

abandoned war-torn homes as casualties and witnesses of violence

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abstract

Most global conflicts are followed by a simultaneous war against domestic architecture. However, this phenomenon remains largely ignored by contemporary spatial discourses. Similarly, previously destroyed homes are marginalised and remain disconnected from the contemporary life of the region. This text-based essay frames the region of the former SFR Yugoslavia as a concrete case study and casts light on the uncertain position domestic interiors hold in times of political fluctuations and ethnic conflicts. It specifically focuses on the time after the acts of violence have taken place, when these sites have lost their prime domestic identity and stand as discarded ruins caught in an ambiguous zone between past and present. The analysis is presented through findings of a unique physical and psychological exploration of the aftermath of ethnic conflicts—*TRAVELS* (2011–2014). Findings from *TRAVELS* are here applied as a universal material and used to analyse the aims, meanings, and consequences of violent attacks in the contexts of widespread ethnic, cultural, and political violence. This essay offers a distinctive perspective by positioning the domestic interior as a direct casualty and witness of violence.

As the key driver of all spatial explorations in this essay, scenography deepens our understanding of the meaning and impact of violence on the current uncertain position of the attacked homes. With scenography taking a forensic standpoint, these sites emerge as abandoned *mise-en-scènes* inscribed with layers of spatial narratives, traces of time, and tactile remnants of past violence and trauma. This essay proposes that the acts of violence transform the meaning of home. In times of conflict, strategic acts of violence are framed as modes of cultural and ethnic cleansing and domestic space as their true medium. In the aftermath, while officially detached from contemporary life, war-torn homes represent survivors of history and metamorphose into uniquely powerful monuments of the collectively lived trauma.

keywords

war-torn home; domestic; abandoned interior; trauma; forensic scenography

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This analysis begins with a set of four photographs of abandoned interiors taken in 2009 in a remote, war-torn village near the town of Knin in Croatia. These images, featuring details of three violated domestic dwellings, were taken by N. A., then a student of directing at the National Institute of Dramatic Arts in Sydney. A native of Serbia, N. A. migrated to Australia with his family in 1995 following the civil war in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFR Yugoslavia). In the winter of 2009, he visited family who had stayed in the motherland. The many towns he visited are now part of the independent republics of Serbia and Croatia. In Croatia, a chance encounter with an old family friend led him to an abandoned village, where he photographed the domestic interiors. Upon his return to Sydney, I received this set of 35 mm film photographs.



Figure 01. N.A.'s set of 35 mm film photographs served as key inspiration for the inception of *TRAVELS*. N. A., 2009.

The three interiors were documented fourteen years after the last conflicts took place in the region. They remain in this state of destruction to the present day. As such, they are disconnected from the contemporary life of the region. Their significance, on both personal and collective levels, as well as regional and global, remains undervalued and neglected. These former homes stand as forsaken ruins, vulnerable to the harsh climate conditions and to continued acts of vandalism and trespassing. This essay responds to the collective neglect and casts light on the questions of uncertainty of domestic interior in times of and after ethnic conflicts. It positions a domestic interior as a direct casualty and witness of violence and examines how the role and perception of private interiors metamorphose in times of political fluctuations and ethnically fuelled violent clashes. Further, this essay is particularly interested in unpacking the ambiguous position these homes have moved into after having been the sites and targets of intense violence.

N. A.'s photographs highlight how a simultaneous war against architecture follows all global conflicts. We continually see it happening in Syria, Palestine, Ukraine, and other conflicted regions across the globe. This set of photographs further highlights the lack of attention to and investigation of this phenomenon in contemporary spatial, cultural, and political discourses. While the limited discussion is dedicated to the destruction of sites

that represent 'official' power and cultural heritage, little to no attention is given to the wanton destruction of domestic sites. This is especially prominent for homes located in small towns, rural areas, and remote villages. Yet, we witness that such sites, which ostensibly hold no strategic or political significance in a conflict, continue to represent prime targets of contemporary ethnic violence. Similarly, these sites appear to be of no interest to the authorities of the region where they exist, nor to anyone linked to the original inhabitants.

N. A.'s set of photographs also represents key inspiration for a critical and conceptual investigation of the phenomenon of violence against domestic space: *TRAVELS* (2011–2014).⁰¹ This essay presents the findings of this three-year-long performative investigation, which framed the region of the former SFR Yugoslavia as a concrete case study for investigating the meanings and consequences of violent acts in and against domestic interiors. In this process, it became evident that what started as a study of the aftermath of ethnically charged spatial violence is, in fact, an investigation of an active phenomenon. Continued interest in this topic and further research over the years reveal that this phenomenon is not unique to the conflict of the former SFR Yugoslavia. Similar patterns are discovered in most conflicted zones; we note wanton destruction of the domestic interior as an ongoing feature of contemporary wars. Hence, the findings presented here are treated as universal material. This essay marks

fourteen years since N. A. photographed the presented interiors. At the time of his visit in 2009, they had already been in a state of destruction for fifteen years. *TRAVELS* took place almost a decade ago. These temporal references provide a much-needed emotional distance necessary for a critical analysis. SFR Yugoslavia thus emerges as a sound testament for establishing frameworks in search for the meaning and role of the war-torn domestic interiors. To cast more light on the meaning of such sites in our contemporary experience, one needs to trace a more complex meaning of domestic interior before and during the war.

TRAVELS represented a physical and psychological exploration of the aftermath of ethnic conflicts and positioned domestic interiors as tools used to think *of*, *through*, and *with*. This exploration was performed from a scenographic perspective, here framed as '[...] a sensory as well as intellectual experience, emotional as well as rational.'⁰² Scenography is primarily employed as the driver of spatial investigations and is seen as a practice that can deepen our perception of war-torn interiors. It offers a distinct standpoint to our understanding of space by shifting the focus to the profound relationship between people and their interior(s). Scenographically, spaces and events are thoroughly interlaced. Space assigns validity to events and narratives and acts as proof an event has taken place. In this light, abandoned spaces go beyond sites of personal and collective traumatic

memory. Such a scenographic approach discovers significant analytical grounds in the ideas of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who referred to ruins as emblems of allegory and defined them as critical tools for comprehending history.⁰³ Benjamin's approach to ruins looked beyond their aesthetic qualities. Instead, he read them as a process: 'a means of demythifying and stripping away symbolism—a means of approaching historical truth through reduction, at the expense of romantic aesthetics.'⁰⁴

Inspired by Benjamin's approach to ruins, scenography is here applied as an inversion of its common frameworks and positioned to act from a forensic standpoint. The war-torn interiors thus mark the beginning of a performative and analytical process. From this perspective, they emerge as abandoned *mise-en-scènes* and represent the remainders of already ceased events. In this light, domestic interiors discovered during *TRAVELS* represent scenographic 'afterimages' of previously performed acts of violence. They act as principal physical remnants of a collective traumatic narrative and represent direct consequences of violence performed during the war. Each violated interior genuinely embodies the traumas experienced by the absent human figures. Collectively, they represent framed case studies of all such attacks and capture the holistic experience of war.

home: from quintessential phenomenological object to target for destruction

Home is a site unique in human experience. It is a complex construct of historic, symbolic, cultural, and spiritual elements. It represents a principle elaboration and the most significant infrastructure of human existence. We begin this analysis by defining the meaning of home on a personal level and position it as a concept that embodies deep psychological associations and significance for each individual. Home, therefore, represents a dominant force in forming personal and collective identity. It '[...] is where one starts from,'⁰⁵ and marks a focal point in our individual being in the world. It is our territory and the site of everyday activities: of personal, cultural, and social relationships. Home is our private shelter, where we are free to orchestrate our being in the world.

Finnish architect and architectural scholar Juhani Pallasma proposes that the definition of home and its significance belongs more to the realms of poetry than to architecture.⁰⁶ Pallasma defines our dwelling sites as containers: 'of memories and images, desires and fears, the past and the present.'⁰⁷ We thus begin to understand our home as a shell in which we establish and store our personality, emotions, and memories. We trace Pallasma's thinking to French philosopher, poet and phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), who similarly conceptualised a house as embodying meanings deeper than those of 'an object.' In *The Poetics of Space*,⁰⁸ his seminal study of human existence in space,

Bachelard identifies the house as a site that offers 'heavenly' protection and security. For him, 'to dwell' surpasses banal acts of physical residence in a dwelling unit. Rather, the house represents a site of the most profound human experience. Phenomenologically, the vital qualities of a house lie in the notions of intimacy, protection, and bliss it provides. To render this more evocatively, Bachelard introduces a system of 'topoanalysis,' which he defines as 'an auxiliary of psychoanalysis.'⁰⁹ Topoanalysis relates directly to 'topophilia,' which literally means 'love of place' or, in this context, our profound emotional relationship to a house. In explaining his topoanalysis, Bachelard argues that psychoanalysts could discover a blueprint for understanding the soul by shifting the focus to the localisation of memory. Topoanalysis is thus a psychological survey of sites of our intimate experiences and memories. For Bachelard, memories remain still: 'the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.'¹⁰ In this light, home represents the fusion of thoughts, memories, and dreams. The most significant aspect of a house is that it '[...] protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.'¹¹

Our home is thus a space of bliss and embodies 'maternal features': 'Without it a man would be a dispersed being.'¹² From childhood, we are conscious of home as a place we leave to experience our surroundings and establish other relationships. Building on Bachelard's proposals, Norwegian architect and architectural scholar Christian Norberg-Schulz (1926–2000) asserts we discover our

core personal identity within our home.¹³ In his view, 'to dwell' means 'to belong.' Our home represents the central core of our existence. We orient our experiences and establish personal and social relationships in accordance with 'home' as the dominant reference point for existence and identification. A house gives us our place in the world. Importantly for this analysis, Norberg-Schulz explicitly highlights the significance of domestic interiors. In his view, the interior satisfies the need to be situated and to have shelter. Domestic interiors thus allow us to move inside, to be alone, and to be protected.¹⁴

Phenomenological understanding of home is pivotal for acknowledging its significance on a personal level. However, it also serves as a blueprint for comprehending the underlying reasons and meanings behind violent attacks. Phenomenologically, we understand a domestic site to form the foundation of personal and collective identity. Yet, this concept can't be studied in isolation. Geographical, historical, cultural, and political contexts emerge as crucial references. Here, they assign complex layers of meaning to analyse the heightened uncertainty of political turbulences. These references help us trace the metamorphosis of our (personal and collective) perception of domestic interiors as they transition from quintessential phenomenological objects to targets for destruction. If each conflicted ethnic group in the region (Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian Muslim) perceived home to be a site of ultimate bliss and the core infrastructure

of human existence, we can argue that in times of conflict these intimate sites become perceived as targets of violence charged with complex, multilayered aims of conquering, dominating, and exterminating 'the other.'

the obscure position of war-torn homes

These additional layers of information are even more significant in defining and understanding the obscure position the abandoned homes now hold in the contemporary experience of the region.

We return to their geographical, cultural, historical, and political origins to better understand this complexity. SFR Yugoslavia is a crucial reference here. This was a socialist unity, which existed for almost the entire twentieth century, with the aim of uniting all Southern Slavs in one country. Multiple changes of name and territory and social and political regulations mark its complex history. The country reformed several times, yet its continuous thread was a compound of diverse nations, religions, cultures, and traditions united in a small geographic region. *TRAVELS* focused on the aftermath of the period of the socialist federation that existed from 1945 to 1992. In this period, SFR Yugoslavia was a unity of six constituent republics: Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina [Fig. 02].¹⁵

The socialist unity was built on 'seismic' foundations. World War II left an atrocious legacy of human and material loss in the region, as well as deeply inscribed traumas



Figure 02.

Map of SFR Yugoslavia representing its territory in the period 1945–1992. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2014.

for many Yugoslavs. The new country, led by Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980), launched with an abrupt shift. Among other aspects, this predominantly reflected a change in the personal and collective sense of identity and belonging, which now came with dictatorial communist concealment of any traces of 'previous' identities between the people from different regions of the federation. Instead, a concept of 'Brotherhood and Unity' was introduced in the name of removing any separative nationalist sentiments within each constituent republic. This denoted Yugoslav nations and national minorities as equal, peacefully coexisting groups who promoted both similarities and interdependencies for the sake of overcoming conflicts initiated and burning during World War II.

The federation disintegrated in the same way it was formed—with many victims; poverty; significant economic disruptions; erosion of cultural, moral, and traditional values; and continuous instability on all

levels. Ethnic clashes between 1991 and 1995 (with further conflicts continuing in Kosovo until 1999) claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. They left a bitter legacy of architectural debris and psychological devastation on all sides. Hence, we locate an essential analytical reference in the proposal of the contemporary French cultural theorist Paul Virilio, who defines war as '[...] the magical spectacle, because its very purpose is to produce spectacle; to fell the enemy is not so much to capture as to "captivate" him, to install the fear of death before he actually dies.'¹⁶ From our scenographic perspective, the war of the early 1990s is the major spectacle of the region. During the war, but also for decades after, aspects of daily life acquired levels of theatricality that transcended those of staged performances. This meant life in a prolonged state of uncertainty, continuous ethnic clashes and escalation of violence, power and water restrictions, multiple rounds of international sanctions and embargo, and heavily affected health and education systems. Finally, this also meant displacement and loss of home for many Yugoslavs.

Two decades later, SFR Yugoslavia remains a reference in history and memory. Independent republics have established relatively positive relationships, and central locations and big cities have mostly 'moved on.' Architectural objects of 'official' significance (cultural, religious, military, etc.) are restored, adapted, and integrated into the (once again) 'new life' of the region. However, domestic sites remain largely ignored and in a state of destruction.

As such, they are cut off from the daily life of the region and from the re-making of its official history. They stand as 'in-between' zones, with their current and future role entirely ignored by those in power. These former homes, now in their ruined state, seem to belong to the life of the motherland that no longer exists. The key focus of this analysis is thus to understand and (re)define the role these sites hold in our contemporary experience. Scenographically, they expose a unitary, intimate experience of spatial narratives and are interpreted as locations charged with traumatic experiences. As such, they emerge as agents in the comprehension of intimate and collective spatial and political relationships.

forensic scenography

Arrival in Belgrade, former capital of the unity, on the afternoon of 27 June 2011 marked the beginning of a complete (re)immersion in the research context and the beginning of *TRAVELS*. In the period 2011–2014, five major *TRAVELS* were performed. All originated from Belgrade, and I was the main performer. This role was dual, and had an insider and an outsider perspective. As performances of a physical and psychological quest through history, *TRAVELS* were a sum of personal and collective experiences, and memory. As such, they embodied parallel conceptual levels, defined as 'insider' and 'outsider.' The insider point of view is derived from the position of the main performer being a person born in the former unity, who lived through the traumatic events of the past. This perspective assigned layers of personal experience and

memory. The outsider treated the framed phenomena from the perspective of a person who was absent from the region for eight years (2003–2011, before *TRAVELS* began).

All *TRAVELS* were informed by live actions and direct experiences in the region and produced faithful representations through written documentation and photographic artefacts. Established on the basis of conceptual and performance art, *TRAVELS* explored events and phenomena within a defined historical and geographical context. This exploration comprised a physical and conceptual search in civil-war conflict regions of the former unity. It was particularly concerned with locations of violent clashes between 1991 and 1995 in the territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, and later in Kosovo. They were carefully orchestrated and followed a devised structure. As the main performer, I was always accompanied by at least one more person. Different *TRAVELS* lasted from a few hours, to up to three days of active involvement in the abandoned spaces. Movement between locations was apart of the actual performance, while war-torn domestic sites represented the focus and climax of all *TRAVELS*. This essay focuses on the findings from three *TRAVELS*.

TRAVELS are distinct in initiating the discourse on domestic sites of violent trauma in small towns and rural areas. The destruction of architectural objects in urban locations has been relatively well documented over the past two decades.

'Urbicide',¹⁷ a term coined by English fantasy writer Michael Moorcock in 1963 and later actively used in academia to refer to the destruction of cities in civil wars, reached peak prominence during the fall of SFR Yugoslavia and the violence performed against the architecture in cities like Sarajevo, Dubrovnik, Vukovar, and Mostar. Many scholars, including American philosopher Marshall Berman¹⁸ and Serbian architect and architectural scholar Bogdan Bogdanovic,¹⁹ have written on this topic and have positioned the term as 'the violence against the city',²⁰ Writing on the same region and period, but more explicitly focusing on Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) as a case study, Andrew Herscher coined the term 'warchitetcure'.²¹ Herscher specifically coined the term as a name for the disastrous violence against architecture in the period 1992–1996. However, the equivalent violence in rural areas and small towns, often located around the cities that represented the sites of major conflicts, has been largely ignored by the media at the time and scholarly discourses afterwards. Similar phenomena are emerging in recent conflicts outside this region. Notably, most of these violated domestic dwellings remain in a state of destruction to the present day. This defines them as sites of ongoing trauma and tension, adding monumentality to their transformed meaning. By framing these abandoned sites, *TRAVELS* aim to frame the past as active material.

scenographic 'decoding'

Scenography is a unique spatial discipline. It is employed here as a driver of spatial investigations and emerges as a transformative conceptual force. We recognise it as a tool and a system for understanding the complex relationships between people, spaces, and the events of the past. In this light, the abandoned war-torn interiors are sites that allow a telling search through narratives of intimate spaces shaped by war. They are inscribed with layers of spatial narratives, traces of time, and tactile remnants of past violence and trauma. Scenographic strategies are employed as hybrid methods of spatial manipulation and interpretation. They seek to investigate the essential nature of events, phenomena, and objects.

Scenographic 'decoding' involves interpreting inscriptions of past narratives through a series of strategies that include theatricality, narrative, context, perspective, framing, focalisation, atmosphere, inhabitation, embodiment, materiality, and spectatorship. In this context, all spatial and visual explorations are heavily inscribed with layers of cultural, historical, and political associations. Through the acts of scenographic decoding, the material and immaterial testimony becomes the prime witness to a collectively lived traumatic past. The acts of violence that occurred in these homes constitute their present identity. Further, their present monumental nature is contained in the haptic traces of the collective trauma. This form of

decoding interprets the *mise-en-scène* by critically investigating the personal objects, remaining furniture, and inherent atmosphere of violently destroyed homes. The discovered scenographic framing reveals some information about the missing inhabitants: their age, family structure, occupation, ethnicity, and so on. Meanwhile, critical investigation of the objects' present state speaks of the nature and intensity of trauma the missing people experienced. Scenographically, these *mise-en-scènes* expose layers of otherwise obscure past narratives and, upon investigation, more closely render the events that took place inside these homes.

The absence of human figures is critical in all investigations. Although they are physically absent from each *mise-en-scène*, the people and their traumatic experiences are the core focus of all spatial investigations during *TRAVELS*. Their previous interaction with each space is inscribed in the captured state of the interiors. Meanwhile, the remaining objects reflect multiple layers of past narratives. The presence of domestic objects, furniture, and personal items reveals multiple domestic activities performed in these spaces before the war. Currently, numerous objects are smashed, personal garments are torn and scattered, and multiple interior elements such as doors and windows are pulverised. Human movement through spaces is traced through strange arrangements of furniture. Scenographically, the ghost of human violence is mesmerically present in all these physical appearances. The atmosphere

is also inevitably controlled by such clear traces of violence. In every room, within each discovered interior, records of violent human interactions are exposed as if frozen in time. In scenographic terms, such events inscribe the spaces with a distinct atmosphere. In each discovered space, material and immaterial traces of violent physical actions define an atmosphere of severe trauma.

three types of decoded interiors

This essay focuses on the decoding of three different *TRAVELS*: an abandoned village near the town of Knin in Croatia; villages near the towns of Brcko and Derventa in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and the town of Visegrad and surrounding villages, also in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Each offers a significant contribution to tracing the transformed meaning of abandoned domestic interiors. Routes from these *TRAVELS* are illustrated in the maps opposite [Fig. 03, 04, 05].

villages around the town of knin, croatia

Abandoned interiors near the town of Knin still contain a range of personal items, family memorabilia, garments, and similar 'intimate' traces of previous inhabitation. Traces of violence are evident, yet in many interiors personal items remain as if frozen in time: jackets hanging in the hallway, half-open drawers full of personal items, postcards, coffee mugs and plates sitting in the kitchen cupboards, schoolbooks and notebooks spread over the floor in a bedroom that most likely belonged to a student who lived in this home with their family [Fig. 08]. Such



Figure 03.
Map of the *TRAVEL* to Knin. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2014.



Figure 04.
Map of the *TRAVEL* to Brcko and Derventa. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2014.



Figure 05.
Map of the *TRAVEL* to Visegrad. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2014.



Figure 06.
A left-behind dress. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2014.



Figure 07.
Personal items in a village near Knin. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2014.



Figure 08.
Books and notebooks in a house near Knin. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2014.



Figure 09.
Destroyed bedroom. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2014.

scenes trigger an emotionally heightened interaction with an interior space. In these locations, I interact with material evidence of another human being's traumatic experience. Through these remaining personal items, I have snippets of who they might have been, how many of them lived here, and what their life was like before the war. The atmosphere in these spaces reflects a deep sense of loss, of damaged and interrupted life, and of profound trauma. Images I encounter are profoundly disturbing and embody powerful symbolic meaning. One of the most powerfully engraved images is of an inside-out silk dress draped over a broken wooden wardrobe in a destroyed bedroom [Fig. 06]. The softness of the fabric contrasts with the violently pulverised space. Its presence speaks loudly of a former life. This item is highly symbolic, a delicate, intimate item of clothing associated with moments of pleasure, warmth, bliss, and protection. In this context, it sums up the tragedy of ordinary lives caught up in the whirlpool of a catastrophe.

Explorations of these homes are significant and emerge as turning points in my understanding of war-torn domestic sites. They take place early in the process of *TRAVELS* and, in many ways, shape how subsequent regions are perceived. My first TRAVEL to Knin began with an exploration inspired by N. A.'s photographs. Without much knowledge of the context to which they belong, one could see these spaces as representations of the concepts of memory, inhabitation, human departure, and traces people leave behind. However,

my physical and psychological interaction with the discovered spaces immediately assigned the concept of trauma as the most significant aspect of this experience and the region's collective past. The complexity of this experience has further elucidated the monumentality of the destroyed homes. Importantly for this analysis, this did not happen by reading or hearing about the events. In fact, it occurred by standing amid the genuine remnants of trauma—orchestrated purely by the past acts of violence, without any official perspective from the two new republics. I stood in sites of brutal conflict, in spaces that embodied a broken life in its overwhelming connotations.

villages near the towns of derventa and brcko, bosnia and herzegovina

Domestic interiors discovered in *TRAVELS* through Bosnia and Herzegovina revealed very limited or no physical artefacts that spoke of the past inhabitants. Traces of violence were more intense than those seen around Knin, and discarded homes were demolished and vandalised to their bare walls. It appeared as if the acts of violence were performed in different stages, with some dating from the original military clashes in the early 1990s, while other destruction (like graffiti on the walls) was more recent. Homes I interacted with here were bullet sprayed, burned, with floor and wall coverings removed, and many had graffiti in multiple rooms. As different alphabets and traces of dialects suggest (Serbian Cyrillic, Latin, etc.), graffiti were a territory-marking tool utilised by all three conflicted ethnic groups (Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian Muslim).



Figure 10.
Destroyed interior near the town of Brcko. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2013.

Without left-behind personal belongings, the experience in these interiors was less impacted by the ghostly presence of previous inhabitants. However, the intense levels of inscribed violence rendered the collectively experienced trauma more prominent.

These regions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (especially around the towns of Derventa and Brcko, pictured in figures 10–15) were heavily ethnically mixed during the unity. This meant we could not know to whom a particular house belonged. This added a sense of collective experience of loss and trauma. Furthermore, discovered homes in this region were mostly built during the time of the SFR Yugoslav unity (post World War II). They feature a simple, repetitive floor plan. These interior layouts were common in the whole region of the former SFR Yugoslavia, and could be read as an informal spatial typology of the time. All ground floor levels feature



Figure 11.
A destroyed kitchen in a house near the town of Brcko. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2013

public areas that include a large open-plan kitchen, pantry, dining and living areas, a small bathroom, storage rooms, and a large separate dining room for family gatherings and celebrations. Level one continues with a simple layout: two or three bedrooms and a large bathroom. All bedrooms include large windows and a single long and narrow balcony facing the street.

Empty and vast, these interiors shape no specific image of the former inhabitants. Yet, given their familiar layout, they begin to form a blank canvas for all the memories of SFR Yugoslavia. During *TRAVELS*, this invites a conscious and unconscious translation of memories of spaces, experiences, and people I knew well. These unknown sites thus became symbols of an 'interrupted' Yugoslav life. This brings us to the prime significance of these interiors, as we discover they highlight the



Figure 12.
A staircase near the town of Derventa. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2013.



Figure 13.
Graffiti in a house near the town of Derventa. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2013



Figure 14.
Abandoned house near the town of Derventa. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2013.



Figure 15.
A former bedroom in a house near the town of Derventa. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2013.

fact that such intense acts of violence reach beyond the aim of 'conquering the other.' It appears as if the physical and psychological draft of the enemy was not enough, and we identify a clear aim of extermination and prevention of the possible return of anyone linked to the former inhabitants. At this point, the destruction of domestic sites as the most intimate site of one's existence surfaces as a clear act of strategic destruction. Such intense attacks are closely related to attacks on 'the other.' 'Otherness' is here understood as the state of being foreign to the personal, social, cultural, ethnic, and religious identity of a person. Opposite to what was celebrated in the name of 'Brotherhood and Unity,' 'the other' here meant 'the enemy' and was marked for extermination. All three ethnic groups destroyed and vandalised each other's homes to prove their regional power and ownership, and to prevent any possible return. Thus, we propose these attacks be read as means of exterminating 'otherness.' As such, they unavoidably identify as modes of ethnic and cultural cleansing.



Figure 16.
A destroyed house near Visegrad. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2012.

villages around the town of visegrad, bosnia and herzegovina

Domestic sites around the town of Visegrad (also in Bosnia and Herzegovina) revealed the same aims of the attacks. Many of the destroyed houses found in this region were in the upper hill areas, well off the main road. Those who performed the acts of violence had to invest physical effort to reach and systematically destroy them. Again, these homes are not distinct in style and have no ethnic or religious markings. Most are large, architecturally simple, and mainly built of local stone and concrete. They are mostly two-storey dwellings, typical for this region. Such large structures complement the natural surroundings. Almost monumental in scale, they match the harsh natural surroundings specific to this region of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Scenographically, one could identify references for the mentality of the former residents. This region is locally known for its stubborn and physically strong population. In this light, their houses satisfy the need for physical shelter, while their scale



Figure 17.
A village near Visegrad. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2012.

symbolises the concepts of family, heritage, belonging, and identity.

Though these domestic structures no longer provide physical shelter, their distinct atmospheric quality remains. Once inside, one feels entirely isolated. Each interior becomes a disconnected 'zone.' Inside, the houses appear as abstract concrete sculptures. Interiors are dark, and the vegetation that now grows inside often blocks natural light. All traces of the previous inhabitation are erased. Scarce personal belongings remain but are very limited. Many houses have no doors or windows. In some, sheets of nylon are stretched over a window frame instead. Many homes are missing all dividing walls, doors, and staircases. They have been burned, bombed, mined, and vandalised with graffiti. For a moment, this feels like moving through staged *mise-en-scènes* of horror. All notions of intimacy, protection, or homeliness are violently wiped out. To be inside is a horrifying experience.

The sights of the picturesque landscapes around them intensify the power of these images. Physical movement through the spaces is limited. A consistent feeling of danger is still present in these spaces. As I walk between the abandoned homes, I cross the exact paths military troops walked twenty years ago when they attacked these spaces. Former inhabitants fled to avoid almost certain death. Every road is etched with layers of harrowing memory and experience. I encounter no people in these villages. The scenes are uncannily quiet. The experience inside and around these former homes marks the most prominent state of the aftermath. In this TRAVEL, the concept of the past as 'active material' becomes very significant. The overall experience is overwritten with the oppressive feeling of trauma and tragedy. In this region, the mysterious silence that comes after traumatic events is still heavily present. This implicitly defines the symbolic monumentality of destroyed domestic objects. Through



Figure 18.
Remaining house structures near the town of Visegrad. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2012.



Figure 19.
Remaining house structure near the town of Visegrad. Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2012.

their present state, it is evident they were assigned leading roles in military actions. At this point, they emerge as direct 'interpreters' of the collective traumatic past.

from ruin to monument

Scenographically, these interiors have absorbed the intensity of trauma previously experienced by people. Derived from the Greek 'wound,' 'trauma' originally related to circumstances beyond the ordinary and was commonly associated with physical injury. Late in the nineteenth century, the term was introduced to describe less visible, internal, emotional, and psychological 'wounds.' In contemporary contexts, we understand trauma as profoundly distressing and disturbing experiences that interrupt one's ability to cope. American professor Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an overshadowing experience and argues that the definition of trauma is discovered precisely in the 'structure of experience or reception.'²² This implies that a catastrophic event is not entirely experienced at the moment of its occurrence. Instead, its effects are endured belatedly: 'in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it.'²³ In Caruth's terms, therefore, 'To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event. [...] The traumatised, we might say, carry an impossible history with them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.'²⁴ In this context, we shift the focus to space as the representation of trauma but also as being the traumatised subject itself. In this way, these authentic sites of trauma become tangible 'reproductions' of

memories experienced by people who lived through the events. In psychological terms, these are understood as intrusive flashbacks, yet we here see them as concrete images of trauma in the places of their origin.

The conflicts in former Yugoslavia (1992–2001),²⁵ in which more than 200,000 lost their lives, 'gave rise to atrocities unseen in Europe since the Second World War, and left behind a terrible legacy of physical ruin and psychological devastation.'²⁶ Contemporary professor of political sciences Stathis N. Kalyvas analyses the aims and dynamics of violence in civil wars and proposes that 'In everyday language, "civil war" (unlike "revolution") is a term [...] often used as a metaphor for extreme conflict and widespread brutality.'²⁷ Civil wars are fought for multiple reasons, so the behaviour, actions, and tactics vary considerably. Without exception, however, war leaves devastating traces on cities, landscapes, and entire countries. These brutal traces are the results of military actions, which seek different goals. These goals are commonly identified as intimidation, demoralisation, degrading the enemy's ability to fight, gaining territory, destruction of resources, elimination of opposing forces, and material and moral destruction of 'the other.' With a specific interest in attacks on architectural objects in times of war, we here classify military attacks as 'strategic,' 'cultural,' and 'domestic.'

Attacks on institutions of power and authority, such as military headquarters and army camps, are classified as strategic and aim

to wipe out the enemy's ability to fight. As a tactic, they exemplify the dominant power and superiority of the attackers. Attacks on sites of 'knowledge,' which stand for the preservation and confirmation of national cultural identity, are understood as a violent negation of the cultural and historical significance of the attacked. Such attacks are strategic, and targets are never random or irrelevant. Finally, domestic attacks are often ignored, yet we note in these the level of violence is perhaps the most extreme. Domestic attacks embody complex psychological meanings and imply an indirect means of cultural and ethnic cleansing by means of domestic architecture. The destruction of an object that, on one hand, embodies the most profound notion of personal identity and belonging, and on the other, a permanent solid structure, is calculated to inflict maximum psychological damage. To face the destruction of an object that is supposed to outlive multiple human spans, and forms an intergenerational foothold of identity inevitably wants to remind an entire people of their own irrelevance. In multi-ethnic environments, domestic interiors become politicised through the notions of 'belonging,' and this phenomenon intensifies in times of war. By belonging to a family of a certain ethnic group, the domestic space is assigned the same ethnic identity. In wars, a home marks the presence of a community marked for extermination. From our scenographic perspective, there is a physical and psychological link between erasing material remainders of human inhabitation and killing people directly.

Polish-born American architect Daniel Libeskind defines memory as the principal architectural element, providing historical, geographical, and ideological orientations. According to Libeskind, memory is particularly significant for places where trauma and tragedy have occurred. He proposes a shift in our perception, suggesting that everyday life is the crucial realm of architectural experience. Herein, 'ordinary' architectural objects, like homes, are to be regarded on a par with, or more significant than, museums and institutions of power and authority. Libeskind profoundly interweaves trauma and memory into his architectural thinking, focusing especially on trauma that involves destruction: '[...] when the continuity of life is so brutally disrupted [...] the structure of life is forever torqued and transformed.'²⁸

Following Libeskind's proposal, the experience of emptiness after tragedy connotes that architectural objects are inscribed with life and memory. The destruction of buildings, especially domestic sites, translates to the destruction of a community and its individuals. Ravaged homes, therefore, take on monumental quality and can by no means be classified as collateral damage. In a literal sense, their present ruined state represents collapse and destruction. However, returning to Benjamin's approach to history through reduction, we shift the focus from individual spaces and events of trauma to a critical understanding of the remaining sites of history. In this, we establish links between

the concepts of violence and trauma, which now define the monumental nature of these 'obscure ruins.'

With this shift in perception, they emerge as implicit monuments to the collectively lived traumatic past. The notion of their monumentality comes from the merging of concepts of embodiment, materiality, and testimony. Trauma and the acts of violence unite these three concepts. Through the embodiment of traumatic memories, evocatively captured in physical inscriptions of violence against the most intimate domains of human existence, abandoned war-torn homes testify to collectively lived trauma. These sites acquire the 'positive state of poverty' by further tracing Benjamin's approach to stripping away the commonly accepted mystical and romantic nature of ruins.²⁹ Ruins are no longer romantic images but meaningful critical tools. For Benjamin, ruins were never mere remnants whose monumentality has forever ceased. Instead, by defining them as 'allegories,' Benjamin positioned them as focal points—perspectives from which to study other concepts.³⁰ By embracing this, *TRAVELS* discovered that ruination does not necessarily mean 'loss.' Rather, *TRAVELS* initiate a shift in the perception and meaning. Violent attacks have altered the established domestic nature of the found sites. However, in the aftermath, after all the inhabitants have left, they acquire a new monumental identity. While the domestic identity was monumental on a personal level, violence redefines this by shifting the monumentality to the collective

experience. Domestic ruins emerge as valid sites of history. They are unchained from the ceaseless flow in which they remain trapped and are reoriented in a new reading—as a legacy for the future.

author biography

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notes

- 01 TRAVELS is the official name of the presented project and is for this reason written in capital letters and italicised in this essay.
- 02 Joslin McKinney and Philip Butterworth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 4.
- 03 Naomi Stead, 'The Value of Ruins: Allegories of Destruction in Benjamin and Speer', *Form/Work: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Built Environment*, 6 (2003), 51–64 (p. 5).
- 04 Stead, 'The Value of Ruins', p. 5.
- 05 Joseph Rykwert, 'House and Home', *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 58 (1991), 51–62 (p. 51).
- 06 Juhani Pallasma, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 27.
- 07 Pallasma, *The Eyes of the Skin*, p. 32.
- 08 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (London: Penguin Classics, 2014).
- 09 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 15.
- 10 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 31.
- 11 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 28.
- 12 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 29.
- 13 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).
- 14 Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, p. 53.
- 15 At the time of the performance of TRAVELS, all were already independent republics.
- 16 Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (New York: Verso, 2009), pp. 7–8.
- 17 Michael Moorcock, *Behold the Man* (London: Alison & Busby, 2013), p. 18.
- 18 Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2010).
- 19 Bogdan Bogdanovic, *Vukovar: The Final Cut* (London: Verso, 1997).
- 20 Bogdanovic, *Vukovar*, p. 51.
- 21 Andrew Herscher, *Violence Taking Place: The Architecture of the Kosovo Conflict* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
- 22 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 4.
- 23 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 4.
- 24 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 5.
- 25 The author here refers to the continued occasional escalation of conflicts in Kosovo, which continued post-1999 when most of the other conflicts had resolved in the region.
- 26 Chris Nation, *War in the Balkans 1991–2002* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), p. 7.
- 27 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 16–17.
- 28 Daniel Libeskind, *Breaking Ground: Adventures in Life and Architecture* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), p. 12.
- 29 Stead, 'The Value of Ruins', p. 5.
- 30 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (New York: Verso, 2009), pp. 177–78.