Why Do Old Places Matter?
Why We Need Bad Places

Max Page

My job is to bring you down, and then up again.

This issue of Forum Journal is justifiably uplifting, filled with ruminations about why old places matter for the good of our individual and collective lives—for our sense of history and beauty, for knowledge of our identity, to connect us to community and root us in a continuum of family and nation. Old places matter because they raise us up—spiritually, culturally, personally. These reasons for saving our old places are all true and right, and doing this benefits all of us.

But I’d like to introduce another part of the equation: the importance of preserving and interpreting difficult places, the places of pain, of violence, of failure, and controversy. The places we might normally want to avoid. I’d like to suggest, with some urgency, that our preservation movement—and it must be a movement and not simply a profession—must bend in the direction of justice. Part of that calling is to help our society confront its difficult places and difficult pasts.

My hope is that we will continue to bend historic preservation policy and practice so that the movement contributes, through the overlapping and intersecting of these two activities concerned with physical places, to the fundamental, dual human requirements of preserving memory and pursuing justice. Simply put, old places matter in part because of their capacity to force us to confront painful pasts, which must be the first step in healing wounds and building a more just world.

I will intentionally talk about places besides our own home, the United States. In an article for Preservation magazine next fall, I’ll look closely at some fascinating efforts to confront the difficult past here, in places such as Shockoe Bottom and Manzanar. But I’d like to survey three places abroad where I have spent time, because they suggest different approaches to confronting the difficult pasts that reside in the urban landscape. I’ll take us quickly from Rome to Berlin and Buenos Aires and then back to Rome, a city that writer Anthony Doerr has called “The City of Always.”
ROME
From atop the Janiculum, a hill where Giuseppe Garibaldi fought unsuccessfully for Rome’s independence in 1849, visitors can look out at centuries of ambitious visions for the city. Squint a little and you can make out the monuments of Roman emperors: the Baths of Diocletian, the Pantheon, Palatine Hill. Later the planners were popes, usually scions of wealthy Roman families, who gave rise to the city so recognizable today, of palazzi and church domes and grand squares anchored by obelisks.

With virtually no modern buildings added to the city’s historic center since the 1950s, one might easily get the sense that Rome has been largely unchanged for centuries. There was, however, one last great builder. Benito Mussolini and his stable of architects and planners built post offices, sports facilities for youth, apartments, schools and public markets. They remade the road system, not only with the massive Via dei Fori Imperiale but also the Via della Conciliazione, the equally famous boulevard leading to St. Peter’s Square. They built entire new towns in agricultural lands south of Rome, made possible by massive draining and reclaiming of the Pontine marshes.

Some of the most surreal sights in modern Rome are Mussolini’s surviving spectacles of propaganda. To the south of the city is the EUR, a virtual necropolis of white neoclassical monuments, including an abstracted, cube-like homage to the Colosseum, all part of an unfinished plan for a 1942 world’s fair—the Esposizione Universale Roma—that would celebrate 20 years of Fascism.

The Foro Italico, a large sports facility in Rome, features a mosaic plaza with crumbling but still visible repetitions of the favorite roar at Fascist rallies: “Il Duce.”

PHOTO BY MAX PAGE
The Foro Mussolini (now Foro Italico), a large sports facility north of the Vatican, features a mosaic plaza—the largest built here since the fall of Rome—celebrating the colonial conquest of Ethiopia in 1936. The mosaic includes 248 crumbling but still-visible repetitions of the favorite roar at Fascist rallies: “Il DUCE.”

Though Mussolini came from the north and had once disdained the Eternal City, after his 1922 coup he remade the urban landscape as only a few before him had. Today he might be surprised, and pleased, by how little of his legacy has been erased, or even discussed. Public reckonings are a big part of how other nations have moved forward from morally repugnant pasts. Not so in Italy. Today a handful of people are trying, openly, to confront Mussolini’s architectural imprint on Rome, but they’re a small minority. In an Italy and Europe rumbling with the newfound power of the right wing, the more typical response is a deafening—and troubling—silence.
GERMANY

Silence is the one word one cannot apply to Berlin.

For me as an individual and, I believe, for countless others, the art of remembering the awful begins in Berlin. My father grew up in this city, the capital of Europe in the 1920s, and his family fled in 1937 after seeing the writing on the wall. I have a long and troubled relationship with this city.

Berlin, the center of the apparatus of the Nazis and the Holocaust, conveniently pushed aside its memory in the aftermath of World War II. But under pressure from the next generation and its politically engaged artists, Berlin’s government and citizens have taken on the task of building a memorial landscape unlike that of any other city. This has defined an obsession with history and memory that is one of the hallmarks of our age. It has also defined a nation—at least the capital city—that is firmly committed to “never forgetting.” With each visit to Berlin, I find new memorials, new efforts to interpret sites related to Hitler and his regime. If the clutter of memorials is an annoyance to some, it is a far better failing than silence.

German artists and memorial-makers have, for two generations, been committed to resist building Kranzwerfstellen. This German word, which translates as “wreath-throwing place,” captures perfectly the failure of so many memorials, even ones that so consciously try to avoid being forgotten. The Austrian writer Robert Musil famously said that there is nothing as invisible as a monument. The man on the horse, the obelisk, the stone marker—all are eager to seem permanent, but quickly become forgotten. Desperate to make memory last, and deeply suspicious of the history of jingoist “man-on-horse” monuments, German artists and architects of the postwar period went about the job of remembering the Holocaust and its Nazi propagators by building non-monuments—interventions at historic sites that could not be brushed aside, that would not have one-line summaries, that would not allow for viewers to rest easy with a simple tear or shake of the head. And so in Berlin, we stumble over stolpersteine—“stumble stones,” bronze cobblestones with names of Nazi victims in front of the homes where they lived; we visit a Jewish Museum building that looks to be shattered; we climb to the top of a transparent dome and look
down into the Parliament hall Hitler burned, and where now a
democratic government works.

In Berlin, to ignore the Nazi past, one would have to willfully
look the other way.

BUENOS AIRES
While Germany’s memorial efforts have been in the service of
never forgetting, Buenos Aires’s efforts have sought to use memory
to bring the perpetrators of state terror from the 1970s to justice.
The “bad” places are seen as crime scenes, with the culprits yet to
be punished.

From 1976 to 1983, Buenos Aires, Argentina, was at the center
of a state-sponsored, U.S.-supported internal war of repression,
torture, and murder of those belonging to or perceived to be part
of a left-wing revolutionary movement. The Dirty War was an
everyday system of repression. The torture centers of the Dirty War
in Argentina, which were found in neighborhoods across the city,
have a rarefied elegance to them, inspired by the Parisian model
that seemed to dictate all design decisions in the city. Old military
schools, rusticated neoclassical police stations, Gothic churches and
French-inspired mansions, rural estancias: the Dirty War took place
in the genteel splendor of the Paris of South America.

A Fulbright Fellowship in 2009 took me to Buenos Aires and
into the middle of a long-delayed national reckoning with the Dirty
War. I visited the clandestine detention centers as well as official
and neighborhood memorials to the “disappeared” and interviewed
human rights activists, museum officials, memorial designers and
artists obsessed with creatively keeping the legacy of the Dirty
War in the public eye.

Human rights groups grew in reaction to the efforts of conser-
ptive regimes of the 1980s and 1990s to “put the past in the past.”
The regime of Carlos Menem, president beginning in 1989, put an
end to persecution of those involved in torture and insisted on
closure through erasure. Indeed, he proposed that sites related to
the dictatorship—such as the ESMA detention center—be leveled as
acts of “national reconciliation.” The election of Néstor Kirchner as
president of Argentina in 2003 reopened the debate over the Dirty
War and how it should be remembered. Kirchner (who was followed in the presidency by his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, now serving her final year in office), was much more sympathetic to the victims and the memory of the Dirty War and built political support on the left in part by demanding new accountability of the perpetrators, and new respect for the victims and their families.

Today Argentina is also at the vanguard in wrestling with how to preserve sites, remember that time, and honor the victims. Thirty-five years after it was founded, the main building at ESMA is slowly being opened to the public while the debate over the future of the larger site continues, seemingly endlessly. Just a mile east is the vast Parque de la Memoria (Memory Park), the national memorial to the desaparecidos (the disappeared). Finally, everywhere are popular grassroots memorials and public art installations, flourishing on the sidewalks and walls across this sprawling city.

The goals of this activist preservation movement have begun to be met: at the very end of 2009, 26 years after the end of the dictatorship, and continuing to this day, some of the key leaders of the military dictatorship have finally been forced before a judge, or brought before a court again after having been pardoned decades before. In part because of the work of preservationists who are human rights activists, Argentineans are confronting their past and finding some closure through the justice system.

*Stolperstein*—“stumble stones”—embedded into sidewalks in Rome and Berlin make remembrance of Nazi atrocities part of daily life by listing the names of victims in front of their former homes.
To confront, of course, does not mean to erase. What countries such as Argentina and Germany, not to mention South Africa and even the United States, have done is to make public interpretation at historic sites—monuments, memorials, innovative public art—an ongoing commitment, as if to say: We have to keep talking about our difficult pasts, here, where the past took place, where it was built. We will preserve not to salve wounds but to pursue a better country.

**ROME**

Italy’s engagement with its Fascist past in Rome might best be called a policy of organized forgetting. While much has been written by Italian scholars about the rise of Fascism, there has been little effort by the city and nation to confront the physical propagandistic legacy that Mussolini left one of the world’s great cities.

But perhaps even here things are changing.

Nearly two years after Mayor Marino’s proposal to eliminate the Via dei Fori Imperiale, his plan has gotten little traction, though he has managed to close off the street on weekends and holidays. Others are busy trying to deal more explicitly with the legacy of Mussolini, with a nervous intensity borne of concern about the rise of right-wing movements across Europe.

Siblings Adachiara and Luca Zevi, children of the Jewish modern architectural historian and critic Bruno Zevi, have separately taken on projects to remind Romans of the dark side of Fascism. Adachiara and her Arte in Memoria Foundation have brought German activist Gunter Demnig to install some of his *stolpersteine* in front of the homes of Romans (largely Jews, but not exclusively) who were persecuted and then, starting in October of 1943, deported to Nazi death camps.

The GIL building, a former sports center named for the Gioventu’ Italiana del Littorio—the organization of the Italian Fascist youth—was constructed by Luigi Moretti in 1933.
Luca has designed a Holocaust memorial museum which will be built, starting in 2015, in a park adjacent to Villa Torlonia, an 18th-century country estate just a mile beyond the walls of ancient Rome. The new museum glosses over the site’s many layers, especially the one involving Mussolini. The villa, where he lived (often with his mistress) during much of the 1920s and 1930s, sits atop his personal bunker and a Roman-era Jewish catacomb system; nearby is the private English school that now educates Mussolini’s great grandson, son of his granddaughter, Alessandra Mussolini, a senator from Silvia Berlusconi’s conservative People of Freedom party.

Finally, the South African artist William Kentridge was recently in town to advance his project for drawing 90 huge figures of “victory and lament” in Roman history along the high walls that channel the Tiber river near the Vatican. One of those will be an image drawn from a Naples mural that still stands, shot through with World War II bullet holes, of Mussolini on a horse, like so many previous Roman leaders, giving his infamous salute.

Who knows? In a few years, the thousands who walk along the Lungotevere, on their way to work, or on their way to a soccer game at the Foro Italico, might pause for a moment to take in a dramatic public art installation, and start to consider again Mussolini, Italian Fascism, the danger of empires, and regimes—then and now—that traffic in brutality. Inch by inch, project by project, perhaps the arc of memory in the Eternal City can be bent.

CONCLUSION

When I first arrived in Rome in January of 2014, I saw an image in an exhibition at the American Academy that immediately captured my imagination. It was a photograph by Italian artist Mimmo Jodice entitled Demetra Opera 1 (1992). In the photograph, an ancient bust is lacking much of the right side of its face. But a hand holds in place a reconstruction of the lost piece.

In a way, it is a metaphor for what we traditionally try to do as preservationists—save the object, perhaps restore it, bring it back to life. But I read it differently. It seems more of a metaphor for our elusive desire to repair a shattered human world. The hand
gently holds a repaired piece up to the original, trying to make it fit. But, of course, it does not. Only an approximation of wholeness can be made. And it requires the gentle hand to hold it there, a continuous effort.

We cannot heal, once and for all, injuries of the past. But it seems to me a central—I may even say sacred—duty of historic preservation to lead our fellow citizens to historic buildings and landscapes that represent our very worst histories, or capture our most fundamental disagreements, and, like the hand in this image, hold us there with creativity and compassion, and make us think again about who we are. FJ

MAX PAGE is professor of architecture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and director of the Historic Preservation Program. He is also author of The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, The City’s End, Rethinking Jane Jacobs and Giving Preservation a History. In 2014, he was a Rome Prize Fellow at the American Academy in Rome. Parts of this essay appeared first in the Boston Globe on July 13, 2014, as “The Roman Architecture of Mussolini, Still Standing.”

VIDEO
To watch a video of “Why Do Old Places Matter?” with presenters Tom Mayes, Max Page and Jeremy Wells at the 2014 Past Forward conference in Savannah, Georgia, click here.