

Modernity as Perpetual War or Perpetual Peace?

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Fig. 2. Sharing the façade of the Atatürk Cultural Center during the Gezi protests in Summer 2013.

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As I am writing these words for this volume about the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East during the summer months of 2015, Turkish soldiers and Kurdish guerrillas are shooting each other under the alibi of a new fight against ISIS, which signifies the sudden rupture of the approximately six-year-long process-to-peace within the Republic of Turkey. If this was the summer of 2013, I would have probably concluded my opening sentence by referring to the Gezi protests that mobilized the biggest mass

We cannot meaningfully criticize the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East if we do not question the apparatuses, institutions, and mindsets that lead to terror and destruction in the first

movement in Turkey to reverse the government's attempted destruction of a modernist architectural icon—a protest that faced extreme police violence as a result of which seven citizens died, 7,478 were injured, ninety-one had head trauma, and ten lost an eye by the twelfth day. If I was writing this text in 2003, I could have cited the destruction of the buildings of Iraqi modernism in Baghdad as a result of the U.S. bombings; or if it was 2001, I would have started with the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York; or if it was the 1990s, I could have shown the ruins of the late Ottoman and modern Lebanese buildings in the city center of Beirut as a result of the civil war. I probably could have referred to the destruction of the Palestinian villages in almost any year of my life. And, if I had lived for more than seventy years, I would have started the essay with the Hiroshima bombing, or the images of Auschwitz remains, or the destruction of the European cities to debris mountains by the end of the Second World War. Imagine what a long list it would have been if I had lived for 100, 200, 300, or more years. Isn't it at all possible that my future self will not need to start the text with the same sentence?

A topic like the destruction of cultural heritage begs an essay that constantly circles around the same question, one that reflects on the constant repetition of the same and the constant return to the same action, an essay that figuratively replicates the cycles of destructions themselves. How is it possible to condemn the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East and elsewhere meaningfully in the midst of such a complex web of vicious circles?

There is no need to go over the twists and turns of the long history of monumentality and memory in architecture in this short essay. If we may live but cannot remember without architecture, as John Ruskin once said, and if a monument “is a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events alive in the minds of future generations,” as Alois Riegl had worded it in one of the early theories of architectural preservation, the symbolic value in erecting, preserving, as well as destroying an architectural monument is hardly surreptitious.¹ Erasing a monument from the surface of the earth is meant to erase a people's history from the world of knowledge.

Spectacularizing this erasure by disseminating images of destruction in multiple media is meant to claim one's power to erase history, and to replace oneself with that which made history, with the confidence that the terrified audiences will, indeed, enable this spectacle by watching and even facilitating the distribution of these images. Perhaps there is no need to complicate these statements of criticism any

place. Just as state apparatuses can make the deaths of enemies ungrievable, cultural and educational institutions can make demolished buildings into something un-memorable.

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further. Am I wrong to assume that they must explain the motives for destruction sufficiently well? What I find harder and more meaningful, however, is to ask whether it is possible to condemn sincerely the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East and elsewhere if we do not at the same time condemn war and terror that lead to destruction, and, more importantly, question the state apparatus, the modern institutions, as well as the architectural values that lead to war, terror, and destruction in the first place.

In a situation like this, I find myself inspired by Virginia Woolf when she was asked to donate a guinea for a women's college building fund to prevent war. However, Woolf hesitates before she donates her penny for peace. She is asked to donate for peace as the daughter of an educated man, as an educated woman, the request says, so that more women will be able to attend colleges in the future. But, why educate women in institutions that are controlled by men who perpetuate war in the first place? Woolf writes:

Let us then give up, for the moment, the effort to answer your question, how we can help you to prevent war, by discussing the political, the patriotic or the psychological reasons which lead you to go to war. ... Is that not enough? Need we collect more facts from history and biography to prove our statement that all attempts to influence the young against war through education they receive at the universities must be abandoned? For do they not prove that education, the finest education in the world, does not teach the people to hate force, but to use it? ... And are not force and possessiveness very closely connected with war?²

The answer, for Woolf, then, is not only to think about peace after war or about women's colleges, but to think about the current state of education itself, and by extension of all professions and all institutions that lead to war. She will donate her guinea only on the condition that it will be used to change the patriarchal mindset in education, the manly approach that perpetuates war in the first place.

Let me go back to my question: How is it possible to criticize meaningfully the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East, and to criticize war and terror that causes the destruction? What exactly is the benefit of condemning war, terror, and destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East if we are to continue with our knowledge-sets,

geopolitical categories, and institutions that lead to violence in the first place?

Along with Woolf's diagnosis of patriarchy, we might consider adding a few more concepts to the list that participate in causes that lead to war. Take the words "the Middle East" and "heritage," for a start. Many scholars admit that the category of the Middle East has been constructed by commentators from its outside, and has been less about the experience of those who live in its vague borders, than about the West's intention to designate an "other."³ More importantly, the concept has been a product of a mindset that maintains the clash-of-civilizations argument—an argument that sees separated and self-contained areas in the world rather than their intertwined histories, as if these geographical areas have never shared ideas, images, objects, and technologies that travel back and forth between them, and as if they were territories of only the secluded and isolated sedentary people who made up communities with unchanging and essential bonds. The clash-of-civilizations argument that has been invented to explain wars actually produces more clashes of civilizations and more wars.

The relatively benign word "heritage" also invites questioning, as it determines the mournability for a monument. What accounts for a mournable heritage, a memorable monument, an edifice whose destruction can justifiably be condemned as distinct from others that go unnoticed?

Isn't the answer to this question determined by the knowledge-sets and cultural institutions that select what counts as heritage, and aren't these defined either by the Eurocentric, the nationalist, or the religionist canons that are versions of the clash-of-civilizations argument, and thereby constructed along with the same geopolitical favoritisms and disciplined by the same state apparatus that leads to war? As I write these pages, for example, I am simultaneously working on the history of a memorial to an unknown soldier and the story of a refugee whose relatives do not have graves because they have been subject to enforced disappearance, which is a crime according to the United Nations, but has been a customary act of military juntas, including the 1980 *coup d'état* in Turkey. Memorials to unknown soldiers and empty graves for the enforced disappearances beg the same question that Judith Butler asked: What makes for a grievable life?⁴ Why are there memorials to sultans, kings, religious leaders with names, but to soldiers with no names, as if a soldier is only worthy of

collective commemoration when he or she disappears as an individual into a mass of fighters who are all expected to sacrifice their lives and their names on behalf of the ruling elite? Why are there graves for citizens but none for those that are subject to enforced disappearance, as if these deaths are ungrievable? Isn't it a contradiction to mourn for the destruction of monuments of cultural heritage, but not the destruction of Palestinian villages? These questions alert us to the fact that the ways in which the state apparatus exerts itself on dead bodies by making some death ungrievable might not be too different from the ways in which the cultural and educational institutions exert themselves on architecture by making some buildings unmemorable. Are we then not to question the current institutions and the art historical criteria that define the borders of what constitutes cultural heritage in the first place, if we are to criticize meaningfully its destruction in the Middle East and elsewhere?

Do I need to say that my intention is not at all to disrespect the edifices of cultural heritage where the artistic, social, and technological merits of an era culminate, or to look down on the values created by the discipline of art/architectural history? Nothing about this topic necessarily supports an advocacy for unconditional preservation either, as removing a monument after democratic consensus based on a social, scientific, technological, or ecological benefit for the future is different from destroying it with guns. At the same time, however, do I need to tackle more concepts in order to question whether sufficient distance has been kept, or could be kept, between the institutions that define memorable monuments and grievable cultural heritage on the one hand, and the geopolitical discourse that leads to war on the other hand?



Fig. 1. The transformation of Gezi Park and Taksim Square. Top: Military Artillery built in 1806; middle: Gezi Park built in accordance with Henri Prost's plan of 1939; bottom: Proposal by the AK Party government and Istanbul Municipality that sparked the Gezi protests in Summer 2013. Middle: Yapi Kredi Archive; bottom: Istanbul Municipality.

Moreover, has not the word “monument” itself been constructed in a way that perpetuates values such as power, authority, center, grandeur, glory, prestige, and sacrifice

that fuel war? Isn't that why rulers want to erect their own monuments to replace the ones of their rivals? To give the example that would have been my opening sentence in 2013, it was exactly the same claim to monumentality that sparked the Gezi protests. There are three contested sites in the protested project that entail a debate over the destruction and preservation of monuments: first is the reorganization of the Taksim Square, which is by now executed. Taksim was not an arbitrary choice for the AK Party government, not only because of its central location, but also because of its symbolic weight as the marker of the Turkish Republic in Istanbul. Second is the Gezi Park at one edge of the Taksim Square, which is threatened to be destroyed and replaced with a replica of the former Military Artillery redesigned as a shopping mall. Built in 1806 over existing cemeteries, and partially destroyed in 1909, the Military Artillery—an architectural example of self-inflicted Orientalism—was demolished during the construction of the Gezi Park as part of the French planner Henri Prost's Taksim Square project that began in 1939. Today's Gezi Park was originally part of the much bigger park that extended to Harbiye and Maçka, and that was the result of the modernist and secular city planning during the early Republic that put special emphasis on free spaces—*espaces libre*—such as big parks, promenades, squares, and playgrounds as spaces of public appearance (Fig. 1). Finally, the third contested structure, the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM—Atatürk Kültür Merkezi) building at another edge of the square, is a unique architectural design and a historical landmark for Turkish architecture, due to its quality as a palimpsest of different projects envisioned through the course of its design and construction that spanned over 38 years between 1939 and 1977. Its completion was a proud moment for architects and theater designers who sought to make an international contribution to stage design. With the large banner on its façade during the May 1st rallies, the building had made a mark in collective memory, especially of the political Left in Turkey. The AK Party government wants to demolish this building to erect another monument that would probably be stylistically continuous with the Military Artillery, so that the mark of the early Turkish Republic would be replaced with its own. Instead, a counter-monument emerged on the façade of this building during the Gezi protests. Many diverse groups of the Gezi uprising found a poetic way to share the façade of the AKM building to express their diverse aspirations, by hanging their banners on the elements of its aluminum lattice screen that used to thinly veil the transparent glass façade with iconic patterns. This counter-monumental gesture on the façade also serves as a metaphor

of democratic architecture in a way that falsifies its critiques that participatory design is doomed to result in the lowest common denominator or the tyranny of the majority. On the contrary, the appropriation of the AKM façade during the Gezi protests suggests that participatory design might as well become the platform that makes the co-existence of different ideals, even hitherto opposing ones, possible.⁵ (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2. Sharing the façade of the Atatürk Cultural Center during the Gezi protests in Summer 2013.

If you found me circling around similar questions in this essay, asking the same again and again from the perspective of the concept of the Middle East, the heritage, the monument, and the Gezi protests in Istanbul, there was a reason beyond the fact that this repetition mimics the cycles of destructions themselves. All these inquiries actually lead up to the same question about the choice between perpetual war and perpetual peace. It might be constructive to think along with authors who have actually defined or questioned the promises of modernity in these terms. Even though it was just a philosophical sketch in its own author's title, Immanuel Kant's essay "Perpetual Peace" was no less than a manifesto which declared that war was incompatible with the values of Enlightenment. If we read this text and Kant's foundational book *Prolegomena to Modern Ethics* together, we will conclude that nations, like individuals, could be modern only if they were at the same time committed to perpetual peace.⁶ Peace could not be called peace if it was made with the secret reservation that one might go to war in the future; and no unconditional goodwill or duty to oneself and to others—standards of modern ethics according to Kant—could possibly be fulfilled under conditions of war. The fact that the cycles of wars continued to exist long after Kant

wrote his “Perpetual Peace” text in 1795 does not invalidate his argument, but it has given philosophers reasons to think skeptically about the promises of modernity. If nobody or no modern nation could claim to be enlightened and go to war, do the endless cycles of war suggest that we have never been modern, or that modernism actually creates inhospitable and unc cosmopolitan discourses that inevitably lead to war? In order to prevent war and destruction of cultural heritage, are we to insist on the triumph of current geopolitical orders, cultural institutions, and architectural criteria, or are we to admit their fallibility?⁷

I would therefore like to call us to reflect on the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East only if we are to acknowledge what it takes, what it really takes, to defend perpetual peace; only if we are to truly stand in solidarity with humanity rather than a selected affinity group, with non-violence rather than violence, with a critique of all destructions rather than some; and only if we are to change our habit of believing in the clash-of-civilizations and nationalist arguments that have been used to justify wars in the past and that continue to do so for wars in the future.

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Esra Akcan, “Modernity as Perpetual War or Perpetual Peace?,” *Aggregate 4* (December 2016), <https://doi.org/10.53965/HNKQ3462>.

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¹ John Ruskin, *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1849); Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments,” *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 20–51. Quotation from page 20. [↑](#)

² Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt, 1938), 11, 29–30. [↑](#)

³ As Albert Hourani puts it, the geographical scope of the Middle East has always been arbitrary: while “Arab states,” Egypt, Israel, Iran, and Turkey are usually cited, the borders could well extend southward to North Africa, eastward to Afghanistan, and westward to the Balkans. Albert Hourani, “Introduction,” in *The Modern Middle East*, 2nd edition, ed. Albert Hourani, Philip Khoury, and Mary Wilson (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 1–20. Also see: Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). This confusion has equally marked architectural historiography. See, for instance: Nezar AlSayyad, “From Modernism to Globalization: The Middle East in Context,” in *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sandy

Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 255–266. [↑](#)

4 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso Books, 2006). [↑](#)

5 For more information on AKM and the relation between architecture and the Gezi protest, see Esra Akcan, “Bir cepheyi paylaşmak: Parsömen Olarak AKM ve Toplumsal Bellek,” *Mimarist*, vol. 13, no. 48 (Fall 2013): 85–92; Esra Akcan, “The ‘Occupy’ Turn in Global City Paradigm: The Architecture of AK Party’s Istanbul and the Gezi Movement,” *Journal of Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* (October 2015): 359–378. [↑](#)

6 Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1795] 1991), 83–130; Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). [↑](#)

7 Due to the concise nature of this essay, it is hard to do justice to this discussion. For my position on Kantian perpetual peace and cosmopolitan ethics, see Esra Akcan, *Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey and the Modern House* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), especially the introduction and chapter 5. [↑](#)