

# Warfare Outcome as a Ground for Destruction of Heritage and Real Estate Development

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### Abstract

There is a major construction program, being undertaken in the past decade, named “urban transformation” by the ruling government. As the transformation moved forward, it turned out this building activity was intended for profit and not for better urban environments. The construction was also a social engineering construct, causing people lose their native homes during the demolition process (dispossession) to make ground for new costlier housing to be bought by the rich.

While this is one dimension of the story; the more severe dimension is the fact that there is an unending clash in between the Turkish Military and the Kurdish PKK in the past 40 years. Combat previously took place in the mountains; this last confrontation was unfortunately conducted within the city, leaving civilians in extreme danger. The destructive battle fought with heavy weapons including tanks, cannons led to rigorous destruction in the solely residential areas. The area, where residential urban habitat and historical heritage were significantly damaged after the clashes, is at the moment sealed off and clearance of post-war debris has started. The demolition, regularly carried out by heavy construction equipment, was indirectly accomplished through war. The locals will be displaced towards the outskirts of the city where they can only afford a much cheaper flat in an inhumane gigantic high-rise compound.

### Keywords

War, Conflict, Restoration, Preservation, Conservation, Destruction, Gentrification, Urban planning, Transformation, construction, Dis-Possession, Dislocation, Forced Removal, Heritage.

### Introduction

There is a major construction program, being undertaken in the past decade, named “urban transformation” by the ruling government. As the transformation moved forward, it turned out this building activity was intended for profit and not for better urban environments. The construction was also a social engineering construct, causing people lose their native homes during the demolition process (dispossession) to make ground for new costlier housing to be bought by the rich. People

who have left (or have been forced to leave) suffer from cultural deconstruction, intense feelings of longing for home due to compulsory exile.

“The AKP government seems to view construction as a tool that can spur broader economic growth. Much has been written about president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s \$100 billion worth of megaprojects for Istanbul, the bid -free contracts of government-friendly developers, and the \$400bn government plan to restore or rebuild a third of Turkey’s housing – some 6.5 million homes.” (Lepeska, 2016)

While this is one dimension of the story; the more severe dimension is the fact that there is an unending clash in between the Turkish Military and the militants of the Kurdish PKK in the past 40 years, that caused the death of tens of thousands of people. Though there were sporadic short temporary ceasefires, the war has recently started again, following Turkish general election, 7<sup>th</sup> of June 2015, when The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which had governed Turkey since 2002, lost its parliamentary majority. Combat previously took place in the mountains; this last confrontation was unfortunately conducted within the city of Diyarbakir, leaving civilians in extreme danger. “Including Diyarbakir Sur district (registered as buffer area), Governor’s Office declared curfew in this zone for 6 times in 6 neighborhoods; the last one still continues as of today. During the curfew process, due to armed clashes and the use of heavy weaponry in the above- mentioned neighborhoods, we diagnosed serious level of devastation in genuine urban texture of Sur district and in registered historical buildings located in the urban archaeological site. Armed clashes which emerged after curfews and blockades have caused serious damages in Surici Urban Archaeological Site in all respects. Besides the damage on architecturally valuable structures, it has also caused rupture of social and authentic life cycle in this district. Curfews causing forced migration of people living

in the area also resulted in disruption of handicraft production and related commercial activities, which is a tradition that has survived for thousands of years. Collective memory of Sur formed within thousands of years will face a rupture due to changes in property ownership and demographic structure if expropriation decision taken after the end of armed conflicts will be implemented.” (Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality, 2016, pp. 4-6)

The destructive battle fought with heavy weapons including tanks, cannons and that seems to be paused at the moment, led to rigorous destruction in the solely residential areas. Tens or hundreds (according to some unofficial local sources) of innocent civilians died, in addition to numerous fighters from each side. The area, where residential urban habitat and historical heritage were significantly damaged after the clashes, is at the moment sealed off and clearance of post-war debris has almost finished. The demolition, regularly carried out by heavy construction equipment in other cities like Istanbul, was indirectly accomplished through war machines.

### **Historical Significance of the Sur District of Diyarbakir**

Diyarbakir has quite a substantial past and is the biggest city in the southeast of Turkey, where the majority of Kurdish population lives. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Committee, “The Diyarbakir Fortress and Hevsel Gardens Cultural Landscape is located on an escarpment in the Upper Tigris River Basin. The fortified city with its associated landscape has been an important center and regional capital during the Hellenistic, Roman, Sassanid and Byzantine periods, through the Islamic and Ottoman periods to the present.” (United Nations, 2015)

Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality’s ‘Cultural Heritage Damage Assessment Report on Sur, Diyarbakir: Aftermath of the Armed Conflict’ states that “Since its geopolitical significance, the city that has been considered by various civilizations and states as a regional capital as it is evident in the history of Persian, Roman, Sassanid, Byzantine and Islamic empires. Thus, the city is a world heritage with its multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-layered characteristics. Within the archaeological site, genuine examples of civilian architecture, mosques, churches as well as inns,

hammams (public baths) can be seen all together as cultural assets of Sur. In total, there are 595 registered historical buildings of which 147 can be categorized as memorial and 448 civil architecture examples. Surici district as a whole, including Ickale was registered as “Di-yarbakir Urban Archeological Site” in 1988.” (Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality, 2016, p. 2)

### **On Preservation of Cultural Heritage during the Times of Conflict**

Different cultures, nations, folks have diverse opinions on what cultural heritage is, as they have different traditions, habits, likes, preferences, walk of life. This diversification can be further experienced within a single nation, where various folks forming a society have distinctive ethnic, religious, folkloric backgrounds. Regardless of this fact, “All disasters, whether they are natural disasters like floods, earthquake and volcanic explosion, or man-made disasters like war, armed conflict, terrorist acts and arson, threaten the existence of cultural heritage and people living in the vicinity, and at the same time cause irreplaceable physical and economic loss, and lead to loss of cultural and social memory that coexists with the cultural heritage. The stream of history has not changed in man-made disasters

like war, terrorist acts, and armed conflict during the same period. Selective destruction; conscious targeting and destruction of cultural heritage, as opposed to the general destruction in natural heritage, have continued at full speed. Demolition of Mostar Bridge (Stari Most - English: Old Bridge) in 1993 during the Bosnian War, and demolition of Bamiyan Valley Buddha Statues in Afghanistan in 2001, were only some of the great losses that cultural heritage suffered during the last 25 years.

Number of examples of the damage that man-made disasters cause for the cultural heritage increasingly continues in 21st century as well. Looting of Iraq National Museum in Bagdad during invasion of the USA of Northern Iraq in 2003, civil unrest that absorbed many countries in the Middle East which is named as the ‘Arab Spring’, which caused destruction of many heritage, including Museum of Cairo, were the uppermost examples. Even as these words are written, many historic structures in Syria are continued to be damaged. Africa has become the setting of one of the bitterest examples of selective destruction directed to cultural heritage. In Mali-Timbuktu, World Heritage buildings (1988) Sidi Mahmoud, Sidi Moctar and Alpha

Moya Mausoleums have been completely destroyed under attacks during June and July 2012.” (Ünal, 2012, p. 1)

While the above instances of cultural heritage refer only to physical buildings and/or objects, “the term ‘cultural heritage’ has changed its content considerably in recent decades. 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage developed normative instruments. According to that cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects, it also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe of the knowledge and skill crafts so called intangible heritage.” (Ünal and Vatan, 2016, p. 1)

Be it tangible (monuments, museums, libraries, archives, buildings, landmarks, objects, relics, artifacts, remains, ruins, etc.) or intangible (creativity, rituals, habits, knowledge, culture, experience, tradition, manners, propriety, decency, ethics, politesse etc.); heritage needs to be protected. There are instances when the loss happens suddenly and drastically. “When armed conflict is not international, but breaks out within the territory of one of the signatories to the treaty, every party involved in the conflict is bound to adhere at least to those articles of The Hague Convention which refer to the respect of cultural heritage. Putting planned measures for the protection of cultural heritage into effect was hindered by the specific circumstances of an undeclared and sudden war.” (Layton, Stone and Thomas, p. 159) The devastation of sites and land-marks of ethnic, traditional, intellectual, historical and spiritual significance is a warfare maneuver that has a long past. Despite the fact most of these detrimental incidents have been declared as unintended or as collateral damage in assaults to other neighboring positions, there are cases of premeditated strikes on heritage.

If some of the heritage cannot be preserved, conserved due to unforeseen, unavoidable, unfortunate reasons like wars and disasters; documentation of damages, under the form of photographic and filmed evidence, gains major importance for the sustainability of the heritage. This documentation should be done prior and subsequent to the wreckage. While the preceding documentation serves as a reference to be able to reconstruct the “original”, ensuing documentation serves as a precedent to convince people not to commit the same crime again.

### **Gentrification as a Tool of Post-conflict (Commercial) Recovery**

Gentrification, as it sounds, may have positive connotations at first sight. As it involves the renovation of an already existing physical entity, it necessitates more costs than building from scratch. This fact manifestly puts the course of gentrification right in the middle of the capital-based economical systems. “The process of gentrification, which initially emerged as a sporadic, quaint, and local anomaly in the housing markets of some command-center cities, is now thoroughly generalized as an urban strategy that takes over from liberal urban policy. No longer isolated or restricted to Europe, North America, or Oceania, the impulse behind gentrification is now generalized; its incidence is global, and it is densely connected into the circuits of global capital and cultural circulation.” (Smith, 2002, p. 80)

Transformation of old dilapidated urban neighborhoods into more sanitized urban corners does not necessarily / thoroughly aim the betterment of citizens’ lives. “Gentrification, cultural innovation, and physical upgrading of the urban environment (including the turn to postmodernist styles of architecture and urban design), consumer attractions (sports stadia, convention and shopping centers, marinas, exotic eating places) and entertainment (the organization of urban spectacles on a temporary or permanent basis), have all become much more prominent facets of strategies for urban regeneration. Above all, the city has to appear as an innovative, exciting, creative, and safe place to live or to visit, to lay and consume.” (Harvey, 2001, p. 355) The rather “manicured” heritage sites need the expensive and globally proliferated prestigious brands in order to recruit occupants that can either lease or purchase the re-conditioned buildings in the hyped-up / hipstered neighborhoods. “Large -scale urban development projects have increasingly been used as a vehicle to establish exceptionality measures in planning and policy procedures. This is part of a neoliberal ‘New Urban Policy’ approach and its selective ‘middle- and upper-class’ democracy. It is associated with new forms of ‘governing’ urban interventions, characterized by less democratic and more elite- driven priorities.” (Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez, 2002, 195)

Planning is frequently (ab)used as a tool of social engineering. Zoning various urban components like residential, commercial, industrial, transportational sectors into divisionary juxtapositions may enable

administrations to gain

control of social dynamics. “Conflict, ethno-national and social alike, has spatial expression. Conversely, spatial transformations can also affect conflict resolution processes, testifying to the important role of urban planning as a tool.” (Stanley-Price, 2005). “The new revanchist urbanism that replaces liberal urban policy in cities of the advanced capitalist world increasingly expresses the impulses of capitalist production rather than social reproduction.” (Smith, 2002, p. 80)

Inhabitants of gentrified neighborhoods ended up being losers in the game, losing their properties, neighborhoods and memories. In addition to such individual losses; communal green areas, small-scale humane streets are uncompromisingly sacrificed. Though the typical alliance of state and real estate developers claims to be conservative, not much is conserved at the end; cities as we remember, integral values, traditional urban corners, natural resources are mostly gone. This fracture between past-present and deconstruction by construction can be shortly described as “erasing memory”! “Top-down planning is not a remedy for all problems. It is necessary to have publics informed and sensitized enough to demand, reclaim and even fight for their right over space. In other words, civic awareness is a key factor that can and should be mobilized in participatory planning processes.” (Foka, 2015)

### **Conclusion**

The new urbanism we can observe in developing countries is centered on an excessive construction abused to boost economy. The construction practice is not necessarily meant for good quality housing accessible for all levels of income; there is a surplus of luxury housing for the rich, to the point of ending up with relatively large vacancy percentages: Construction based economy is doomed to failure and recent economic developments in Turkey is a perfect example to this assertion.

Departing from this assertion and focusing back on the devastated Sur district of Diyarbakir, it is viable to ask: “The destruction of Sur: is this historic district a target for gentrification? More than 30,000 residents have fled the Kurdish -dominated World Heritage Site in Turkey. With the PM promising to ‘rebuild Sur like Toledo’, some see links between the government’s military operations and its regeneration plan. The

government has been pushing to remake Sur – much of which is run-down and poor – for years. ‘With the projects we are planning to implement in Diyarbakir, employment will increase in the province and we will make Diyarbakir an international tourism destination,’ president Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in 2011, shortly after the state housing body, known as TOKI, had begun demolition work in Sur.” (Lepeska, 2016)

In the presence of precarity, lack of trust and land speculation “there are two crucial questions: Who will make decisions for the city? The central government, the local town authorities, or private individuals? And how will priorities be determined vis-a-vis urban needs? All of the queries listed above inform the debate sparked by the Sur Renewal Project (Sur Ihya Projesi) initiated by the AK Party

government. The Council of Ministers took the decision of ‘urgent expropriation’ of 6,300 parcels scattered along 15 neighborhoods of Sur.” (Yildiz, 2016) “The rebuilding plans for Sur have yet to be released. But in a recent statement, the office of the Diyarbakir governor, who is an appointee of the ruling AKP, said historical structures would be restored, while slums, shops and various other commercial and residential buildings would be demolished. TOKI would then build ‘luxurious’ housing, along with retail and tourist facilities.” (Lepeska, 2016) A further question is: “Will the inner city of Diyarbakir become a 21st century project town, a ‘new Toledo’, or will it be just another listed UNESCO world heritage site destroyed in the conflict that has flared across the Middle East – like Palmyra?” (Assénat, 2016).

Dragging the combat that previously took place in the mountains to the urban environment, leaving civilians in extreme danger, was surely a very harmful strategy. “The prominent Diyarbakir businessman Shahismail Bedir-hanoglu met with young PKK militants and urged them not to go down this path to defend Sur. ‘I told them it’s as if you’re mad at someone, yet you burn down your own house,’ he said to me in a recent interview. ‘It’s like giving the state an invitation for these operations. We told the people there will be death and destruction.’” (Lepeska, 2016)

The war-damaged area in the Sur district is a remarkably large urban zone covering many blocks. The new residences to be built instead will most probably be too expensive for originally local population to buy, as there will have to be height

regulations banning high-rises within the old city. The locals will consequently be displaced towards the outskirts of the city, where they can only afford a much cheaper flat in an inhumane gigantic high-rise housing compound. “The various forms of exclusion and dispossession the residents have experienced appear to generate intense feelings of belonging and of the rightness of their cause, as well as their conviction of possessing a distinct identity” (Bender and Winer, 2001, p. 31) and this is why all local citizens I was in touch with have no intentions of leaving Diyarbakir for good, though some of them are pushed towards the outskirts of the city.

The new urbanism has changed the manner people interacted with one another: High-rise and / or high-cost luxury construction detaches people from each other introducing a physically / socially hierarchic living format, as opposed to the previously low-rise format that provides horizontal (and rhizomatic) format that fosters audial-visual communication between people and more natural green / public space in between for better placemaking. The strategies consisting of prevention of independence at different levels, individualization of people and less cooperation / collectivity, competition in urban societies for success, zoning principles aiming for separation of various neighborhoods with income levels; result in new cities that divide people, instead of equally uniting them! The result is: Perishing concept of “heritage” and imposed introduction of profit to be gained by the injection of population with higher economic means and consequent dispossession forced relocation of the local/original residents...

Instead of the above results post-war reconstruction should rather focus on the concept of placemaking. Place-making is a collective act and it reinforces relations between community members, consolidates the foundations of a culture. In other words, “the iterative actions and collaborations inherent in the making of places nourish communities and empower people. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.” (Markusen and Nicode-mus, 2010)

## Illustrations & Captions



Figure 1. Construction workers are having a break amidst the demolishing process of some residential neighborhoods damaged seriously during the recent fight in between the Turkish Special Action armed forces and Kurdish PKK militants. ©Murat Germen, 2016.



Figure 2. Both residential quarters and historical monuments and heritage were significantly damaged during the battle that was carried on for months within the urban context. ©Murat Germen, 2016.





Figure 3. Outside the historical Sur district of Diyarbakir province, it is possible to see many new housing development projects, either under construction or already built, within the “urban transformation” movement initiated by the ruling government and that led to excessive urbanization. This particular group of buildings has many vacancies. ©Murat Germen, 2016.



Figure 4. The new housing development is not constructed in a way compatible with the relatively harsh climatic conditions, which get very hot during the summers and cold in winters. The old Sur district has narrow streets, adjacent houses, thicker stone walls in older buildings and internal courtyards that provide comfortable living environments in all seasons. The new buildings are energy-inefficient and are devoid of regional character since they look the same as buildings anywhere else in Turkey. ©Murat Germen, 2016.



Figure 5. The supposedly conservatist (but rather narrow minded) government does not really do much in decently conserving the historical, cultural, architectural, ethnic heritage and they instead construct revivalist mimics in order to bring Ottoman Empire’s legacy back in a shallow way. These fake public buildings built in the theme-park-aesthetics are usually of very poor taste and built weakly with veneered material; consequently, there is no way they can have sound reference to the historical architectural heritage. ©Murat Germen, 2016.



Figure 6. The various entrances, gates through the old city wall that were previously accessible to public, are all sealed off now with huge concrete blocks for security purposes. ©Murat Germen, 2016.



Figure 7. Even sacred, holy, blessed places like mosques and monuments that constitute the legacy of the Diyarbakir's historical heritage were relentlessly sacrificed during the many combats between the two sides. ©Murat Germen, 2016.



Figure 8. Waste collectors that are called “eskici” (scrap men) are still around in Turkey and they constitute a remarkable percentage of the waste management and recycling in Turkey. When I saw this guy, I thought maybe he salvaged the items on his cart from houses that were damaged during the battle and urgently abandoned as was in order to stay alive. ©Murat Germen, 2016.



Figure 9. This was the saddest moment I personally experienced, which was surely not sadder and more brutal than what some civilian residents of Sur district suffered; loss of homes, injuries, even death... The large hole on the wall in the right-hand side is a puncture caused by a loose artillery shell, that instantly killed an old woman having a meal at her home, away from the conflict area. The place was left as was and nobody has cleared the scene, including the relatives of the old woman. ©Murat Germen, 2016.



Figure 10. The ones who un/consciously suffer the most from the hostilities certainly are the many kids you encounter on the streets of Sur district. The never disappearing warm smiles on their faces was my only source of hope. I sincerely hope this clash will be over very soon and kids will enjoy their innocent infancy. ©Murat Germen, 2016.

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### Author Biography

Born 1965, Germen has a MArch degree from MIT, where he went as a Fulbright scholar and received AIA Henry Adams Gold Medal for academic excellence. Works as a professor of art, photography and new media at Sabanci University in Istanbul. Having many papers, photo series published on architecture / photography / art / new media in various publications; he has lectured at tens of conferences internationally.

His oeuvre focuses on impacts of urbanization and gentrification, civic rights and participatory citizenship, documentary sustainability of local cultures, human devastation of nature. Has two monographies, one published by Skira (Italy) and the other by MASA (Turkey). Has opened/joined over eighty international solo+group exhibitions. More than 300 editions of the artist's several artworks are in personal collections of eminent art collectors internationally, in addition to several that are in Istanbul Modern, Proj4L Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art, Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń (Poland), Benetton Foundation's Imago Mundi collectionE