Transforming Heritage in the Former Yugoslavia
Synchronous Pasts

Edited by Gruia Bădescu
Britt Baillie · Francesco Mazzucchelli
CHAPTER 10

The Politics of the Past in Kosovo: Divisive and Shared Heritage in Mitrovica

Mattias Legnér and Simona Bravaglieri

INTRODUCTION

Kosovo, which proclaimed its independence in 2008, is the youngest state in Europe. Its path to becoming an independent nation has been uncertain and characterized by a conflict-ridden relationship with its north-east neighbour—Serbia. In this context, culture and heritage have been, and continue to be, at the centre of the dispute between the two states. The conflict has often been understood as one of culture and ethnic identity. References to history and cultural differences are continually made to fuel...
the conflict and support territorial claims (Herscher, 2010; Herscher & Riedlmayer, 2000; Schwartze, 2013).

The development of heritage politics in Kosovo before and after 2008 can be understood as having occurred under conditions characterized by conflict-time, defined not by the presence or absence of violence, but rather by a heightened sense of unease and contestation (Baillie, 2013, p. 301). We argue that heritage that is not useful for actors interested in maintaining conflict-time is forgotten or neglected. This situation prevents the recognition of both pluralities of heritage and the heritage of plurality, which could contribute to building a more democratic and culturally diverse state. Inspired by Lowenthal’s statement that ‘the worth of heritage is ... gauged not by critical tests but by current potency’ (Lowenthal, 1998, p. 127), we set out to understand which heritage is considered useful, thus carrying ‘potency’, and which remains of the past are allowed to decay and ultimately disappear. By looking closer at legislation, policies, and urban heritage, we can better understand how the past is used for political aims in Kosovo.

The first part of this chapter looks at heritage politics before and after the 1998–1999 Kosovo War. The second part studies the case of Mitrovica, a divided town in northern Kosovo, in which cultural heritage can be found from different historical periods and where it is claimed to represent different contemporary groups in society. Our analysis indicates that the city’s tangible heritage is often ignored since it does not support the notion of a segregated city. Instead, narratives based on historical myths are produced and manifested in memorials and monuments. By looking at choices and difficulties in managing heritage assets, we attempt to understand Mitrovica’s political and cultural situation and how it affects nation-building. We believe that preserving buildings and other remnants from multiple historical layers would help cultivate a peaceful development towards a more tolerant and inclusive heritage politics.

**THE KOSOVO WAR AND ITS IMMEDIATE REPERCUSSIONS ON CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Historically, Kosovo has been an area where cultures have intersected, and consequently, clashes have also occurred, especially in the relationship between Albanians and Serbs, both in early-modern and modern history. According to the World Fact Book, approximately 93% of the population of Kosovo in 2011 self-identified as Albanian (CIA, 2021). However,
about half of Kosovo’s pre-1999 Serb population had left Kosovo by that time, a territory that many ethnic Serbs regard as the ‘Cradle of Serbia’, because it was the centre of the Serbian medieval state. In 1945–1963 Kosovo was an autonomous province named the Autonomous Region of Kosovo and Metohija. In 1968, the term ‘Metohija’ was dropped, and the prefix ‘Socialist’ was added, changing the official name of the province to the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo. In 1974 Kosovo was granted a higher level of autonomy in relation to Serbia, as it strove to become a republic of its own within Yugoslavia. This struggle for greater autonomy resulted in an escalating conflict between the Yugoslav government and the Kosovo Albanian movement for liberation. By the late 1970s, Serbia began to seek ways to limit Kosovo’s autonomy, fearing that the province would break free completely. Albanians were increasingly excluded from public office, and Serbian was declared the sole official language (Judah, 2008, p. 57). As separatist movements gained traction, the Serb leader Slobodan Milošević attempted to preserve Yugoslavia by controversially centralizing power in Belgrade. Milošević stressed that Kosovo was the birthplace of Serbia in a famous speech held at the Gazimestan monument in Kosovo on 28 June 1989, which commemorated the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje, in which an Ottoman army is said to have won a costly victory over the Serbian army (Sell, 2002, p. 11). Milošević urged his countrymen to take control of it and populate the area, raising the possibility of armed conflicts in Yugoslavia: ‘we are again engaged in battles and are facing battles; they are not armed battles but such things cannot be excluded’ (Sell, 2002, p. 89).

A couple of months earlier, the Serbian Assembly in Belgrade had radically reduced Kosovo’s autonomy (Malcolm, 2002, p. 344). On this occasion, Milošević actively used the past to justify Serbia’s right to Kosovo territory since this was where the patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church had its origins (Herscher, 2010, pp. 73–74). For Kosovo Albanians, his speech was regarded as an attempt to negate their claims to Kosovo.

Discriminatory policies directed at Albanians, culminating in the abolition of Kosovo’s autonomous status, led to violent conflict between Serbs and Albanians. Sometimes, Albanian resistance was expressed through the vandalizing of Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries—precisely the type of tangible heritage that the Serbian government claimed had given it the right to rule over Kosovo. After the 1997 financial collapse in Albania, the situation became even more chaotic when border controls between Albania and Yugoslavia stopped functioning. The conflict escalated in the
late 1990s when the armed Kosovo Albanian opposition began mounting attacks on the Serb police and military. The Serb response was to initiate a counterinsurgency campaign directed at the Kosovo Albanian population. Violence escalated in 1998 when Serb paramilitary forces advanced into Kosovo and forced civilians from their homes and burnt villages. The war was fought along a frontline that moved from house to house, and in some parts of Kosovo, houses were looted, emptied, and burnt to make it more difficult for the Kosovo Albanian population to return after the war. Around 207 of 609 mosques were damaged or destroyed, together with religious schools, libraries, bazaars, and kullas. A kulla is a defensive structure, often a tall masonry tower, found in traditional western Kosovo farms and mainly built during the Ottoman period. More than 500 of the existing 700 kullas were vandalized, looted, and torched in an intentional act of cultural cleansing because the Serb militia perceived them as symbols of Albanian heritage (Herscher & Riedlmayer, 2000, pp. 109–112).

Architectural heritage was thus at the centre of the Kosovo conflict and territorial contention. Kosovo became the symbolic centrepiece of Serb nationalist claims. Many Orthodox churches were erected in the twentieth century’s interwar period, and historical churches were restored or replaced. New churches were built on locations at which a church had allegedly once stood, built in the same style as medieval Serbian Orthodox churches but with modern materials and building techniques. According to Pantelić (1997, pp. 30–33), this building policy was a way of integrating Kosovo into Serbia and making the territory ethnically Serbian. In the 1990s and afterwards, the properties owned by the Serbian Orthodox Church were used to sanction Serb dominance over the province, while Kosovo Albanian heritage was deliberately mismanaged and subsequently targeted during the war (Judah, 2008, pp. 73–78; Malcolm, 2002, p. xxxii).

Consequences for Heritage Politics After 1999

The war came to a forced end due to a NATO intervention in Kosovo, but this did not mean that the destruction of cultural heritage came to a halt. The violence continued after Serb paramilitary forces had moved out of Kosovo, as some Kosovo Serbs were vindictively targeted (Herscher, 2010, p. 124). Extensive demolition of historic buildings also continued because of (often politically motivated) unchecked urban development,
reconstruction, intentional destruction, and the absence of functioning institutions and laws. After the NATO invasion in 1999, Kosovo came under the governance of the United Nations. The UN Interim Administrative Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), an interim civil administration, was put in place ‘to eliminate ethnic hatred and attempt reconciliation, reconstruction, and political planning’ (Minervini, 2002, p. 572). There were several structural problems in preserving heritage in Kosovo after 1999 due to earlier mismanagement and the chaos of war. First, there was the unresolved conflict between Kosovo and Serbia surrounding the interpretation of the area’s historical origins and responsibility for preserving heritage sites. Institutions were understaffed, and there was little funding for heritage conservation. The level of professionalism was low due to the Serbian government officials’ flight, the politicized educational system, and the patriarchal structure of Kosovar society. When the UNMIK administration took control of Kosovo, the existing Yugoslav legislation on cultural heritage was abolished. New institutions began to be developed, but this proved to be a very slow-moving process that has not attained satisfactory results. In 2006 a new heritage law was introduced by the parliament. In addition to the lack of a functioning law before 2006, poorly developed institutions were working to protect cultural heritage, and these institutions did not cooperate with the various municipalities’ planning departments (Legnér, 2018).

As heritage assets were pieces in the power struggle between Kosovo and Serbia, many heritage sites had to be guarded by KFOR troops or Kosovo police, thus restricting access. The violent and destructive conflict of 1999 was followed by an extended period of unrest that Herscher (2010) coined the ‘afterwar’. In the afterwar, there was no peace or even a lack of organized violence, but rather a precarious situation with recurring acts of violence against sites with a heritage value, with mostly Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries and Roma sites being targeted.

During the initial years following the war, little international support went to preserving heritage since there was a focus on rehabilitating housing and repairing damaged infrastructure (Pickard, 2008). As a result, heritage was largely ignored in the rebuilding of Pristina and other Kosovo towns between 2000 and 2008. The immediate reason for this was the lack of capacity to protect cultural heritage. The neglect and lack of maintenance during the 15 years of preceding instability also played a role, not to mention the damage inflicted during reconstruction itself in the years following the war (Ljungman & Taboroff, 2011, p. 33).
In 2000, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) became involved in preserving cultural heritage in Kosovo (Legnér, 2018, p. 4). Sida was also involved in the reconstruction efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Building on that experience, the agency recommended that some municipalities in Kosovo begin integrating conservation into spatial planning. To achieve this aim, they supported higher-education provision within heritage management and economic development stimulated by conservation projects. A Swedish non-governmental organization called Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB) acted as a facilitator for Sida in the region (Stengård & Legnér, 2019). In the meantime, the Kosovo–Serbia relationship had experienced severe setbacks, and it had become apparent that the violence affected the possibilities for cooperating with different institutions.

In 2004 violence broke out again, this time aimed at the Serbian minority and its cultural heritage. There were two motives behind the targeting of Serbian cultural property in 2004. One was that Milošević had used these sites to make political statements since his regime had supported the construction and restoration of many Serbian Orthodox churches. There was a widespread belief that many of these monasteries had originally been Albanian religious buildings (Morel, 2013, p. 4). The unrest in March 2004 resulted in riots in many villages and towns, which killed 19 people and wounded many, including KFOR soldiers who were trying to protect Serbian communities and heritage sites. Albanians also attacked Roma communities. Morel (2013, p. 4) states that 35 Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries were attacked on 17 March 2004. In the years that followed, there were recurring cases of the intentional destruction of Orthodox sites (Herscher, 2010, pp. 141–148).

The UNESCO Cultural Heritage in South-East Europe: Kosovo Protection and Conservation of a Multi-Ethnic Heritage in Danger Mission, was launched to create a dialogue between the two ethnic groups. Later, the significance of heritage, culture, identity, and religion was again highlighted by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to Kosovo, Martti Ahtisaari, in the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement. The report proposed special protective zones around 43 religious and cultural sites and included restrictions on access to activities within these zones. The purpose of these zones was to preserve the sites, including the ‘monastic way of life of the clergy, and ensure a sustainable development of the communities surrounding the sites’ (Ahtisaari, 2007, Annex 5, Article 4). International military forces gained the task
of training the Kosovo police to uphold the security of protected sites (Ahtisaari, 2007, Annex 5, Article 3). As a result, these contested zones—fenced off and guarded by the police or military—have been excised from everyday life (cf. Legnér, 2017, p. 19), threatening their intangible values and sustainability.

The Kosovo claim for independence that followed the Ahtisaari plan was not recognized by Serbia and remains controversial. In 2011, the Implementation and Monitoring Council (IMC) was established with the participation of significant stakeholders. Around this time, several laws were adopted by Kosovo regarding cultural heritage: a law on special protected zones (2008), a law on the Serb enclave Velika Hoća (2012), and a law on the historical centre of Prizren (2012). These laws were all consequences of the aforementioned comprehensive proposal. Despite their existence, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, an international organ tasked with overseeing heritage protection, has noted a failure to integrate cultural heritage into urban plans, a lack of political commitment to preservation efforts, limitations in staff capability, and a failure to protect the heritage of the Serbian Orthodox Church from illegal construction (Surlić, 2017, p. 117).

The reconstruction of damaged heritage sites in Kosovo was carried out alongside the development of legislation and institutions. From 2008 to 2011, CHwB became intimately involved in several different projects related to spatial planning and cultural heritage, while the Serbian Orthodox Church proved unwilling to adapt to the new administrative and legal context following Kosovo’s declaration of independence (Ljungman & Taboroff, 2011, p. 33).

The heritage process (i.e. redefining significance, revaluing and devaluing assets, restoration, and reconstruction) following a conflict can serve to confirm the identity and historical consciousness of a dominant group, or it can be used to bridge differences between several groups and promote a multicultural, more democratic society (Legnér, 2018, pp. 1–2). CHwB wished to make use of heritage to improve the poor relations between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. Resistance from minorities has meant that international organizations have, in some cases, opted instead to focus on ‘weak’ groups within the ethnic majority. The heritage process then becomes part of a more extensive process in which the rights of ethnic minorities may be excluded from a territory, and the heritage process thus becomes the extension of a conflict dynamic. This dynamic may be referred to as ‘the ethnification of space’ (Björkdahl,
2013, p. 211). In this context, the ethnification of space entails reinforcing a process in which the preservation of a site is intimately associated with one particular ethnicity, rather than with the whole of a society. In Kosovo, it was clear that the restoration of mosques and kulla was carried out as compensation for the injustices that Kosovo Albanians had been subjected to by Serbia. International recognition of this injustice, which the Serbian Orthodox Church denied, resulted in the Church refusing to let CHwB repair any of the damaged churches or, indeed, to give international organizations access to areas dominated by Serbs (Interview CHwB, 2016).

Mosques, kulla, bazaars, and churches are all part of traditional Kosovar heritage, but new heritage sites have also been created after the Kosovo War to preserve the memory of the resistance against Serbia and to mourn the martyrs of the war. The memorial to Adem Jashari in the Prekaz Valley is particularly significant (Obučina, 2011, p. 36). Jashari was a local commander of the KLA guerrillas who fought against a Serbian-ruled Kosovo. In 1998 police besieged his house, killing him and around 40 members of his family. Today their graves constitute a site of mourning and remembrance of the Albanian resistance against Serb oppression. The house, preserved as a ruin and a visitor centre, supports the narrative of the suffering and victimization of Kosovo Albanians. As Di Lelio and Schwandner-Sievers (2006, pp. 521–522) have observed, this site is a place of dissonant heritage as some Kosovo Albanians do not sympathize with or share the martyr cult of Jashari. Especially women living in towns and in Pristina have been critical of the cult of war and the victimhood it nurtures, since the cult exclusively recognizes the struggle of male fighters. The master narrative has made it difficult to question the patriarchal social order that is still prevalent in today’s Kosovo.

THE CASE OF MITROVICA

Historical Development

Mitrovica is situated in the most northern part of Kosovo, where the Ibar and Sitnica rivers meet. Modern Mitrovica was established during the Ottoman rule of Kosovo (1455–1912). Historically, mining has been significant in this area, and there are archaeological remains of mining from the Middle Ages near the modern city. The Ottoman Empire
made Mitrovica a node for trade, an aspiration furthered by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It grew into the leading industrial and trade centre in Kosovo after discovering lead there in the nineteenth century. The mining area of Trepča (Минера e Трепчë, Рудник Трепча) developed in the valley framed by the Ibar and Sitnica (Sitnë, Ситница) rivers and transformed the city into a one-company city following the Second World War. Consequently, the city became a socialist town with a mixed population (IKS, 2009a, p. 22). Today some mining continues, but its significance has been dramatically reduced.

Since 1999 the city has been spatially divided between the Serb minority population living north of the Ibar and the Albanian majority living south of the river. Parallel administrations have run the north and the south respectively since 2013. The division is visible in the urban landscape in several ways. In the north, quite rundown buildings from the Yugoslav period dominate the landscape, while the southern part is characterized by a booming building sector funded by the international community. Some buildings stemming from the pre-1945 period can be found in the city centre on both sides of the river, severely damaged, entirely refurbished, or just left in ruins.

Three bridges traverse the Ibar, crossed by people daily when travelling between work and home or when shopping. There seems to be no unnecessary movement between north and south, and most of the population does not use these bridges in fear of reprisals if they enter a space dominated by the Other. Albanians are afraid of violent encounters if they go north and vice versa. The EU has attempted to better connect the north and the south by rebuilding the bridge located on the city’s central north-south axis, connecting the city’s essential public buildings and gathering spaces (Schwertze, 2013).

Historically, the bridges over the Ibar used to integrate residential neighbourhoods located on both sides of the river inhabited by various ethnic groups. Although residents of one ethnicity lived primarily in quarters where it was the majority, the neighbourhood distribution was mixed throughout the city. The 1981 census captured a total population of 52,866; most citizens were Albanians (32,390), followed by 8,933 Serbs and other minorities (1,503 Montenegrins, 4,082 Muslims, 4,299 Roma, 155 Croats, 63 Slovenes, 119 Macedonians, and 295 Yugoslavs) (IKS, 2009a, p. 16). Albanian quarters were historically more numerous in the south, while Serbian quarters were in the north. Albanians have also lived in Bošnjak mahala and Mikro naselje in the north, while Serbs used to
inhabit the centre of the southern part of the city and the Bair settlement. Despite the latent or overt struggle for domination that has historically marked the relations between residents of different ethnicities, especially between Albanians and Serbs, they maintained contacts, interacted, and mixed before the war.

After the conflict, many former residents left the town, and there was an influx of new arrivals into Mitrovica (IKS, 2009a, p. 22). Today, the south is populated by 50,000 Kosovo Albanians and internally displaced people from neighbouring war-damaged villages. The north is populated by approximately 17,000 Serbs, 2,000 Albanians, 1,700 Bosniaks, and several thousand Roma people who live in segregated neighbourhoods (Legnér et al., 2020). Presently, the city is predominantly perceived as ‘divided’. Likewise, as in other cases of divided cities, memory is long in relation to the wounds of war, but short regarding the period of peaceful coexistence that predated it (Baillie, 2013, p. 301). Many of the city’s residents have no connection with its past since they migrated thereafter the 1999 war. Immigrants from the countryside and other municipalities lack traditions of mutual coexistence, for which Mitrovica was once famous (IKS, 2009a, p. 22).

In 2013, the same year that the city’s administration became segregated, the European Union decided to reconstruct the Ibar bridge to ease tensions and to reconnect the two parts of the city. The Kosovo government and the international community have spent almost a decade focusing on this particular bridge in Mitrovica and on conflict management, reifying the divided city’s status quo (KIPRED, 2008). Critics call instead for developmental incentives that focus on the common problems, e.g. in education, employment, and poverty reduction (IKS, 2009b). The essential EU contribution to peacebuilding emerged in a top-down decision to make the Ibar bridge a space that links the two cities, resulting in an impasse caused by construction delays.

Perpetuating Conflict-Time Through Heritage

The EU has made efforts to turn the new bridge into a symbol of reconciliation, but there seems to be little interest from residents to further this aim. The bridge is a way of symbolically addressing the issue of urban division, but it is treated as a non-existent path in everyday life. Many heritage sites attesting to the city’s plural history can be found
throughout the urban centre, most of them in an urgent state of disrepair. The heritage law protects only a few monuments as listed sites: the Hammam, the Roman Catholic Shën Pjetri church (St Peter), the Great Mosque and its graves, the ruins of the medieval settlement of Treča, Treča town (Gjyjet), the ruins of the medieval complex of old Treča, a house located on Ilia Bircani street, the house of Blagoje Đorđević, and a house on Zelengora street (Republic of Kosovo, 2015). No additional sites have been granted protective status since 1980 (IKS, 2009b, p. 53). CHwB has identified 15 endangered cultural objects in the Mitrovica area, recorded in the Database of Cultural Heritage of Kosovo. However, the city’s cultural heritage is essentially ignored by both city administrations and by the Kosovo government. One reason is the lack of potency of cultural heritage in contributing to the solution of social problems identified in Kosovo. Aspects of the past that offer evidence of a multicultural society in which ethnic communities lived side by side and tolerated each other are systematically ignored in favour of aspects that point to one group’s rightful dominance over the other.

Most of these heritage assets have been left to decay and are in various stages of degradation. One could blame the lack of clarity of the 2006 Heritage Law, which led to the overlapping of roles and competencies between administrative bodies, and which was worsened by the spatial division. However, we argue that the deliberate choice of neglect is a significant strategy in conflict-time. The border created in the Ibar river after the 1999 conflict is the most tangible sign of the division, but it is not the only one. The enforced neglect of the city’s plural heritage wipes out alternative narratives of peaceful coexistence, which does not serve the political purposes of the monolithic narrative of a divided Mitrovica.

In today’s Kosovo, memories of war and suffering carry much more potency than heritage assets that provide glimpses of a shared past. Since heritage sites do not convey this narrative, actors interested in feeding the conflict between Kosovo and Serbia have erected tangible memory sites that commemorate the war martyrs. Nowhere in Kosovo are these memorials more visible than in central Mitrovica. They ultimately serve to foster the city’s division by presenting selective, one-sided, and opposing versions of ethnic heritage expressed through post-war monuments around the bridge (Legnér, Ristić, & Bravagliari, 2020). New monuments are thus created using myths of war heroes that have materialized in tangible memorials located along the city’s north–south axis on both sides of the Ibar bridge. The most prominent memorials are the
Monument to Prince Lazar—the Serbian martyr of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo—located in the northern part, and the Monument to Isa Boletini, who presently bears the officially recognized title ‘Hero of Kosovo’, in the southern part of the city. Lazar is said to have fought for the independence of Serbia from the Ottoman Empire. He was allegedly killed in an epic battle against the Ottomans on the Kosovo field (Radomirović, 2016). Boletini was an Albanian guerrilla fighter killed in 1916, remembered firstly for having fought against the Young Turks and later resisting a Serb invasion of Kosovo (Malcolm, 2002, pp. 243–261). The creation of memorials operates as a physical reminder of this hostile relationship while also redefining the borders of memory actively. Two parallel and incompatible narratives of suffering are created through them, motivating the spatial division of ethnic communities and the borders’ construction.

One result of the Kosovo War and the city’s subsequent division was that heritage became spatially separated from the ethnic group with which it was associated. Heritage appeared, presently referred to as ‘orphan heritage’, owned by people distant from the territories that contain them (Price, 2005, p. 182). Religious sites both in the northern and southern parts of the city have been targeted and destroyed. In 1999 a mosque located just north of the Ibar bridge was razed. After being part of the EU’s negotiations, this space is still a void in the urban centre. Five years later, the church of St Sava, used by Serbs living in the region since its construction in 1921, was burnt during violent riots and later rebuilt. Since 2015, Serbs living in the northern part of the city have visited it a few times each year to celebrate prominent festivities, escorted by police. For the rest of the year, the Sunday service is attended by a handful of people who arrive by bus, while the rest of the religious community gathers in the new church built on a hill in the north. The priest and his family reside next to St Sava. In 2017 they were still the only Serbs living in the southern part of the city. The church and the priest’s residence are supervised by a policeman day and night, surrounded by a protective zone like the ones implemented by Ahtisaari in other parts of the country. This situation clearly shows that sudden outbreaks of violence are still feared, and it also serves as an additional example of urban division in Mitrovica (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353211667).

At some distance from St Sava’s church, in the south, there is also a Serb Orthodox cemetery monitored by a security camera, but still showing signs of vandalism with toppled headstones and little maintenance and care. In the north, there is a much bigger Muslim cemetery.
displaying far fewer signs of disrepair. Both cemeteries were damaged during the riots of 2004 and 2008 and seem to have been neglected since. They are frozen in time since those who identify with them are no longer present in this part of the city or do not feel safe enough to visit them. Religious heritage, especially Orthodox churches, has been used in Kosovo to claim ownership of the territory, as in other Yugoslav realities, because they were the only major group of structures that visually embodied the Other (Baillie, 2013, p. 304). As a result, these buildings were the focus of violence and retaliation during and after the conflict. Heritage that could be regarded as shared across the ethnic groups has been neglected and allowed to be forgotten, and has thus been deprived of much of its value and potential impact on social life.

One of the areas around Mitrovica with the richest history is the Trepça miners’ village. The area presents traces of the Roman Catholic church of Shën Pjetri, which dates back to the thirteenth century. The church has been listed since 1958 but has been abandoned and is at risk of further degradation (IKS, 2009b). The area attracted Saxon miners and a Turkish colony during the fourteenth century. The modern metallurgical complex, founded in 1930, reached its peak in 1988, at which time it employed almost 23,000 workers (Schwartz, 2013). Trepça was organized as a one-company town and brought facilities and amenities to the city. The mining facility is still used, and squatters have occupied the partially ruined village (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352934204).

The act of inscribing the past in Mitrovica’s public spaces played a role in fostering the city’s interethnic unity before the 1990s. Key streets were renamed to commemorate the most prominent communist leaders and the Miners’ Monument (Monumenti i minatorëve të rënë/Spomenik rudarima junacima) was erected to commemorate the fallen Trepça workers who fought as Partisans in the Second World War. The monument is a 12-metre-tall concrete structure built in 1973 by the architect Bogdan Bogdanović on Kukavica hill, where it is clear to see although not actively commemorated. It is shaped as a minecart resting on two massive columns with a marble tombstone placed on the ground in front of the monument. The stone has inscriptions of the names of Serbian, Albanian, and Bosniak miners killed in the Second World War. The monument was designed to promote Yugoslav ‘Brotherhood and Unity’ by disseminating the myth of a shared sacrifice made by Kosovo’s different ethnic groups during the war.
One actor in the bottom-up peacebuilding processes is the museum, located on the Ibar bridge’s southern side and funded by the Kosovar institutions. It was first established in 1952 in the Hammam, but in 2009 it was transferred to a building previously used by the Yugoslav army. The museum is actively working to reduce tensions through cultural initiatives, presenting a more diverse heritage different from the historical narrative conjured up by heavily politicized media. The museum organizes different projects for all residents of Mitrovica. The aim is to encourage citizens’ participation and to offer a plurality of interpretations of the city’s past. This attempt can also be seen on the museum’s Facebook page, on which heritage is not labelled ‘southern’ or ‘northern’ (Muzeu, 2020). The museum’s narrative focuses on the shared history of the different ethnic groups characterized, for instance, by the miners’ community and its political resistance in the late twentieth century. Most recently, the memory of the Miners’ Strike in 1989 (Grevës së Minatorëve), in which 400,000 people demonstrated, has received attention as an example of peaceful protest (Obuçiça, 2011, p. 40).

The museum collaborates with several NGOs active in the city in celebrating intangible heritage, such as craftsmanship and the city’s strong musical tradition. One example is the NGO GAIA Kosovo, organized in 2019 at the museum Mitrovica: City of Diversity, the final event of the Mitrovica’s Joint Story project, funded by the European Union. Another NGO is Mundesia, which works with groups of mixed ethnicities to empower women and youth to promote cultural diversity (Interview Mundesia, 2017). Besides organizing music and craft festivals, they actively encourage the promotion of shared heritage in the Mitrovica area. School groups and students from the northern part of the country are not officially allowed to visit the museum and may only attend privately. Therefore, fewer visitors come from the northern side of the bridge than from the Kosovo Albanian side. NGOs thus play an important role in stimulating people from both communities to participate.

The museum cannot completely avoid divisive elements, such as a highly political statement called ‘The voice of the parents’. In the museum foyer, a banner runs along all the walls and it states the names of Albanians who have disappeared in recent years. In both parts of the city, pupils attend separate schools in which two different and contested stories of Kosovo’s history are taught. In the eyes of local people from different backgrounds, the historical facts presented strongly coincide with political opinions. It has been difficult for the museum to present the social
and political developments that have followed the Kosovo War. Since the museum is missing some written documentation because of the division, it works with exhibitions of old Mitrovica photographs, and these exhibitions leave space for multiple interpretations. These initiatives are guided by a focus on the future, starting from a diverse past, and without reviving nostalgia of, for instance, Yugoslav history. Both the museum and several NGOs are striving for grassroots peacebuilding through practical engagement and participation, areas in which the international community and the Kosovo government have been unsuccessful. Instead of focusing on victimization and divisive elements from the past, they appear to be making strides towards identifying everyday needs in Mitrovica.

CONCLUSION: THE KOSOVO POLITICS OF CONFLICT-TIME

Buildings and their historical record have particular importance for producing and reproducing identity because of their perceived permanence (Bevan, 2006, pp. 12–13). This is one reason why architecture has been crucial for nation-building since the nineteenth century. In and around Mitrovica, however, historical buildings have been permitted to decay because they do not seem to play a significant role in constructing ethnic identities. Instead, memorials are erected on both sides of the river to glorify and consolidate a history of violence and victimization. The memorials and their glorification serve as territorial markers demonstrating that the group who identifies with that specific memory remains in conflict with the Other. However, there are many examples of both tangible and intangible heritage that offer evidence of peaceful coexistence and friction in the history of northern Kosovo, as has been exemplified in this chapter.

The politicization of heritage in Kosovo has resulted in a mosque or a church no longer just being a place of religious significance. Heritage has become a symbol of a community deliberately targeted and ultimately eradicated. Also, cultural institutions such as museums or libraries have become symbols of memory for such communities and legitimize their continued existence and presence. Cultural heritage is deemed less necessary for its cultural, historical, and artistic values; it has instead become evidence of one ethnic group’s rights in relation to other groups. As the case of Mitrovica has shown, however, there have been grassroots initiatives that look beyond heritage that is highly ‘potent’, i.e. memorials and religious institutions. In so doing, they aim to create a more pluralistic
narrative of history and of traditions that could potentially speak to several ethnic groups in Kosovar society. These initiatives have in common a lack of government support and a reliance on volunteers and domestic and international NGOs. Mitrovica is a place where the conflict over Kosovo’s past plays out in urban space, and where bottom-up initiatives may resist ethnonationalism and dismantle the barrier to a shared history. Such initiatives serve to fight fear and remind the population of a past in which people of different ethnic origins lived side by side peacefully, with the hope that such conditions can become real again, if people really wish so.

REFERENCES


