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Book Review: Ristic M & Frank S (eds). *Urban Heritage in Divided Cities: Contested Pasts* Routledge, 2020

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As terrible events continue to unfold in the West Bank and Israel, filling headlines with disturbing scenes of misery and destruction from Jerusalem and Gaza, good scholarship on the questions of the divided city has never been of greater potential relevance and practical value. The issues surrounding ethnic partition of cities – its origins, its proponents, its sequences and its aftermaths – are complicated, and it remains likely that scholars and practitioners will never understand them sufficiently. The scholarship is young; we have only begun to recognize reliable cause-and-effect relations which result in violent and sometimes permanent harm to the civilians who reside in and around these places.

One of the newest contributions to this body of work is "*Urban Heritage in Divided Cities: Contested Pasts*" edited by Mariana Ristic and Sybille Frank, published by Routledge in 2020. This volume is a compilation of papers contributed by authors from around the world, building from and expanding upon material presented at a 2016 Montreal conference panel called "Contested Pasts", likewise curated by Ristic and Frank. The volume focuses on the importance of historic cities in the broader dialogue about urban partition, and it argues that well-conceived responses to partition on the part of designers and

planners can influence the speed and quality of post-partition recovery and reconciliation. It allows the reader to examine more than thirteen different sites where formal or informal partition has taken place, with emphasis on the role of historical narratives, both real and invented.

The core premise, or promise, of this book is to demonstrate how manipulations of the built environment in divided cities may assist with "mediating, subverting, or overcoming" sociopolitical conflict and traumas associated with partition. Elsewhere Ristic has asserted that "design can act as a trigger for a positive sociopolitical change" and that "insights into how the urban form, network, spatial practices, meanings and senses of place were destroyed…can open a window into the features of cities that should be transformed with the view to reinforcing coexistence." (Ristic, *Architecture, Urban Space and War: The Destruction and Reconstruction of Sarajevo*, 2018). Upon the possibility of such therapeutic triggering, much of the potential value of this volume rests.

It is revealing to note that Ristic believes a carefully chosen site-specific transformation (regarding bricks and mortar urban "features") may generate non-formal, non-site-specific benefits, such as social healing, conflict reduction and mutual understanding. Her suggestion is certainly a seductive one. If it could be positively shown that the harms resulting from partition could be reduced or eliminated through carefully designed alterations to select historic buildings and public places, we would have the template for a new and hybridized branch of the architectural profession.

Before we return to this exciting prospect, it may be useful to examine how little we know at the present moment in relation to these complicated problems. For example, we have yet to systematize a diagnostic approach to divided cities with respect to their original wounds and pathologies. We have neither a shared terminology nor standard analytical methods which would allow us to systematically examine and compare the dynamics of partition across two or more cities. We continue to apply, for the most part, a purely anecdotal approach to the topic. We speak of particular cities, and particular antagonistic groups, and particular objects in the urban landscape with special symbolic value, but not yet of types, taxonomies or stages of urban partition.

For example, if we understood more thoroughly the forces and politics behind the emergence of the Green Line in Jerusalem – manifesting in 1948, dissolving in 1967, and scarring life in that city ever since – we would have many more insights about what is happening now. If in possession of such insights, diplomats and scholars could be making more useful and substantive contributions to the prospects for negotiated settlement and more equitable allocation of urban resources. Linking this example to the book under consideration, we might wonder what the chapter concerning Hebron and its "heritage necropolitics" might have to say about the current violence in Jerusalem, East and West. While this outstanding exploration by Feras Hammami is one of the most detailed and rigorous in the volume compiled by Ristic and Frank, it does not offer the reader a rubric or language with which to unpack other cases. We are left with a clear sense of the injustices and injuries inflicted upon Palestinians in Hebron, but we are not left with the tools we need to understand an emerging case study or even the one a few dozen miles away.

Absent these insights, researchers and practitioners are compelled to recite the same old stories with fresh names and dates, never quite penetrating the outer skin of the conflict, relying on journalists and others to make superficial, hasty and poorly-corroborated observations on our behalf. These kinds of recitation are a weakness of Ristic and Frank's book; it leaves a reader awash in details, metaphors, emblems, and episodes of injustice, but cross-cutting insights about the nature of partition are regrettably scarce.

This anecdotal approach may lead readers to accept the conventional notion that deep, inscrutable hatreds exist between ethnic groups in divided cities, such that no rational person could understand them and no logical policy could contribute to their dissolution. This set of assumptions typically produces equally superficial and irrational revitalization projects from outside parties, few of which have ever shown much lasting effectiveness on the ground. Heaven help the residents of any divided city who encounter one of these benevolent actors accompanied by a lot of money -- the results are prone to be both dramatic and counterproductive, as evidenced by the odd regression of Mostar since Prince Charles came calling. These well-intentioned interventions rested on a faulty diagnosis of that city's partition, and accordingly delivered the wrong medicine for its residents -- on a silver platter.

It is incumbent upon those of us who are involved in the field of built heritage and urban development to be more candid about what we know, and we do not know about historic cities affected by urban partition:

We know quite a lot about how partition happens and how it intersects with the historic built environment. We know many of the stages and sequences that urban partition exhibits, from the earliest signs of political maneuvering and social unrest to the purposeful construction of permanent physical barricades. We know extensively the particular social and political narratives that accompany this evolution, mainly because we have been able to observe more examples of this phenomenon than any of us would have wished for or anticipated.

We know much less about why certain cities succumb to these forces of partition, while many others with identical underlying conditions and tensions do not. We know little or nothing about how much social unrest is manipulated by political actors in order to justify draconian urban planning schemes involving physical segregation of ethnically distinct enclaves. In addition, though several historically divided cities have been repaired in relation to buildings and free circulation, with Mostar and Beirut as prominent examples, we have yet to see a clear case of a divided city recovering socially and economically as a result of the repairs made to torn and shattered physical fabric. (This point is well articulated by Scott Bollens' essay on Solider in this volume.) More importantly, as a field we know very little about how physical alterations to the urban environment feedback upon social relations and systems in general. Which is to say, we do not know much about the degree to which physical repairs can heal the social wounds which inevitably result from a partitioning process, even when these repairs are thoughtfully made, collaboratively executed and generously funded.

This last observation brings us back to a problem with premises in the book under consideration, as framed by Ristic and Frank. It has already been noted that the editors lean heavily on the idea that heritage "has the agency to transform socio-spatial relations for better or for worse" (p. 2), arguing repeatedly that the historic physical environment "shapes" identities, places, and relations between contesting groups. From a purely practical perspective, a reader is compelled to wonder how this kind of transformation through shaping is measured; what metric is proposed by Ristic and Frank with which to recognize "better" or "worse" socio-spatial relations? Better for whom? The editors do not offer an answer to such questions.

More fundamentally, Ristic and Frank fail to adequately define the terms and assumptions upon which their overarching analysis rests. Looking only at the phrasing cited above, the editors are obliged to explain how the notion of "heritage" is bounded and construed in this context, and why they chose to distinguish historic from non-historic urban fabric for the purposes of their analysis. The reader is also compelled to wonder what exactly would constitute a durable and substantial transformation, and how that change could be measured with consistency across disparate case studies. How should the reader understand the notion of "agency" as it may be exercised by an abstract entity such as heritage, and what precisely is meant by the shaping of identity?

Aside from broad-stroke terminology, this volumed is embedded with problematic assumptions regarding failed group relations, identity-based conflict, the superiority of stability over conflict, and the individual's relationship with the built environment. Each of these is debatable in the broader context of divided city politics, but they are implicated by Ristic and Frank as non-debatable and understood. Central among these is a supposition, adopted without comment or examination by the editors, that partition is a uniformly heinous injury inflicted upon cities, one to be healed through reconciliation between historically antagonistic social groups. It is worth remembering that reconciliation may not be what is most needed by the groups in question, while partition may be part of a larger process of urban evolution, one complex enough to defy positivistic notions of fairness and social harmony.

This book contains many rigorous and informative contributions from highly informed scholars, demonstrating a consistent concern for the well-being of communities affected by urban partition. Anyone who has spent time with the topic of divided cities shares an interest in the possibility of recovery on the social level, and many of the contributors to this book have put their interest into practice with insightful examinations of traumatized communities they know well. Despite all this, the editors have failed to synthesize these findings into a form that could improve the efficiency and relevance of future research. They have instead produced a volume marred by fuzzy logic and reductive phrasing, imposing a therapeutic frame on an urgent problem which deserves straightforward treatment.

Ristic and Frank observe rightly that social conflicts can modify historic places, and then they proceed to assume that modifying historic places can reduce social conflict. The symmetry of this logic is tempting but unstable. It becomes irresponsible when it leads researchers to seek physical interventions they hope will bring about symbolic social change. This approach attacks symptoms of partition without sufficient

exploration of its root causes. Ristic and Frank have given us an optimistic projection of how they hope urban professionals might influence the consequences of partition, propped up with non-corroborating, non-parallel anecdotes. Though useful patterns surely exist, under Ristic and Frank's stewardship, these anecdotes coalesce into neither a proof nor a method. Their book provides more reasons for professional concern, but does not offer the tools and yardsticks built environment practitioners need to confront the problem -- one still unfolding, still evolving, and still eluding most scholars of urban development -- in its fullest complexity.

About the Author

Mr. Calame is an independent American scholar whose training is in architectural history and urban development. He currently serves as a Research Scholar at the Global Institute for Sustainable Prosperity. Between 2001-2013, Jon was a partner with Minerva Partners, a non-profit consulting group working internationally to support cultural heritage. He examined collaborative urban planning in Nicosia, Cyprus as a senior Fulbright Scholar and studied Italy's Roma camps as a Fellow of the American Academy in Rome in 2010. He is the co-author of a 2009 book entitled *Divided Cities: Beirut, Belfast, Jerusalem, Mostar and Nicosia*.