

Learning from European Reconstruction after WWII

Nicholas Bullock

Department of Architecture, Cambridge

ABSTRACT

The symposium seeks to establish whether, after the devastation in parts of the Arab world, its reconstruction can profit from the lessons of European reconstruction after WWII. Naturally, much of the discussion will focus on what may be learnt from the experience of individual countries in both Western and Eastern Europe. The purpose of this introductory paper is to explore – looking across Europe – whether there are a number of common overarching themes that are to be found in one form or another in the rebuilding of each country, and whether these may be of value to reconstruction in the Arab World.

Examples of such themes might be the contrast between pre-war reliance on market forces and the new enhanced role played by the state in reconstruction, and the links between physical reconstruction and wider plans for transforming and modernizing post-war society. The paper will also touch on the tensions between programs of modernization and the attachment of so many to the lieux de mémoire, the memories and the physical reminders of the past, now irretrievably lost. How did these tensions shape the choice between simply rebuilding the past and the ambitions for radical reconstruction along CIAM principles?

Finally, the paper will conclude that the years of post-war reconstruction equipped Western Europe for the prosperity of the next 20 or so years, but raises the question whether, as wartime solidarities and the ideals of shared endeavor faded, the new order put in place by reconstruction served the interests of the many or the few?

The all too familiar but disturbing images of war-ravaged cities do indeed suggest parallels between the destruction in Europe during WWII and that created by the wars of the middle east. So, too, does the comparable scale of the resulting challenge of reconstruction. In Europe, the challenge was not just to rebuild, as one might rebuild a city after an earthquake, but to reconstruct the culture and the physical fabric of a continent. Is this the challenge that now faces the Arab world from Libya to Syria? And if so, what can it learn from the European experience of reconstruction after WWII?

War and the city:
left, Aleppo, summer 2016;
right, Berlin May 1945;



But if this challenge was faced across Europe, the way in which reconstruction was carried out was particular to the nation state and, after 1947, these were increasingly divided from one another by the start of the Cold War. Many of the lessons of European reconstruction will relate to the experience of the individual nation state, and explaining this will be the task of my colleagues who alone have the expertise to do so. My task in introducing the discussion is to ask – if we can stand back far enough to look across Europe (or more accurately across Western Europe, given the very real limitations of my knowledge of events east of the Oder) – to see if there are a number of fundamental themes that are common. In seeking to frame these common themes, I leave it to my colleagues to judge their applicability to the particular case. And hopefully by the end of the day, we can identify yet further overarching themes of relevance to the Arab world.

To start with, there is the sheer scale of the destruction. Aerial photographs, whether the ruins of Le Havre in September 1944 or the seemingly lifeless shells of the tenements of Berlin in the summer of 1945, offer a vivid reminder of the extraordinary scale of the task that faced the nations of Europe at the end of WWII. In 1918, the destruction wrought by war, though intense, had been relatively limited: in France, for example, it had been concentrated in the 13 departments of the north-east. In 1945, by comparison, 74 of France's 90 departments had suffered. Her cities, largely spared in 1918, had suffered too: Paris (but not its suburbs) may have escaped virtually unscathed, but Marseille and Lyon, the nation's second and third largest cities were badly damaged, along with 15 of France's 17 largest cities. Second-order cities (with a population of 50-100,000) fared no better with 21 out of 35 declared to be significantly war-damaged. What happened in France was matched in most other combatant nations in Western Europe. In the east, in Poland, the Ukraine, Russia, the scale of the damage was even more murderous.

Reconstruction: the new role of the state

Where was reconstruction to begin? In the interwar years, there was a general presumption across Europe (if not in Germany, where from the 1870s cities could make their own plans for growth) that the shap-

ing of the city was a matter for private enterprise and market forces. This was reflected not just in the decisions taken by private companies on the routes for new suburban rail lines or the London tube but equally in the resistance – in the name of the defence of the rights of property – to any comprehensive system of urban planning.

The lessons of reconstruction after WWI showed the limitations imposed by this presumption. In France, reconstruction, though funded by the state in the expectation of reparations from Germany, was to be left largely in the hands of those who had suffered. For the most part, their properties were to be rebuilt à l'identique without the agency of the state. In Britain, post-war 'reconstruction' (in effect the construction of social housing to resolve the acute post-war housing crisis caused by the fall in wartime house building) was not a success. The wartime command economy was dismantled quickly in 1918. As a result, there was no control of manpower and materials for reconstruction and the state found itself unable to enforce the priorities that it had set: it could not privilege housing over commercial developments which were more attractive to private enterprise as paying a higher return.

In 1945, however, reconstruction was to be different. The economy was broken. There could be no recourse to 'market forces.' More important, not just the scale of the task, but fundamental assumptions about the role of the state had been changed by the experience of war itself. In Britain, the state had been credited with winning the war, transforming popular perceptions of what it might legitimately now do: it had acquired a moral authority that flowed first from its success in organizing and marshalling the resources of the nation and, second, from the 'fairness' with which it had overseen the equality of sacrifice that had been demanded of the people in order to win the war. If the state could mobilize the country to win the war, could it not now do so again in order to 'win' the peace?

An important example of the new powers available to the state was the way in which wartime experience demanded a re-casting of the balance between the interests of the collective and the rights of individual property-owners. Since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in England and France – but not Germany – the progress of planning had been held back by the inability of the state to compel owners of property to accept that a plan might restrict their future use rights. In France, the powers provided by the Loi d'urbanisme of 1943 and in Britain the comparable powers granted under the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 nationalized the use rights (but not the ownership) of property, and at last guaranteed the right of the state to make and enforce compliance with a plan. The modernization of existing cities would have been impossible without the powers now given to the state.

With power went responsibility to meet the expectations of reconstruction. Britain was fortunate in the continuity of the state and the strength of the mandate it received in 1945 for a radical vision of reconstruction and the launch of the welfare state. But in other countries too, like France, Germany or Italy, the newly constituted state was required to direct post-war reconstruction. In France, de Gaulle's government of left and right came to power with the expectation that it would transform France, rebuilding it politically, economically and

physically in answer to the aspirations voiced by the resistance during the dark years of occupation. Across Europe, the state was now called upon – and given the legal powers – to deliver a new post-war world, to plan the economy, to honour aspirations for a fairer society and to undertake physical reconstruction.

Finding the Resources for Reconstruction

However, the new responsibilities of the state were not matched by the availability of resources. Across Europe, national economies were shattered by the war. Those countries that had been occupied had seen their economies looted. Germany had taken without scruple raw materials, manpower and agricultural and industrial production to serve its war aims. To the east and in the west, the results were devastating: in France, for example, despite strenuous attempts to boost production, it would take years for the production of key materials like coal and steel to return to pre-war levels. Britain, victorious and never occupied, was barely any better off. Required to pay back to the US the loans that had financed the war, the country lacked the resources to build the 'New Britain' so often promised during the war. Across Europe, very large numbers of people lived in grossly inadequate temporary accommodation. Even in Britain, which had suffered much less than its continental neighbours, the number of new housing programs – the flagship policy of reconstruction – produced the most pitiful results: in London, only 16,500 dwellings had been completed five years after the war ended, a far cry from the 50,000 that the LCC had promised in 1941.

It was only with the arrival of Marshall aid from April 1948 – for Western, if not Eastern Europe – that the resources to realize the plans for reconstruction became available. With American dollars, Western Europe could now embark on those bold plans for modernization that were to lay the foundations for the next 30 or so years of prosperity. As the economies of Western Europe – Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands – revived, reconstruction got under way. But in return, Europe's frontiers were now opened to US goods and culture: along with tractors came Hollywood films and Coca Cola.

If the revival of European economies was given an American flavor, it is important to see the plans proposed for physical reconstruction as part of a wider European vision – social and political – of modernization. Conceived not in isolation, they were seen from the start as a necessary component of wider plans for realizing ambitions nurtured during the war. Thinking about the transformation of old, worn-out and damaged cities was part of wartime speculation about 'a better tomorrow' so necessary to keep hope alive. In France, the resistance had dreamed and debated the forms of the new post-war France. In Britain, ideas for re-planning bombed cities were intimately linked to hopes for an economy managed for the many not for the few, for a universal system of education beyond the minimum school leaving age of 15, for a healthier and wealthier citizenry protected by a universal health service and provision of family allowances, and for provision for the old, the infirm and those unable to provide for themselves. Modern housing and rebuilt cities were seen as the natural complement to the social and economic policies of the new welfare state founded not on adversarial laws of competition, the dog-eat-dog rule of the market, but on an extension of the principles that emerged – however painfully

– from the experience of the war. The belief in universal, collective benefits delivered through a system of historically high levels of taxation and a managed economy formed the basis for the social-democratic consensus that, variously interpreted, would become the western European norm for the three post-war decades.

Reconstruction: Modernization versus Rebuilding

How was Europe to be rebuilt? If there was a deep-seated desire on the part of all to rebuild as quickly as possible, there were deep divisions on how this was to be done. On the one hand was the widespread if paradoxical desire of the people to return to a familiar past, to the pre-war world as they now remembered it in happy retrospect but shorn of its failings: a world without the unemployment, the poverty, the slums of the '20s and '30s or the gross inequalities of pre-war society. After the turmoil of the war, the old remembered certitudes might easily appear to many as more enticing than the bracing prospect of a brave new world. There were, too, good pragmatic reasons for wanting a return to a familiar past: would a rebuilt city offer to the landlord or the shopkeeper the advantages of location – the spot on the high street – that they had enjoyed before the war? Why, asked so many – particularly those who were suffering because of the war, the homeless or those living in temporary shelter – why wait for the outcome of the cumbersome machinery of planning when so much could simply be repaired or rebuilt as it had been?

For others defending the past and the memories associated with familiar landmarks were bound up with the larger and more challenging issues of defining the present. To many people retaining these landmarks, so often badly damaged or barely reparable, was what gave identity to a local community: in Coventry, it might be the burnt-out ruins of the cathedral; in Saint-Malo, the granite façades of the walled city; in Berlin, the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche; across Europe, there were calls to defend the key lieux de mémoire.

On the other hand were those – planners, architects, engineers – who had long championed the case for a radical extension of planning powers, an agenda now largely adopted by the state as part of the post-war drive for modernization. In some countries, this might be at the level of central government, for example the centralizing stance of MRU in France, in others, such as Britain, it was cities like Coventry and London that took the lead. Modernizing planners welcomed reconstruction as a unique, one-off opportunity to sweep away the failings of existing cities. Their more extreme proposals might be tempered by the constraints of budgetary realism and they might not agree on the form of the modern city. But they were agreed that to miss this opportunity for transforming European cities would be unpardonable and might set back the case for planning for decades.

But even amongst those demanding that the opportunities presented by reconstruction should not be lost, there were real divisions of approach reinforced by divisions between those of different generations. Many of the plans made earlier in the war, for example, in France for the towns along the Loire like Gien, Sully and Orléans in the winter of 1940 and early 1941 were prepared by those like Royer and Bardet whose ideas were shaped by planning agenda of the interwar years. Their plans called for adjustments to the existing fabric of the towns to manage traffic more efficiently, to reduce the number of incompati-

ble adjacent land uses through zoning and to open out the densest and most insanitary areas. The architectural proposals, too, were generally respectful of regional character and local materials and detailing lovingly reported in journals like *Architecture Française*. In Britain, early wartime plans often envisaged a continuation of Garden City ideas and designs couched in the vernacular manner. The ideas of Abercrombie and Forshaw for the County of London Plan and the proposals drawn up by Sharp, Halford and other members of the planning establishment were framed in a manner that lay somewhere between the ideas of Garden City movement and the Beaux Arts, an ambiguity captured in the contents of the Town Planning Review where the ideas of Unwin lay alongside the Beaux Arts- inspired schemes of the Liverpool Planning School.

These ideas were soon being overtaken by a more radical modernism. Gibson's 1941 proposals for the reconstruction of Coventry, tame by the standards of the later 1940s, were seen to be excitingly new to the Labour councillors whom he encouraged to read Lewis Mumford's *The Culture of Cities* as a preparation for the modernizing of their city. But it was the publication of Le Corbusier's Charter of Athens in 1943 that introduced a new paradigm for post-war reconstruction. Based on ideas already set out in *La Ville Radieuse* (1935) and claiming the authority of CIAM, it offered a decisive break with the planning of the interwar and early war years. With its argument for the provision of vertical neighborhoods to ensure space, sun and greenery for all and the separation of the road network from building lines and pedestrian routes, it anticipated the construction of the *Unité d'habitation* in Marseille and inspired others to follow the same 'logic' to the new urbanism: Marcel Lods' rebuilding of the railway suburb, *Sotteville-lès-Rouen*, or Pierre Vivien's three brightly coloured, 12-story slabs on *Quai Gambetta* in Boulogne are only some of the earlier developments conceived in this manner. CIAM's endorsement of the Charter of Athens as the basis for post-war reconstruction at CIAM 7 in Bergamo in 1949 encouraged the development of an approach to rebuilding the city that was unashamedly different from the bustling diversity and the mixture of activities that were, notwithstanding wartime destruction, still the norm in the streets, squares and market places of most European cities. But even before the end of European reconstruction, members of CIAM's younger generation, soon called Team X, were questioning the new orthodoxy and calling for a new approach to urbanism that recognized and drew on the animation and vitality of the traditional European city.

Reconstruction: Judging the Results

Ten years after the war, as the various programmes of 'reconstruction' gave way to what was now simply called 'construction,' contemporaries took stock of what had been achieved. For the progressive architectural journals like the *Architectural Review*, *Casabella* and *Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, the results fell far short of earlier aspirations. A 'modern' architecture might now be the default style for housing, offices, shopping centres and public buildings across Europe but it was only a pallid, bloodless simulacrum of the true modernist vision that might have been achieved. From the bland timidity of the 'style MRU' in France to Britain's despised 'contemporary modernism,' progressives felt that, with notable exceptions – Le Corbusier's *Unité d'habitation*, the LCC's *Festival Hall* – the opportunities had been squandered.

But this elitist judgment, failed to recognize how much reconstruction had done to lay the physical foundations for Western Europe's three decades of post-war modernization, for France's Trente Glorieuses, for Germany's Wirtschaftswunder and Italy's Miraculo Economico. How, unchanged, would the pre-war cities of Europe have been able to meet the needs of growing car-ownership, for modern housing to accommodate those moving from the countryside to the cities, for the facilities to meet the growing leisure time increasingly available to a more affluent society? In defence of what had been achieved, planners and leaders of city government could point to the way that the program of changes launched during the reconstruction years had transformed and 'modernized' European cities almost beyond recognition: industrialized construction of mass housing offered families a level of physical amenities beyond the hopes of the pre-war working class; public transport brought home and work closer together or bridged the distance between suburb and center for those who chose to commute; provision for the motorcar, now virtually universally available, gave families a freedom to enjoy leisure unimaginable in the early post-war years.

But could the very state that had been so readily entrusted to direct post-war reconstruction be trusted to be even-handed and impartial? Yes, reconstruction did indeed lay the foundations for the transformation of post-war Europe, but who were the beneficiaries of the new order that emerged as modernization got under way? As the memories of wartime solidarity and shared sacrifice faded, politics across Europe seemed too often to move to the right. For many, particularly on the left, a new question now arose: did the new order put in place during reconstruction serve the interests of the many or the few?