

How modern warfare turns neighborhoods into battlefields

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It has been almost 12 years since I left my city. And I have never been able to return. Homs, the place I was born and grew up, has been destroyed and I, like many others, have been left in exile: left to remember how beautiful it once was. What can a person do when their home—that place within them that carries so much meaning—has

effectively been murdered?

I have spent my academic career studying the impact of war on architecture and cities and researching acts of deliberate destruction of home, termed by scholars as [domicide](#). Domus is the Latin word for home and domicile refers to the deliberate destruction of home—the killing of it. I have investigated how architecture, both at the time of war and peace, has been weaponized; willfully targeted, bombed, burnt and contested. It has led me to publishing my first book, "[Domicide: Architecture, War, and the Destruction of Home in Syria](#)."

From the burning of housing, land and property ownership documents, to the destruction of homes and cultural [heritage sites](#), the brutal destruction in Homs, and other cities in Syria, has not only erased our material culture but also forcibly displaced millions.

Today, [over 12 million people](#) have been displaced from their homes within Syria, and beyond in countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Germany and Egypt. This destruction has been "justified" by the Syrian government and its allies, who claim these ordinary neighborhoods are in fact "battlefields" in what they call a "war on terror and on terrorists."

In March 2011, peaceful protests against the government [began to grow](#). The protests evolved into a violent insurgency when the government responded with force. Syrians were protesting over issues like oppression and a lack of political freedom.

Amid the brutal crackdown, there were soldiers from the Syrian army who switched sides and formed the breakaway Free Syrian Army to support the revolution. Throughout the years, more armed and rebel groups emerged. But powerful allies also came to the government aid, such as Russia and Iran. This has [led the country into war](#). To date, more than [half million](#) people have been killed.

The government destroyed and bombed rebel held areas as well as issuing new urban planning laws to carry out further devastation without the need for a military justification. The new planning [decrees](#) led to the erasure of entire neighborhoods which were largely populated by people who opposed the government. These sites were labeled as "illegal" or "built without permission." These wanton acts of destruction were carried out to [punish opponents of the government](#).

My home

I sometimes wish there were cameras that could livestream the streets of Homs in Syria. I wonder, how is my city getting on? How are the people? Can I see their faces again, and can I, even through a camera, see every corner of the streets of Homs.

I search for every new video published on the city, looking at the new shops that opened, and the many that have remained in ruins. I look in these videos at the people. What is happening in their minds? Who have they lost? Is their home still intact? They have endured so much pain. I wonder how they are after 12 years of suffering that left over half of the neighborhoods in ruins.

It feels like a dream now when I see Homs. Even after being so privileged to visit so many cities around the world (from New York and Berlin, to Rome, Istanbul and Athens). Every city reminds me of the city of my birth.

When my well-meaning friends tell me to forget about Homs, forget about the past—"Syria is no longer for us," I refuse to forget, even when the world seems to do exactly that. I don't want to live in a landscape of forgetting.

Now, when walking the streets of my newly adopted home city of

Oxford, Homs remains in my mind. I remember the day I left on November 17, 2011. The departure day was filled with tears to leave as tanks were positioned across different parts of the city and Homs was being divided and shelled. I feel a deep sense of grief for the people who have been killed since the start of the revolution—and for those who remain, for those who are forcibly displaced: for us. Grief was aching my heart for my friend who was killed while marching in a peaceful demonstration. His name was Taher Al Sebai. He was killed on October 16, 2011, a month before my departure from Homs to Manchester.

Protests in Homs were spreading across neighborhoods, with men, women and children calling for a new future inspired by the waves of protests sweeping countries as part of the wider movements of the [Arab Spring](#). "Death but not indignity," people in Homs chanted, "One. One. One. The Syrian People Are One," they called in the streets, and "Freedom Forever." The protests were brutally attacked.

When protests were targeted and oppressed, people chanted from their own homes; from their balconies. I watched this from my own bedroom. I remember women in the neighboring buildings breaking the silence of the dark nights; "where is everyone," a woman cried to encourage our neighbors to start chanting.

This became a daily practice in the early days of the revolution when the streets became no-go zones because bullets were being shot randomly from cars to spread fear and prevent protest. There were times I sheltered in the corridors of my home with all the lights off, away from the windows, for fear of being hit by a stray bullet.

Despite the constant threat and fear of death, the people stood up. Walls of fear and silence were knocked down as thousands of Homsis gave the streets new purpose, turning them into sites of resistance and protest. 2011 will forever be engraved in my mind because it was a historical

moment of discovery built on the hopes of everyday people who dared to imagine and construct a new way of life based on the simplest of things: freedom. Homs, often known for its jolly people and their sense of humor, took a new name, "The Capital of the Revolution."

When a peaceful demonstration marched in my street on October 16, it was targeted. I remember the screams and the shouting in the street. Soon I was told that Taher was killed. A martyr, everyone wrote on social media. How did I, at the age of 23, come to have a martyr as a friend?

And not only Taher, two other young children were killed too. I knew Taher from the Department of Architecture, as we both studied there. I remember his smile; his face radiated with kindness, tranquility and goodness. His name in Arabic means "pure" or "virtuous" and everyone who knew him described him like that.

Even when writing this piece on a rainy and cloudy summer day in Oxford, the images of Taher return as if it all was just yesterday. Can someone tell me how to live after death? Is there a life after destruction?

From Ukraine to Syria: Civilians as the frontline

This is surely a question which occupies the minds of the many millions of ordinary people caught up in today's wars—wars which have transformed streets, towns and neighborhoods into battlefields.

On February 20, 2022, I contacted [Lyse Doucet](#), the BBC's chief international correspondent to invite her to write the foreword to my book. She replied from the Ukrainian capital Kyiv. Throughout her career, Doucet has covered several conflicts around the world, including Afghanistan and Syria, by taking the audiences globally to the intimate stories and lives of those civilians who suffer the horrors of war.

At the time of her response, the emerging videos and photos from Ukraine, reminded me of the trauma that the Syrian people have suffered through. "All the images were trembling into our lives again," Doucet wrote in her foreword, adding:

"Moscow's cruise missiles smashing into high-rise residential blocks, exposing wrecked homes within: tidy rooms turned topsy-turvy; crockery shattered; children's torn toys strewn across the floor. Heartbreaking images of petite suburban bungalows with pocket gardens swallowed up by flames. Stomach-churning images of bodies sprawled out along the streets."

Cities have become the battlefields making the everyday urban life the site of contestation, division, siege and destruction. And we have all seen this destruction, which has been wiping out peoples' intimate and cherished places causing a deep sense of grief and rupture. This is Domicide. As Doucet adds,

"Wars of our time, sometimes fought in our name, are not in the trenches; they're fought street-to-street, house to house, one home after another. Why does a hospital, a kindergarten, always seem to be hit in every outbreak or hostilities? After nearly four decades of reporting on conflict, I now often say, civilians are not close to the front lines; they are the frontline."

This is what we have seen in Ukraine, and before that in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and many other countries. Civilians are the frontline. In my city, some people have been displaced multiple times within the last 12 years.

As a London-based citizen from Homs, who I interviewed in 2019 told me: "We left Homs in 2012. We lived in rural Damascus for a year and a half. During that time, we rented another house, we furnished it, and we wanted to start over, but then again, we had to leave, and we went back

to Homs. It was bombed again. So I think my mother lost two houses. After that, she decided she does not want to furnish any house, she doesn't want to buy any luxurious things because she was afraid it might be destroyed again."

Architecture at the time of war

When I tell people that I am researching the impact of war on architecture and cities, they often get surprised, even some of those within the field of architecture. For some, architecture is about shiny buildings, luxurious design and skyscrapers.

But then I start explaining that architectural questions are central at the time of war. Questions like: How do we rebuild cities after war? What should we remember and what should we forget? Who decides the shape of the future of cities? How do you protect endangered heritage? And how can you engage with local communities in the process of reconstruction so that their voices are heard?

Once I unpack these questions, the people I meet start reflecting on these themes by telling me of an example they are aware of, such as the preservation of the remains of the Berlin Wall after its fall, or the reconstruction of Coventry after World War II, or Beirut after the civil war, or struggles to decide how to rebuild Mosul, or the destruction of peoples' ways of living in Gaza.

Architecture is a fundamental part of the process of making and unmaking a home, an essential debate to be discussed and researched in our times as many cities remain in ruins around the world.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

These questions and more have been [researched](#) by architects and academics writing about their own cities and countries, either from within or from [exile](#). Bringing this personal attachment to the research is, in my opinion, fundamental when it comes to explaining the impact of destruction on people who cherish their own architecture and cultural heritage. As Doucet added,

"In many realms, from journalism to academe to literature and art, there is now a deepening appreciation that whoever asks the questions and seeks the answers can have a decisive impact on how much, and what kind of knowledge we gain. A new generation of scholars, researchers and writers bring to their work a fluency in relevant languages and a more visceral understanding of their own cultures and societies, including its deepest pain and greatest joys. This is lived experience."

In Ukraine, Ievgeniia Gubkina wrote about the destruction and reconstruction of cities. In her book, [Being a Ukrainian Architect During Wartime: Essays, Articles, Interviews, and Manifestos](#), Gubkina included a letter titled Unseen Realities: Let History Be Told by the Victims.

In the letter, she emphasized the need to bring trauma to the surface, instead of hiding it. By doing so, Gubkina centralized the concept that architecture is not just about stones and buildings, it is about people and their pain and hopes. This is the reality that Gubkina lived at the time of war:

"My reality is thousands of missiles that have been fired at civil infrastructure and all-day shelling aimed at residential areas. My reality is thousands of people and hundreds of children that have been killed. My reality is millions of people that have been forced to leave their homes. My reality is my substantially destroyed home city of Kharkiv ... My world, my reality, is being destroyed, bombed, exterminated, erased, exploded, demolished, deconstructed and killed."

And through this new history, written by the victims, we are able to enter the worlds and the realities of others. Through these entries, we are able to create spaces of solidarity and understanding and construct narratives that are often kept hidden, silenced and unspoken.

Gubkina adds, "The pain that, when people see Saltivka, a residential district in Kharkiv, is felt not just in the rest of Ukraine but in Paris and London too and can bring tears to eyes from Palmyra to New York. This is the pain of loss, loss of what we all, regardless of nationality, social status, and place of residence, understand as life, way of living, and memory of lives. These are tears of shared despair at our inability to stop these lives being destroyed."

In the case of Syria, there are several architects who lived there and are writing about cities and war, such as the work of [Nasser Rabbat](#), [Sawsan Abou Zainedin](#), [Hani Fakhani](#), [Ahmad Sukkar](#), and [Marwa al-Sabouni](#).

On Iraq, Sana Murrani, has researched questions of memory, belonging and refuge through interviews with Iraqis from different parts of the country, and through deep-mapping and storytelling methods. Murrani left Iraq in June 2003 shortly after the U.S.-led invasion. She has never been able to return. Now two decades later, she has written a [book](#) on her beloved country which will be published in 2024; Rupturing architecture: spatial practices of refuge in response to war and violence in Iraq.

I have been privileged to talk to some of these architects, including Abou Zainedin, Rabbat, Murrani and Gubkina. Today, as we live in a world of ruins, it is vital that we have conversations and exchange ideas, to support each other and learn—perhaps, to write a new history together.

Deconstructing reconstruction

As wars continue to destroy many cities around the world, reconstruction has become an important word of our times. From Syria to Ukraine, this word has been debated and discussed.

Syria was a fashionable conflict site, covered widely in the media and studied in academia—unlike other conflicts, such as Yemen and Libya. Conversations and debates about reconstruction have already been discussed both inside and outside the country.

Today, however, 12 years into the conflict, no reconstruction project has been implemented. In Homs, some partially damaged buildings have been rehabilitated but most of the heavily damaged buildings remain in ruins. The continuation of the war, the collapsed economy and the

financial sanctions, have all contributed to a country in ruins.

It feels like the world moved on from Syria. All the eyes have now turned to a new conflict site: Ukraine. It has attracted significant attention in the media and academia. The [reconstruction question](#) has become highly debated in [conferences](#) and architecture [symposiums](#) both inside and outside of Ukraine.

One of these conversations that has fueled big debates and discussions is "a [vision for the Master Plan for the city of Kharkiv](#)". [The Master Plan](#), according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), "is being developed under the leadership of and with substantial expert contribution from the Norman Foster Foundation on a pro bono basis."

[In his presentation at MIT](#) in January 2023, the British architect and designer, Sir Norman Foster, explained that thinking about reconstruction does not start after the end of the war, but at the time of war. He referenced the [Greater London Plan of 1944](#) which was developed by Patrick Abercrombie.

But as he referenced the case of London, Foster did not note that the architect at the time was British, not Iraqi, Polish or Ukrainian. In other words, would the U.K. have let a foreign star architect lead its master plans for the destroyed cities of Coventry, Manchester and London? Would they hire someone who knows nothing about the history and culture of these cities?

If this seems like harsh criticism, it is not, as Foster himself admitted in the presentation that: "I knew nothing about the city other than I might find out from a Google search."

Responses to Foster's involvement have varied between those who say

that star architects bring money and attention to those who fear that the voices of local architects will be marginalized. Oleg Drozdov, the founder of the Kharkiv School of Architecture, said in a webinar earlier in 2023 that Ukraine's leaders should be wary of "[intellectual colonization](#)," and the deputy vice chancellor of the school, Iryna Matsevko, [emphasized the need](#) for "architects who have deep knowledge of the local context to avoid a 'copy paste' rebuilding program."

Foster explained that the work they have been doing on the city included a questionnaire where more than 16,000 people responded. In one of his slides, he showed two pie charts with questions that read: "Are you satisfied with the quality of the house you live in?" and "Are you satisfied with the neighborhood you live in?"

Imagine your city is being bombed, that your world is collapsing, that you are escaping in a search of a shelter and thousands of homes are being destroyed. Next, imagine you are being asked about your "satisfaction."

Oleksii Pedosenko, an urban planning specialist, has [written](#) an excellent reflection on the questions of reconstruction in Ukraine. He raises ethical points about the transparency of the work being done on Kharkiv's master planning. Pedosenko writes that even though the project continues to engage with Kharkiv architects and local government officials, it only reports limited information to the public. He has also asked for the written report of the plan, but the foundation never responded to him.

Pedosenko asks: "How can solidarity be created if the very process of plan development is left to be constantly hidden from the very people who will live with the outcomes of the master plan long into the future? Also is it reasonable and practical for international actors to work remote

from the local context if a truly collaborative process is the goal?"

These are important questions to think about at the time of reconstruction, and I have come across the same dilemmas when researching the reconstruction in Syria. Who has the right to write history? How could architects engage with local communities? And whose voice is heard? These questions matter, and they matter the most, when people have lost so much including their choices to shape their own future.

Star architects can bring with them power, money, fame, prestige and attention. But there are times where none of these are needed. Who knows what it means to lose home but the victim?

Good intentions are important. Global solidarity is important. But sometimes good intentions are not enough. As Pedosenko writes, there needs to be a more critical approach towards reconstruction.

Reconstructing hope

Despite everything we have lost, we should not lose hope. And despite the destruction of war, we must not let the war defeat us on the inside. It is hard to believe what has happened, it is hard to believe how death and destruction have shaped our lives in Syria. But at moments of despair and hopelessness, I return to the words of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who wrote in 1970:

"Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it. The dehumanization resulting from an unjust order is not a cause for despair but for hope, leading to the incessant pursuit of the humanity denied by injustice."

In moments of despair, I also return to the words of [Fadwa Souleimane](#),

a Syrian artist who became an icon of the revolution. In the early days of the revolution she led protests in Homs and was one of the few women who spoke publicly about the situation in Homs—from within Homs. I still remember when she was asked live by the news reporter if she was aware that her face was visible on the screen, or whether she thought it was a phone call only. She replied confidently that she was aware of being visible.

Her belonging to the revolution put her life under threat. She fled to Paris and continued her struggle from exile until she died from cancer at the age of 47. During her time in Paris, she advocated for peaceful tools and devices to face war. She remembered the art, culture, dance and music of the people who protested in the streets. Until her last moments, she remembered hope, and reconstructed it, reminding people to not live in a landscape of despair. In 2016, she said,

"Even if they erase everything, we should not let them erase our dream. If there is only one Syrian left, I am sure he [or she] will build the Syria that we love. Syria is not a country, a geography. It's an idea."

And as time passes, as the years move with new degrees of pain, let us remember this hope. Let us think and work towards the rebuilding of Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, Iraq, Libya and Palestine. Let's fight the bulldozers that destroy our memories and presence. Let's remember.

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