**Lucien Steil**

**Building in a Wider World**

*The genuine alternative for most of us is that between an aimless utopia of escape and a purposive utopia of reconstruction.*

*—Lewis Mumford*

The School of Architecture has durably and successfully established a design studio tradition in fourth year spring studio design, exploring, discovering, and elaborating on non-Western design cultures with deference, diligence, and empathy. The purpose of this pedagogical endeavor, though in line with the excellent tradition of the Grand Tour, is not in any manner inspired by an appetite for exotic tourism and romanticizing *Wanderlust*—rather, it is inspired by solid academic and didactic reasons. It is indeed an intellectual, philosophical, cultural, as well as technical and ecological inquiry into a universal art of sustainable placemaking, building, and dwelling that responds poetically, ethically, and pragmatically to the nature and culture of places and communities, their climate and geography, their faith and mythologies, their thinking of the universe and time, their philosophy of change and permanence, as well as their aspiration for beauty and peace.

This is neither driven by an anti-Western sentiment nor an idealization of indigenous cultures nor an anti-industrial nostalgy, but by a rational and purposeful acknowledgment of the selected wisdom and genius, as well as the practical and operational intelligence to be gained, not only from preindustrial cultures, but as well from diverse, alternative, and different cultures. The emerging general consensus is that we share far more things in common than things that divide us, and the contrast, alterity, and diversity, rather than disproving this, does indeed reveal the complex and sophisticated scale and rich spectrum of our humanness. As Lev S. Vygotsky pointedly noted in *Mind in Society*, “Through others we become ourselves.”[[1]](#footnote-1) We cannot but emphasize how engaging with a wider building culture of “otherness” leads us back to the very foundations of our own historical cultures and enhances our identity as a living and evolving component of “perpetual becoming,” rather than the archaeological ruin of a stagnating Self. This moment, or journey, where “identity arises when the Self meets the Other”[[2]](#footnote-2) may occur in a way that we not only recover lost memories and forgotten knowledge, but even may be able to reconstruct essential components of “Techne”—a fundamental feature for the moral and ecological reconstruction of architecture and urbanism, both in theory and practice.

Terror and wars and the destruction of many cities throughout the Near East and Middle East, from Gaza to Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and beyond, and in Europe, as well as frequent and redundant natural disasters—earthquakes, tsunami, tornadoes, hurricanes, flooding—and global pollution and the destruction of natural resources have contributed to humanitarian desolation, misery, and suffering. More than ever there is a pressing need for empathy and sympathy for otherness and diversity to save us from despair, indifference, and even cynicism. Learning from the world’s wider ecology of knowledge and intelligence is not an act of charity, not even of humanitarian interest. It also does not result from a postcolonial *mea culpa*, nor is it selfish cultural appropriation; it is an urgent and indispensable requirement for healing and rebuilding the world—and maybe our only chance to save our planet from irreversible deterioration, if not complete annihilation.

The world has never been at peace for long and is, alas, often struck by natural or manufactured tragedies; if golden ages ever existed, they were rare and short-lived. So here we commemorate the heroic and compassionate resilience of human responses to destruction and draw inspiration from epic efforts to rebuild a finer world over the ruins of old cities and memories.

Even early in my education I have been fascinated by the issue of Reconstruction. Though most of the post-World War II reconstruction in my home country Luxembourg had been beautifully completed in my childhood with no ruin or ravage left from the German occupation and the Rundstedt Offensive, I witnessed the brutal and rapid destruction of my hometown’s historic center and large portions of Luxembourg City by an enthusiastic crowd of landlords, politicians, and real estate agents served by docile and opportunistic architects who were not interested in traditional and popular visions of comfort and beauty, but eager to sign the death certificate of the traditional city and declare the end of popular architecture.

Though most people preferred traditional architecture and city-building, I remained perplexed by the passivity and their lack of resistance to the rapid deterioration and destruction of familiar urban environments. It came to my mind much later that the issue of reconstruction was not only a material, structural, and technical endeavor, but also, almost more importantly, a political, philosophical, poetical, moral, ethical, and maybe a mythological one. The trauma of destruction and physical and archaeological remainders of our homeland and hometowns, the images of our *Patria* in shards*,* unfortunately and surprisinglydid not seem sufficient to rouse the necessary patriotic and emotional thrive for salvaging our dearest and most evocatory dwelling places.

Coming across the destruction of whole blocks of beautiful Haussmann architecture in Paris during my architectural studies, I thought of how important and central the issue of reconstruction had been in my earliest understanding of the significance of architecture. I vividly remember reading Léon Krier’s and Maurice Culot’s joint publications, particularly the “Declaration of Bruxelles,” in which they write eloquently about the urgency of a “moral and material Reconstruction.” In one of his earliest interviews, Léon Krier narrates in a very poetic manner the postwar reconstruction of Echternach in the 1950s as a paradigmatic model of this kind of material and moral reconstruction. Both Léon and his brother, Rob, refer to this magnificent reconstruction, efficiently and beautifully executed by outstanding local craftsmen and architects as an almost mythical task. Witnessing how a small country was able to rebuild consistently and elegantly its villages, towns, and cities immediately after the war—and then experiencing their destruction by modernist architecture, functional zoning, and traffic-planning in the following decades—had a foundational impact on their thinking and design work. The pairing of “moral and material” in the reconstruction task had a particularly suggestive influence on my own studies and professional development. I was never attracted by the moralism one finds both in “fundamentalist” modernism and “doctrinaire” classicism; my major reasons to study architecture had to do with social justice, sense of place, and the common good—not with “morality” perverted by strict interpretations of religious fanaticism and ideological extremism.

Though historical reconstructions were generally conceived as imitations of destroyed cities, the memories they sprang from were never straightjackets for imagination and recollection. The rebuilders were not bound by nostalgia but rather saw their task as a creative and poetic opportunity. Free of the dogma of archaeological authenticity, literal restitution, or folkloric mimicry, they were unashamed to borrow, copy, and imitate where appropriate, and to innovate where necessary or useful. They were not particularly concerned with expressing a “spirit of the time”—or at least not as posited by modernism. It probably seemed evident that their buildings should fit into their settings and that the “spirit of the time” was an inherent condition of human existence in the world. The best reconstructions were not meant to manipulate, censor, or distort memory with emotion or sentimentality. There was no retribution, manifesto, or utopia, but rather an expression of human solidarity, patriotism, and culture.

**The Aleppo Reconstruction Project**

Our Reconstruction of Aleppo project addresses urban architecture in the specific context of Syria’s post-Civil War reconstruction. We chose one of the most damaged yet remarkable neighborhoods located at the foot of the Citadel among various central areas to be rebuilt within a perspective of “philological reconstruction” in both their urban and their architectural forms. The site was chosen for its symbolic and historic significance and complexity in the context of its contemporary and historical civic, architectural, and urbanistic identity and collective memory. Students worked in small planning groups to research, analyze, and sketch various iterations of a masterplan to be synthesized afterward in a single draft. Drawing upon local precedents through typo-morphological analysis and research, the final plan was based on principles of “philological reconstruction” (with reference to Paolo Marconi and Léon Krier) and developed through a methodology of “imitation” (Léon Krier and Demetri Porphyrios, 1980) and “pattern language” (Christopher Alexander, 1977), allowing students to quickly draft a coherent, contextual, and empathic reconstruction model. They then focused individually on the design of a building or built ensemble using similar techniques of “imitation”; they sought to recover the “originality” of the place by returning to the origins and essences of placemaking and architecture in Aleppo.

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1. Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, *Mind in Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Énard, Mathias. 2017. *Compass.* New York: New Directions Publishing. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)