

External Destruction And Internal Chaos To Psychological And Spiritual Redemption

Elizabeth Danze

Our interactions with the historic, sacred, and ordinary buildings and places that make up our cities reveal how the past lives on in our psyches. The core of architecture is our experience of it, while the study of our inner life, psychoanalysis, is the understanding of that experience. The experience of architecture beyond mere building, is vitally concerned with promoting mental health and emotional and spiritual well-being. At its best, architecture enriches the knowledge of our surroundings and enhances our self-awareness. In his book *Why Architecture Matters*, Paul Goldberger argues that the making of architecture is intimately connected to the knowledge that buildings evoke emotional reactions in us and perhaps awaken our preconscious mind.¹ We know buildings can spark delight and awe and create serenity and exhilaration, but can also inspire anxiety, perplexity, sadness, hostility, and fear.

When buildings disappear, whether they are sacred, iconic, civic, or ordinary, individuals and society are destabilized and collective memory put at risk.² The relationship between a physical environment and an internal sense of self is both tangible and jarring, especially in the face of warring aggression. When destruction of a city's fabric alters what we understood to be constant and we lose our spatial bearings, we are at risk of experiencing psychological displacement, confusion, and a deep sense of loss.

The international criminal court considers the destruction of historic buildings to be a war crime. Targeting places of worship is not only an assault on religious freedom but is also a brutal attempt to tear at the fabric of society. As Eugene Walter writes in *Placeways*, "it is important to acknowledge that a sacred place, understood holistically, is a moral environment as well as a location of sensory and aesthetic experience."³ Buildings might also symbolize societal unity and communicate a shared, even defiant, belief system to others. In February 2022 when Ukrainian President Zelensky wanted to make it clear that he was boldly defending his country and had not fled, he appeared in video in front of the 1903 Art Nouveau Horodecki House, which stands for the identity of all the Ukrainian people. By selecting this location, Zelensky implicitly pointed to the collective cultural heritage at stake. As a writer for the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "May Zelensky and Gorodetsky House survive the onslaught — and add a chapter of 21st-century history to this extraordinary building's storied halls."⁴

Since the beginning of the war, millions of Ukrainians have been internally displaced, losing their homes, businesses, and families. UNESCO has verified damage to 238 cultural sites, including religious buildings, museums, historic and cultural buildings, monuments, and libraries. As the loss of cultural and historic sites is particularly demoralizing, so is the destruction of the ordinary urban fabric. Disruption, alteration, and eradication of the familiar are intertwined with reminders of shared collective histories and memories. As Elizabeth Auchenloss explains, "The processes employed in memory are very complex and involve perception, recognition, encoding, retrieval, and activation. Like all mental experiences, memories are a complex amalgam of cognitive and affective processes, such that the storage and recall of memory are shaped by the conscious and unconscious emotional conditions associated with that experience."⁵

Buildings and places are the backdrops for meaningful human interaction we attach our personal stories to where we shop, meet, and interact. A real architectural experience is not simply a series of retinal images. We *encounter* buildings and are in constant dialogue and interaction with the environment, making it impossible to detach the image of self from its spatial and situation

existence. “I am the space, where I am,” as the poet Noel Arnaud established.⁶ As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio writes, we are continually inventing and reinventing a life story as part of an ongoing effort to situate ourselves in the world and to maintain a coherent sense of self.⁷

Juhani Pallasmaa has written on how the home is integrated with self-identity; our home becomes part of our own body and being. Memorable experiences of architecture fuse space, matter, and time into one dimension, into the basic substance of being, penetrating the consciousness. We identify ourselves with this space, this moment, and these dimensions, as they become ingredients of our very existence.^{8,9} When our homes, neighborhoods, and schools, are violently damaged, how are we to understand ourselves? Are we not extensions of these identifications? If we think of buildings and neighborhoods as an integrated part of ourselves, the death of the building disrupts our understanding of permanence, longevity, and our own concept of human mortality.

Damasio says that how we reason cannot be separated from how we feel.¹⁰ In other words, “cognition cannot be studied independently from affects--- the complex emotional/physical states (both pleasurable and painful) produced by and in the body as part of its system of evaluating the self in relationship to the environment.”¹¹ “Feeling state” then can be understood as the way events are experienced through and within the body. As such, experience and its mental processing convey a very strong connection to our emotional state. This connection can either be literal, i.e. physical, or it can occur as a mental or conceptual experience or construct. In either case, the perception of the physical world as it connects with our bodies and hence our emotional, inner state is the critical element.

Derived from the Greek word meaning *wound*, trauma is a medical term referring to bodily injury and its effects.¹² When our attachments to architecture are severed, a form of trauma ensues, and mental anguish and anxiety follow. Under conditions of environmental destruction and trauma, the integrity of the individual is overwhelmed. While resilience is often identified as a trauma response, Auchincloss writes, “Many have argued that no traumatic event is fully integrated. While there is no pathological outcome specific to trauma, common sequelae include symptoms, inhibitions, massive repressions and/or dissociation, persistent regression, broad avoidance patterns, failures of mentalizations, and other distortions of character.”¹³

Examples of this external erasure and ensuing internal destabilization are not limited to wartime violence. By studying aggressive urban renewal and eminent domain as in Haussmann’s wholesale reconfiguration of Paris we see an analogy of what is happening in contemporary Ukraine. Architectural historian, Esther da Costa Meyer writes in her essay, *The City Within*, “On the whole, the kind of destruction that most affected the inhabitants of Paris concerned the familiar part of the past, the commonplace and often rundown buildings that made up most of the urban fabric, and served as home to thousands of citizens...these non-descript buildings and their immediate surroundings offered a point of anchorage for their tenants’ lives and identities. They existed as important segments of itineraries or walking patterns that drew in nearby landmarks, whether a church, a square, or a crumbling tenement—signposts that functioned as mnemonic devices or as transitional spaces that announced the reassuring proximity of home and security.”¹⁴ Architecture laden with cognitive value, influences both consciously and unconsciously. And as Leonard Duhl points out in *The Urban Condition*, “the loss of an important place represents a change in a potentially significant component of the experience of continuity.”¹⁵

Yet, communities and individuals are resilient. Understanding and remembering the past influences the architecture we create in the physical world and underpins the narrative we create about ourselves. The architecture in turn incites further remembering and even daydreaming of a future to come. Tactical rebuilding is beginning in Ukraine, even as the war continues. Young Ukrainian architects are asking questions about what the new unification will look like. Heritage

and identity around territory are long-contested terms that pre-date the war, so these architects are not only discussing rebuilding the past but also imagining a future for building cultural heritage in and outside the realm of architecture.

Even in reconstruction, the toppling of partially ruined buildings is a personal re-traumatization in which the building occupies an existential stasis of both being and not being, and embodies ideas of temporality and waiting. The sorrow that follows the obliteration of ordinary and iconic streets, squares, and buildings is prompted partially by “the associative meaning vested in the old stones, the cobbled courtyard, the third-story window, that functioned as metonyms for the lost loved one.”¹⁶ In Ukraine, “perpetrators, victims, and descendants of both, (will) seeks to work through, remember, and metabolize its traumatic past and find redemption.”¹⁷ Designs for rebuilding iconic buildings, churches, and settlements are underway in Ukraine, where the tangibles of building will converge and integrate with the intangibles of culture, memory, psychology and spirituality. We might remember the ending of Tennyson’s poem, “Ulysses” contextualized by Mahon’s essay¹⁸ on memory, terror, and its aftermath:

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Notes

- ¹ Paul Goldberger, *Why Architecture Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- ² Elizabeth Danze, "Home," *Clio's Psyche* 19, no. 4 (March 2013): 400-402.
- ³ E.V. Walter, *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 78.
- ⁴ Carolina A. Miranda, "Why it matters that Zelensky stood before a building by 'the Gaudi of Ukraine' on social media," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 22, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2022-02-28/how-volodymyr-zelensky-uses-kyiv-gorodetsky-house-on-social-media>.
- ⁵ Elizabeth L. Auchincloss and Eslee Samberg (eds.). *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 149.
- ⁶ Noël Arnaud, *L'État d'ébauche* (Paris: Le Messager Boiteux de Paris, 1950), 173.
- ⁷ Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994).
- ⁸ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K: Wiley, 2012), 72.
- ⁹ Thomas Barrie, "A Home in the World: The Ontological Significance of Home" in *Architecture, Culture and Spirituality*, ed. Thomas Barrie, Julio Bermudez, and Phillip James Tabb (New York: Ashgate 2015), 93-101.
- ¹⁰ Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*.
- ¹¹ Elizabeth Auchincloss, *The Psychoanalytic Model of the Mind* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2015), 11.
- ¹² Auchincloss and Samberg, *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, 272.
- ¹³ Auchincloss and Samberg, *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, 274.
- ¹⁴ Esther da Costa Meyer, "The City Within," in *Space and Psyche*, ed. Elizabeth Danze and Stephen Sonnenberg (Austin, Tex: Center for American Architecture and Design, The University of Texas at Austin, 2012), 95-97.
- ¹⁵ Leonard Duhl, *The Urban Condition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 153.
- ¹⁶ da Costa Meyer, "The City Within," 100.
- ¹⁷ Stephen Sonnenberg, "A Psychoanalytic Reflection on Berlin, The Holocaust, and Interdisciplinary Research." in *Space and Psyche*, ed. Elizabeth Danze and Stephen Sonnenberg ((Austin, Tex: Center for American Architecture and Design, The University of Texas at Austin, 2012), 135
- ¹⁸ Eugene Mahon, "Memory and Its Entanglements: A Psychoanalytic Meditation on Terror and Aftermath," *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 75, no. 1(2022): 46-58.



Rising from the ruins: a Ukrainian soldier photographs the shell of a traditional Orthodox church in Mariupol. [Evgeniy Maloletka/AP/Shutterstock]



Woman in the village of Krasylivka, Ukraine. [Agence France-Presse]