

Cultural Life versus a Culture of Urbicide in Besieged Sarajevo (1992–1996)

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Abstract

As the uncertainties of the 21st-century risk society intensify, difficult questions arise, with few solutions. Concepts like the art of living, adaptation to change, the role of culture, and stress relief are important global themes. Because the residents of Sarajevo experienced and examined such issues three decades ago, this article bridges anxiety and hope, and illustrates how urban spirit can arise from uncertainty, and even death.

The article presents aspects of Sarajevo's authentic urban cultural (artistic) character during the siege (1992-1996), which was the longest in the history of modern warfare. Based on cultural events during this period, it examines how Sarajevo created a historic urban story and urban identity, while living 1,425 days without basic supplies, and under constant fire from the surrounding hills. The article offers new ways to observe and understand urbicide in a contemporary context, and accentuates the role of art and culture in society.

Key words: art, creativity, culture, cultural life, Sarajevo, siege, urban identity, urbicide

Introduction

There is no part of our modern world
that we must not be ready to scrap
if the need to scrap it is the price
of mankind's safety and continued development.
Lewis Mumford

The city is a cultural phenomenon that represents civilisation; it is an accumulation of the past, a picture of society's development; a generator of identities, a source of knowledge and wisdom, a teacher of harmony and unity, a utopian laboratory, an information exchange, and a house in which residents can satisfy their social, cultural, intellectual and emotional needs. Each city has a uniqueness that makes it and its citizens recognisable, and allows for the two to be mutually influential and inspirational. In this connection between the city and people flows an invisible substance: *specificum*, *genius loci*, the soul of the city.¹ This city *specificum* is difficult to define, but often when we mention a particular city, we evoke an idea about it – the way it looks, smells and sounds – that echoes throughout its history.

Sarajevo is no exception. Its centuries-long history encompasses various forms of urban life in its valley, which is known as the Golden Valley, because of its beauty. Throughout history, the valley has been a meeting point for diverse cultures, religions, nations, and ideas, because of its *specificum* of diversity. For this reason, Sarajevo has long been a metaphor for the harmonious blending of East and West and traditional and modern, and has often been called 'the Jerusalem of Europe'.

During its years of siege from 1992 to 1996, however, Sarajevo was bombarded by the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) – an ethnically defined army of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Serb minority – which inflicted disastrous damage on the city's life and existence. Sarajevo's entire urban space suffered damage, including houses and apartment buildings, educational and cultural institutions, markets, industrial and trade facilities, and urban infrastructure.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) conducted forensic demographic research into the siege of Sarajevo, and found that a total of 18,889 civilians were killed in the city during that time,^{2, 3} including

1 Besim Spahić, *Imidž grada: uvod u marketinško promišljanje grada kao proizvoda* (Sarajevo: Međunarodni centar za mir, 2001), p. 7.

2 This number includes civilians and soldiers who died during this period. The ICTY tried and sentenced two former Bosnian Serb generals, Stanislav Galić and Dragomir Milošević, for their role in overseeing the siege of Sarajevo. They were found guilty of terrorising Sarajevo's civilians, and sentenced to life and 29 years' imprisonment respectively.

3 Smail Čekić, *Dayton (Peace) Agreement – Legalization of Genocide in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina*

1,500 children. This demonstrates the scope of the systematic killing of citizens and destruction of the city and its urban life, which had been built over centuries. Many citizens were killed while standing in line for water or food; at schools, markets and hospitals; on trams and buses; in the streets, or their own apartments; at work; and even during funerals. Many of the city's significant cultural objects were deliberately destroyed in acts of urbicide – a theoretical concept that describes the ritual killing of a city, and a crime that comprises the systematic destruction of urban areas. By September 1993, it was estimated that almost all buildings in Sarajevo had suffered some form of damage, and 35,000 had been destroyed completely.

The siege not only aimed to control territory; it also had the particular purpose of targeting a crucial element of civilisation: the city itself. The urban centre – along with its culture, life, history, and memory – was under fire. Serbian architect and former mayor of Belgrade Bogdan Bogdanović defined urbicide in 1972, long before the recent wars in former Yugoslavia, in his article “The City as a Symbol of Immortality and the Death of the City”. After war broke out, Bogdanović wrote more on this topic, claiming that in the history of their development cities were exposed to different dangers and threats, as there was always a need not only to build but also to destroy, in an eternal dialectic of the urban opposed to the anti-urban.⁴ This could also be defined as the act of destroying buildings and cities that do not constitute military targets.^{5 6}

Urbicide is intended to affect the life of the population in such a way that the war cannot be ignored, and is part of civilians' daily life.

As the uncertainties of the 21st-century risk society spread – particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the current brutal war in Ukraine and genocide in Palestine – we are challenged with difficult questions and decisions, with few solutions. Concepts like the art of living, adaptation to change, the role of culture and art, and freedom from fear are high on the global agenda. Because the residents of Sarajevo experienced and examined such issues three decades ago,

(Sarajevo: Institute for Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law University of Sarajevo, 2016), p. 339.

4 Bogdan Bogdanović, “The City and Death”, in *Balkan Blues. Writing out of Yugoslavia*, Joanna Labon (ed.) (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1995), p. 41.

5 Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).

6 Bevan explains the logic behind a war against urbanity and architecture: “Here architecture takes on a totemic quality: a mosque, for example, is not simply a mosque; it represents to its enemies the presence of a community marked for erasure. A library or art gallery is a cache of historical memory, evidence that a given community's presence extends into the past and legitimizing it in the present and on into the future. In these circumstances' structures and places with certain meanings are selected for oblivion with deliberate intent. This is not 'collateral damage'. This is the active and often systematic destruction of particular building types or architectural traditions that happens in conflicts where the erasure of memories, history and identity attached to architecture and place – enforced forgetting – is the goal itself. These buildings are attacked not because they are in the path of a military objective: to their destroyers, they are the objective.” Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory*, p. 8.

this article bridges anxiety and hope, and illustrates how urban spirit can arise from uncertainty, and even death.

It further contributes content related to the historiography of Europe. What happened in Sarajevo's cultural (particularly artistic) scene during the siege is a phenomenon with universal importance, especially in the context of city narratives.

This article therefore presents a way of connecting memory as an element of tangible heritage, along with physical space, and as a reflection on how that space can be interpreted as part of memory culture in the European context.

The Role of Art in Healing War-Affected Cities

Among its practical uses, art can heal those affected by violence, especially when it is caused by war. Tolstoy explains the idea of "moral art",⁷ or socially accountable art that reinforces fortitude and other human principles. This is important because art is so closely connected to life.

In a different vein, Vygotsky's theory on the exceptional role of art in aesthetic experience states that artistic forms transform reality or, more precisely, create a new reality in which no one can do or be exposed to any real harm.⁸ Vygotsky's approach is similar to that of this article in its examination of the role of art. Further, art is an indispensable part of forging what Vygotsky defines as higher mental functions.

Vygotsky proposed that art is centrally involved in the regulation of emotions and feelings at the social level. He described it as the social technique of feelings, and argued that it systematises a special sphere in the psyche of social humans⁹. A more significant function of art in Vygotsky's opinion is that of an instrument for mapping and expanding human potentiality; a function that performs not by providing inspiring or moralistic examples, but by engaging us at all levels – the embodied, psychological level, the emotional and affective level, and the level of intellectual processing and reflection – through a unique work.¹⁰ This implies that art is a communication and interaction of feelings that inspires social cohesion, especially in challenging times. In the context of Sarajevo's urban narratives, the value of art in the historical period in question was that it brought residents together and engendered a sense of belonging to the city. In doing so, it strengthened relations between residents and evoked empathy, solidarity, and

7 Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), pp. 223-224.

8 Lev Vygotsky, *The Psychology of Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1971).

9 Vygotsky, *The Psychology of Art*, pp. 12-13.

10 Vygotsky, *The Psychology of Art*.

the need to fight barbarism, violence and death. When viewed in the context of urbicide and the siege, the role of art is most valuable in its development of a sense of support and togetherness among residents. How art is perceived can alter the morale of residents who are traumatised and afraid, and help them find the motivation to move forward and stay mentally alive. This is evidence that art can become a city utility, which is currently a dominant theoretical approach for gaining a better understanding of the connection between art and the city. In the context of art and besieged Sarajevo, an excellent example is renowned American intellectual and writer Susan Sontag, who produced and directed Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1993. Rather than viewing the performance as a purely political act, Sontag saw it as an act of conscience. She claimed that she was not under the illusion that going to Sarajevo to direct the play would make her useful in the way she could be if she was a doctor or a water-systems engineer; rather, she stated that it was the only one of three things she could do – write, make films, and direct theatre – that would produce something unique to Sarajevo, and that would be made and consumed there.¹¹

Artists' Responses to the Siege of Sarajevo

Art is a mediator of the unspeakable.
Goethe

If there were an instant answer to how artists and ordinary citizens in Sarajevo coped with the violence inflicted upon them and others, it would be that art presents a degree of purified clarity and lucidity in the face of what may be felt as chaos.

In a broader view, society's understanding of its arts and culture reflects values of inclusion and public opinion. The sector in general is defined in myriad ways, and developing an understanding of its boundaries is dependent on who is observing it, and from what vantage point. Through a wide variety of forms of expression, the arts are instrumental in satisfying the aesthetic need for culture in urban centres.¹² Sharon Zukin holds that culture is what defines a person, social group, or country, in its capacity to establish a role, gain power, and represent a point of view. Culture for Zukin is often in a process of forming and reforming itself, broadly changing its definitions and meanings, and manifesting in an

11 Benjamin Moser, "Sontag in Sarajevo", <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/09/09/sontag-in-sarajevo/>, accessed 5 March 2023.

12 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

unpredictable manner. Zukin further views culture as a framing mechanism, and insists that the way that a modern city views itself will determine what kinds of culture it embraces, fosters, and allows.¹³ This is particularly relevant to the theme of this article, and its examination of artistic content created in Sarajevo during the siege. The Sarajevo String Quartet (*Sarajevski gudački kvartet*), for example, was founded in 1968 and continued playing throughout the siege, exemplifying subtle resistance in the form of music, and the universal idea of humanity in a city under siege.

During the siege, the quartet was composed of classically trained Sarajevo-born musicians, all of whom graduated from the city's music academy: Dževad Šabanagić (violin), Hrvoje Tisler (violin), Dijana Ihas (viola), and Miron Strutinski (cello). The four musicians continued to rehearse and perform tirelessly while risking their lives, even after the deaths of two of its original members: first violinist Momir Vlačić, who died from injuries sustained in the shelling, and second violinist Kamenko Ostojić.¹⁴

Their heroic contribution to the cultural life of besieged Sarajevo was portrayed in Vefik Hadžismajlović's documentary film *Sarajevo's Quartet* (*Sarajevski gudači*), produced in March 1994.¹⁵

Another example of Sarajevo's wartime cultural resistance was the musical *Hair* (*Kosa*), which premiered in autumn 1992 and was staged again in spring 1993, at Chamber Theatre 55 (*Kamerni teatar 55*).¹⁶ The theatre hosted more diverse plays than usual during the siege because it was safer than the National Theatre, which had been directly exposed to shelling. In an interview, the play's cameraman Slaviša Mašić states that:

[I]n Sarajevo's version of *Hair*, there were all the elements of the original *Hair*, which was the model, that is – acting, ballet-dance and songs, while the script

13 Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

14 Dijana Ihas, "Story of Sarajevo String Quartet", <https://communities.pacificu.edu/dijanaihas/story-of-sarajevo-string-quartet/>, accessed 2 March 2023.

15 The film is a realistic and objective documentary portrait of four brave string players. Their music is reminiscent of the days of besieged Warsaw in the Second World War, when Chopin's "Polonaise" was constantly broadcast from loudspeakers. Translated into English from: Vefik Hadžismajlović, *Sarajevo's Quartet*, SaGA, 1994, <https://sagafilm.com/Production/Documentaries/Quartet/>, accessed 3 March 2022.

16 The idea to adapt the New York play *Hair* to wartime Sarajevo came from musician Srdan Jevđević, and many artists were involved in bringing the project to life. The choreography was led by acclaimed Bosnian ballet director Slavko Pervan, who reminisced about the circumstances and details of working on the play in an interview, and shared the impressive fact that it was performed between 30 and 40 times during the siege. Paraphrased and translated into English from: Lejla Kajić, "Kako je sarajevska 'Kosa' nadmašila njujoršku: Plač, smijeh i katarza u ratnom Sarajevu", <https://www.klix.ba/magazin/kultura/kako-je-sarajevska-kosa-nadmasila-njujorsku-plac-smijeh-i-katarza-u-ratnom-sarajevu/200506061/>, accessed 17 January 2025.

was adapted according to the original by Marko Vešović, who spiced it up with the current chaotic events in Sarajevo.¹⁷

As previously mentioned, Susan Sontag came to besieged Sarajevo in July 1993 to stage Becket's *Waiting for Godot*. The play was picked for its symbolism: its theme was similar to the uncertainty of time for Sarajevans trapped in the city – more than a year had passed since the siege had begun, and there was no end in sight. Sontag stated that her motivation to come to Sarajevo was related not only to the play itself, but to her wish to spend some time in the city, sharing the fate of its citizens.¹⁸ One of the questions asked in the cruel wartime reality was whether art made any sense in such a context. Benjamin Moser wrote on this subject: “Her *Godot* in Sarajevo did answer some of Sontag’s essential questions about the usefulness of modern art”.¹⁹

The Sarajevo War Theatre, or SARTR (*Sarajevski ratni teatar*), was founded at the beginning of the siege, in May 1992. It brought together actors and other professionals from three reputable city theatres whose activities had been suspended because of the war. Its founders were director Dubravko Bibanović and dramaturgist Safet Plakalo.²⁰

The Sarajevo War Theatre held the first wartime premiere, a play called *Shelter* (*Sklonište*), which conceptually imagined the reality of that moment and used the facts of life under siege to create a piece of theatre that defined the artistic ensemble’s direction.²¹

Retired Sarajevo professor and director Davor Diklić’s book *Theatre in Wartime Sarajevo 1992-1995* (*Teatar u ratnom Sarajevu 1992-1995*.) “[i]s certainly one of the most important testimonies of the intense theatrical and artistic life of besieged Sarajevo”.²² In it, Diklić provides some impressive statistics on cultural life at the time: during this period 3,102 artistic and cultural events took place; on average 2.5 events every day. The Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra performed 48 concerts in Sarajevo and elsewhere in Europe; 15 writers were killed, but 263 books were published. Although 18 visual artists were killed, exhibits took place constantly – a total of 177 in six city galleries and several improvised venues.

17 Paraphrased and translated into English from: “Sjećanje na kultnu predstavu ‘Kosa’ iz ratnog Sarajeva”, *Radiosarajevo.ba*, 15 March 2013, <https://radiosarajevo.ba/metrohahala/kultura/sjecanje-na-kultnu-predstavu-kosa-iz-ratnog-sarajeva/106226>, accessed 3 March 2021.

18 Susan Sontag, “Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo”, *Performing Arts Journal*, 16:2 (1994), pp. 87-106.

19 Moser, “Sontag in Sarajevo”, 2019.

20 Zoran Bibanović, “Sjećanje na Dubravka Bibanovića i Safeta Plakala: Dva života kao teatar”, <https://upoznajtesvijetokonas.com/2018/09/08/sjecanje-na-dubravka-bibanovica-i-safeta-plakala-dva-zivota-kao-teatar/>, accessed 4 March 2022.

21 Translated into English from: “O nama”, SARTR, <https://sartr.ba/onama/>, accessed 4 March 2022.

22 Translated into English from: Diklić, Davor. *Teatar u ratnom Sarajevu 1992-1995* [*Theatre in Wartime Sarajevo 1992-1995*], <https://mess.ba/Teatar-u-ratnom-Sarajevu-1992-1995/>, accessed 4 March 2022.

Despite the fact that 10 filmmakers were killed, 156 documentary and short films were produced. In theatres, 182 performances premiered and over 2,000 shows were performed, which half a million people saw.²³

Well-known American folk singer, musician, and human rights activist Joan Baez documented her visit to Sarajevo in April 1993 in her video for the song “Stones in the Road”.²⁴ There is an exciting scene in that clip where she listens to then hugs Vedran Smailović, the cellist of Sarajevo, who is playing in the middle of the central street (Ferhadija), where the first of a series of mass casualties occurred in May 1992, as civilians queued for bread.

Mikhail Evstafiev’s photograph of Smailović playing inside the ruins of the National Library and City Hall (Vijećnica) became a visual symbol of besieged Sarajevo.

These examples alone present cultural artistic production as an endemic and natural process, based on the acquired cognition and first-hand insight of a socially developed civilisation. They highlight how such production emerges not just as a random or imposed phenomenon, but as something deeply rooted in the lived realities, accumulated knowledge, and shared experiences of a city. Hošić describes such work as “indigenous and organic”, meaning it is authentic, and arises naturally from within the community, rather than being influenced or shaped by external forces. His reference to a “cohesive and civilization-wise mature community” underlines that this production reflects the values, identity, and intellectual maturity of a well-established and harmonious society.²⁵ In this context, cultural production is presented as a reflection of the community’s historic continuity, adaptability, and ability to integrate its heritage with evolving circumstances.

During the siege, Sarajevo became a symbol of resilience and the indomitable human spirit. The cultural production of that time – which ranged from theatre performances, poetry readings, and concerts to visual art exhibitions – emerged as a vital form of resistance and survival. These cultural expressions were more than just acts of defiance: they were deeply rooted in the shared knowledge, experiences, and identity of the city’s diverse and historically rich population.

The idea of cultural production as indigenous and organic aligns with how Sarajevo’s citizens drew upon their unique multicultural heritage and historical cosmopolitanism to create art that spoke to their plight, hopes, and humanity.

23 Silvija Jestrovic, ‘Sarajevo: A World City Under Siege’, in *Performance and the Global City. Performance Interventions*, D.J. Hopkins and Kim Solga (eds). (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 212.

24 Joan Baez, *Stones in the Road*, YouTube video, 4:38, posted by joanbaezofficial, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9vtYMA_eMM, accessed 14 March 2024.

25 Irfan Hošić, *Slika krize. Kulturne i umjetničke prilike u Bosni i Hercegovini (1990-2020)* (Sarajevo: Buybook, 2024), p. 46.

Despite being surrounded by violence and deprivation, the city's intellectual and creative energy remained alive, fostering a sense of unity and preserving the essence of a "civilization-wise mature community", even in the face of destruction. In this context, the extraordinary circumstances are the siege itself, which transformed ordinary artistic expression into acts of survival and testimony. Sarajevo's cultural production during the siege was living proof of the community's resilience, and served as a reflection of shared identity and a statement against the forces that sought to destroy it.

Concluding Remarks

The everyday struggle for survival during the siege inspired many kinds of artists who translated their unprecedented experience into traditional or conceptual art. Narratives that describe their exploits in these abnormal circumstances are kept alive in books, stories, newspaper articles, motion pictures, and the testimony of living witnesses. Sarajevo's cultural response to wartime atrocities resulted in an almost surreal coexistence of art and urbicide: the city's residents witnessed the everyday battle between creativity and destruction, and saw how the urban way of life could fight brutality.

Sarajevo became a case study in urban warfare, illustrating how civilians and cities could become primary targets in modern conflicts. The siege redefined the nature of war in Europe, as it shifted focus from traditional battlefields to the deliberate targeting of urban centres, which current historians link to patterns of contemporary global warfare. The siege is a critical case for studying war crimes, such as indiscriminate shelling, the deliberate targeting of civilians, and the use of snipers. It is a lens through which to examine the international community's response to such crimes, and influences discussions on international law, accountability, and humanitarian intervention. Despite their immense suffering, Sarajevo's citizens sustained cultural production, education, and social organisation. This resilience challenges traditional narratives of victimhood, and contributes to a historiography that emphasises human agency in the face of catastrophic conditions.

The examples this article presents of cultural actions during the siege of Sarajevo contribute significantly to the historiography of Europe, in light of the modernity of their context and their values, which are characteristic of European culture and urbanity. The genuine cultural events during this period emphasise the immanent role of Sarajevo's actors, artists and residents in creating the city's historic urban narrative and urban identity.

In these turbulent and challenging times, the urban story of Sarajevo is a reminder of the inherent role and value of culture (particularly the arts), because its humanistic and liberating features teach us that the affirmative power of life, solidarity and togetherness will always retain their core values in the lives of citizens.

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Kulturni život naspram kulture urbicida u opkoljenom Sarajevu (1992–1996)

Sažetak

Pojmovi poput umjetnosti življenja, prilagodbe promjenama, uloge kulture i oslobađanja od stresa postaju važne teme na globalnoj agendi u 21. stoljeću. Budući da su stanovnici Sarajeva ta pitanja iskusili i preispitali prije više od tri decenije, ovaj članak pokazuje primjere kako urbani duh može izrasti iz neizvjesnosti, pa čak i smrti.

Glavni cilj ovog rada jeste prikazati neke crte autentične urbane dimenzije Sarajeva kroz prizmu kulture, tačnije umjetnosti, tokom opsade od 1992. do 1996. godine. Na osnovu stvarnih kulturnih dešavanja tokom tog perioda, autori ističu ulogu lokalnih aktera, umjetnika i stanovnika Sarajeva u oblikovanju historijske urbane priče i urbanog identiteta, koji su živjeli 1425 dana bez struje, vode, grijanja i hrane, pod stalnom vatrom s okolnih brda i planina. Refleksije iz ovog rada o specifičnom historijskom periodu Sarajeva mogu stoga otvoriti nove perspektive za razumijevanje nasilja nad gradovima i u savremenijem kontekstu, naglašavajući pritom ulogu umjetnosti i kulture u cjelini.

Ključne riječi: umjetnost, kreativnost, kultura, kulturni život, Sarajevo, opsada, urbani identitet, urbicid