

# REFLECTIONS

This graduation thesis aims to reactivate an old axis connecting two different parts of the city of Mostar. The choice of this particular corridor has been adopted not just because of its strategic location - it crosses the city from East to West, two sides that have been rebuilt after the Bosnian war without a coherent urban strategy - but also because every street, square, park and building along it belong to a common heritage, which after the Bosnian war is lost.

Therefore, this axis ( I will name it Axis Rondo-Old HIT Square-Musala Square, due to the main squares that it crosses) is ideal for a design strategy, which will have a dual nature: renewing three degraded areas facing the axis and, at the same time, introducing into those spaces one of the most important, natural and partially forgotten heritage: the Neretva River. The use of a natural, dynamic and "memory keeper" element - the river - to connect those three spaces, in particular two squares and one ruin of a terrace garden, could represent the link missing in the Axis and create a new social use, enhancing a sense of responsibility for a common heritage that nowadays is mainly used as a public dump.

## 1. ETHICAL ASPECTS

Although the new generations have not experienced the tragedy of war - except through the stories of parents or grandparents - Mostar still lives a reality of division documented by the absence of a single administration. Formally there is a single mayor but in reality the two communities are self-administering, setting vetoes on the redevelopment of the so-called "central zone", i.e. where the front line passed. However, what I have realized during my site visits is that this ethnic division is mainly desired on a political level and is not shared by most of the population; this means that there is a dichotomy between political representatives and the people. The problem most perceived by the Mostarci, in addition to unemployment and corruption, is the lack of a shared social space where the ethnic, religious, or cultural identity does not play a predominant role.

For this reason, I have focused my analysis on this part of the city: revitalizing this area would have an undoubted symbolic and therefore political significance because the restitution of the cultural and social role to the axis would probably prompt people - and their representatives - to improve the integration and collaboration between communities.

## 2.ANALYSIS AND IDEATION

The initial phase was characterized by an accurate historical analysis of the places belonging to the axis, in particular their configuration before the war but above all their social meaning. This analysis is developed through research on texts and articles, as well as interviews carried out during the site visit.

The comparison between the before and after is shocking: beyond the structural and architectural aspect (where there were parks and meeting places, now we observe void spaces and ruins), what is evident is the disappearance of social life - tragically, as if centuries of coexistence has been wiped out. However, I realized as a result of my analysis that this trait of social no man's land is not the irreversible and unchangeable result of the war but the result of political decisions, far from the common feeling of most of the population.

These considerations allowed me to develop the concept of the project: not recreating the past but designing the future combining memory and the sharing of common spaces.

The Neretva river has the historical, natural and symbolic aspects necessary for the Mostari to activate those mechanisms of shared memory that are dormant. First, it belongs to each citizen, irrespective of his/her ethnic group, culture or religion. For this reason, it can be considered one of the few shared symbols of the city.

Secondly, it recalls past periods, when people strolled along its banks without wondering what nationality the other strollers belonged to, or when the young Mostari dived into its waters and swam carefree. Currently, the river is polluted and its banks are difficult to access due to poor maintenance and the overgrowth of vegetation. This caused the Mostari to turn away from their river. I conducted this analysis myself, in situ, walking along the Neretva river banks, overcoming natural and manmade obstacles such as steep slopes, dense vegetation and ruins. The walk under the Tito Bridge was particularly hard: several natural and manmade fences make this part of the river almost unreachable, discouraging the inhabitants to get to the river. This observation is the core of the research question: if the Mostari no longer go to the river, why not take the river to the Mostari?

### **3.THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND DESIGN: THE AXIS AND THE RIVER**

Restoring the axis through a landscape architecture approach means considering every feature affecting that particular part of the city. Previous and current spatial configuration was carefully evaluated through texts, photographs and videos. On site interviews enabled me to understand the social meaning of the axis in the past and what is remaining. In the early stages, while identifying Musala Park and the Old HIT Square as the crucial points to be revitalized, I lacked the single common thread able to provide the design with a logical continuity.

Eventually, I identified in the Neretva the unifying element at the core of the project; not just the river itself but also the river's water used in fountains, currently out of order, which will symbolically represent the rebirth of the axis. However the concept of "taking the Neretva to the city" cannot be simplified in a design strategy aimed simply at reactivating a few fountains along the axis by using the river water.

The Neretva is not just flowing water, it is a keeper of memories: stones, ruins, steps, paths... some of them still visible, others erased by the time and by its corrosive power.

All these elements comprise an infinite heritage which needs to be given back to the city.

### **4.THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN: A CITY OF FLOWS**

The courses attended during the first year of my Master in Landscape Architecture have been crucial to reach my research objectives on the city of Mostar.

At the beginning of my graduation year I became aware about the different flows necessary for a city's survival. I consider a city not as a static and lifeless entity but as a living organism made of both metabolic and human flows. I adopted this way of looking at a city during my analyses in Mostar.

The possibility of working on a thesis that is part of a design graduation lab represented a further point of strength for my final research because I was involved in a team of international students coming from both Architecture and Landscape Architecture tracks.

The site analysis has been developed through different scales, and different approaches and methods have been applied.

## **5. WHAT I HAVE LEARNT FROM MY OWN WORK**

Despite the careful elaboration of a research approach and the choice of an innovative method (urban acupuncture) to propose solutions able to restore the axis, I realized that my work was incomplete due to the lack of interaction with the final users of the project. In other words, the design should take into account - and, indeed, draw its inspiration from - the general perception and feelings of the Mostari themselves. As the end users, they should be at the heart of the project. For this reason, going back to Mostar proves necessary in order to give more relevance to my design theories.

As the Mostari will be the final users of my design, everyday, informal conversations with them about future possibilities for the Axis Rondo-Old HIT Square-Musala Square are the most effective way to gain better insights into the city, and into possible solutions.

However, this may prove difficult, and less natural and free flowing as we don't speak the same language.

One of the things I am learning as a part of my creative studies is that there are different ways of communicating ideas and perceptions, and sometimes the use of words is not the best - or only - strategy.

The use of graphic materials such as photographs, postcards, journals, symbols is an effective way to make locals more collaborative because these items are able to awake lost memories (particularly in the older generations), and at the same time to awaken different feelings in young people.

Obviously one possible limitation of this approach is that due to the nature of the attending people (mainly students), the results may not be generalisable to the whole Mostar's population

## **6. SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE**

The concept of streetscape that I acquired through the vision of Gordon Cullen's sketches has undoubtedly influenced the theoretical framework of the problem as well as the reading of "Streetscapes" by Colin Davis. This theoretical basis was useful to understand the situation of the East-West axis of Mostar during my site visit and posed the preliminary foundations for the design proposals.

The specific methodology adopted for streetscape solutions owes much to the concept of "urban acupuncture". Urban acupuncture is a small-scale interventional approach aimed to revitalize urban void spaces or city's places without energy or with negative energy. This approach is feasible and successful particularly in healing urban wounds that man has inflicted; in the case of Mostar, these urban wounds produced discontinued streetscapes, clearly visible in the West-East axis connecting West Mostar to East Mostar.

Revitalizing these urban voids is the starting point, for example, by adding elements that may be missing but the final goal is to renovate the lost urban function. In this way, the previously unfrequented district becomes attractive not only because it provides a service or a function but also because the new visitors attract people. Good acupuncture is when people are stimulated to go out to the streets through the creation of meeting places. What is really intriguing of this strategy is that the achievement of the final objective is reached with sustainable means that combine the ecological approach with the social one.

The organisation of a workshop in Mostar has been crucial for the development of my thesis in order to understand the real and immediate needs of Mostar.

Very often, as external observer, we are tempted to propose huge and extreme designs, while the real needs of a city like Mostar are met by simple interventions with a high impact on the citizens well being. For example, during the workshop, the main proposals coming from the locals - especially students - regarded the creation of public study areas, green spaces, outdoor gathering points.

For this reason, I strongly believe that communication with locals should be an indispensable methodological element to develop a coherent design thesis.