

# Under siege : transforming Sarajevo's built environment

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## Under Siege: Transforming Sarajevo's Built Environment

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1 By the end of May 1992, the Yugoslav People's Army had renamed itself the Army of the Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

2 Miroslav Prstojević, Maja Razović, and Aleksandra Wagner, *Sarajevo Survival Guide* (Sarajevo: FAMA, 1993), 1.

One of the most valuable documents on how to survive in the besieged city of Sarajevo (1992–1996) during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is *Sarajevo Survival Guide*, written during the first two years of the siege, when military forces of Bosnian Serbs, assisted by the heavily armed Yugoslav People's Army <sup>1</sup> and Serbian and Montenegrin paramilitary troops, took control of the mountains and hills surrounding Sarajevo. Based on collected records, interviews, and recommendations, the guide "intends to be a version of Michelin, taking visitors throughout the city and instructing them on how to survive without transportation, hotels, taxis, telephones, food, shops, heating, water, information, electricity." <sup>2</sup> The guide was later accompanied by a *Survival Map 1992–1996*, a hand-drawn map based on documents and photographs taken during the war, including the positions of weaponry around Sarajevo taken from the original Yugoslav People's Army map. <sup>fig.1</sup> The hand-drawn map, consisting of a legend, enlarged map sections, and text description for fifty-seven highlighted sites, provides a visual document of the siege and survival possibilities, including types of weaponry encircling the city; damaged buildings of social and historical significance; red circles to mark the most dangerous zones, those exposed to constant shelling and sniper fire (e.g., bridges and crossroads open toward the hills); sniper protection walls and barriers; water sources; war gardens; and people running on the crossroads or carrying water canisters or wood. By looking at the map, one can see there were no safe zones in Sarajevo. Every place was subjected to gaze and destruction.

During the siege, Sarajevo was completely encircled and subjected to carefully orchestrated destruction. The city's geography and topography made it susceptible to military blockade and assault but also to more discreet techniques of control. The mountains and hills surrounding the city and its 350,000 inhabitants <sup>3</sup> became sites for the concentration of military forces and their heavy artillery, tanks, and sniper rifles. With the siege, the city was completely immobilized and isolated. All points of entry and exit were blocked. Sarajevo soon became a highly controlled zone where life was reduced to bare existence and survival. Sarajevans were exposed to constant threat, danger, surveillance, control, and fear in their built environment. The gaze of the enemy was felt everywhere. Snipers scanned streets, buildings, houses, courtyards, bridges, and crossroads. The enemy's gaze was particularly felt in parts of the city near Grbavica,

3 The estimate of 350,000 besieged residents takes into consideration the last Yugoslav census of 1991, according to which 361,179 people lived in Sarajevo, as well as the fact that significant numbers left the city in the first months of war. See Vahid Karavelić, "Teroriziranje Sarajeva 1992–1995. godine," in *Politički i vojni značaj odbrane Sarajeva 1992–1995*: ed. Mesud Šadinlija (Sarajevo: Institut za istraživanje zločina protiv čovječnosti i međunarodnog prava Univerziteta u Sarajevu, 2014), 343–72, here 350.

a residential area located on the west bank of the Miljacka River which was occupied and completely cut off from the rest of the town. Throughout the siege, Grbavica was a sniper's nest in the heart of Sarajevo, and areas paralleling it were continually attacked. The main streets connecting the municipality of Novo Sarajevo to the center of the city became known as "sniper alley."

In less than two years of the assault on Sarajevo, the totality of its urban tissue – from commercial and industrial facilities to housing units and residential areas, including cultural and educational institutions, houses of worship, schools, hospitals, cemeteries, and the monuments and cultural heritage attesting to the city's rich cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity – was systematically targeted, damaged, and in many cases destroyed. <sup>4</sup> This deliberate urbicide is carefully documented in *Warchitecture: Sarajevo Urbicide*, a dossier of photographs and maps of damage. Created by the Bosnia-Herzegovina Association of Architects (DAS-SABIH) in Sarajevo, the publication surveys buildings damaged or destroyed from May 1992 through October 1993. <sup>5</sup> Divided into four sections, corresponding to periods of the city's development, the publication provides brief historical information and describes the degree of devastation of individual buildings with the spatial precision of a plan. **fig.2** By the end of 1993, Sarajevo was a ruin, literally and metaphorically.

The siege was also a war on infrastructure directed at the very nature of the modern city and its citizens, especially the most vulnerable members of the population – the old, the weak, and the ill. <sup>6</sup> The strategic paralysis of Sarajevo included the disruption or destruction of systems that sustained the city: the power grids, water network, sewage and waste disposal systems, as well as transportation and communication infrastructure and food supplies. In fact, during the first months of war, supplies of electricity, water, and gas were all cut off, the public transportation system was destroyed, and most telephone service was disrupted when the Main Post Office Building was burned. <sup>7</sup> Soon the city was devoid of fuel, food, and medicine.

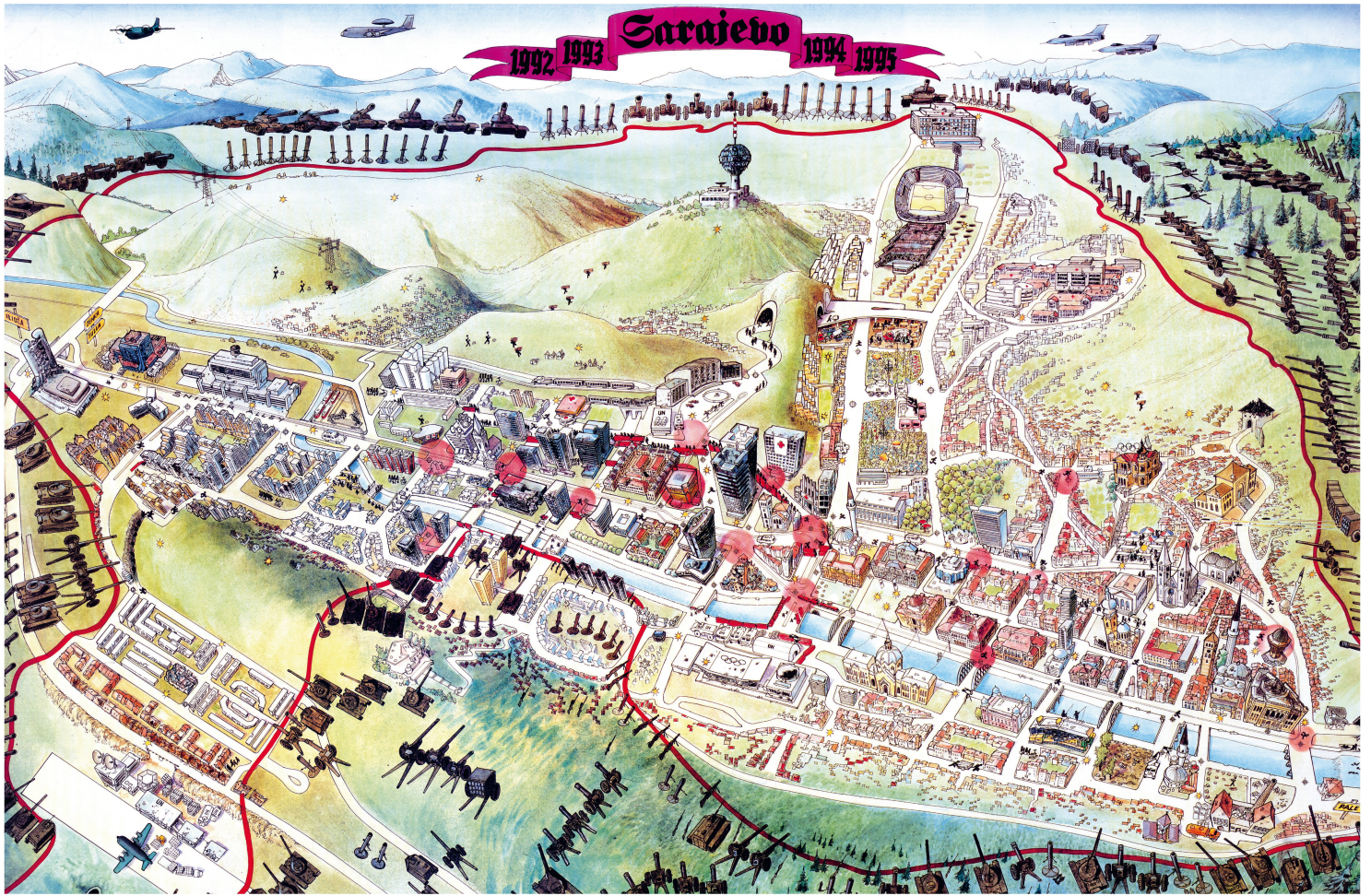
<sup>4</sup> On the destruction of the city, see Association of Architects of Bosnia-Herzegovina, "WARCHITECTURE," *ARH: Magazine for Architecture, Town Planning and Design* 24 (1993).

<sup>5</sup> In the early 1990s, in response to the destruction of Mostar, Sarajevo, and the Croatian cities of Vukovar, Zadar, and Dubrovnik, Bogdan Bogdanović, a Serbian and Yugoslav architect and theorist, wrote about "the ritual murder of the city." See Bogdan Bogdanović, *Tri ratne knjige* (Novi Sad: Mediterran Publishing, 2008), 35–39. The term *urbicide* was then adopted by architects in Bosnia and Herzegovina to describe violence in Sarajevo and Mostar. See *Warchitecture: Sarajevo Urbicide* (Sarajevo: DAS-SABIH, 1994); and *Mostar '92: Urbicide* (Mostar: HVO općine Mostar, 1992). The term is also used in connection to the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina by Martin Shaw and Martin Coward. Shaw, a sociologist of war, sees urbicide as a form of genocide. Martin Shaw, "New Wars of the City: Relationships of 'Urbicide' and 'Genocide,'" in *Cities, War, and Terrorism Towards an Urban Geopolitics*, ed. Stephen Graham (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 141–54. For more information on urbicide in Sarajevo, see also Martin Coward, "Urbicide in Bosnia," in *ibid.*, 154–72.

<sup>6</sup> See Stephen Graham's analysis of the importance of infrastructure for the functioning of modern cities. Stephen Graham, "Disruption by Design: Urban Infrastructure and Political Violence," in *Disrupted Cities: When Infrastructure Fails*, ed. Graham (New York: Routledge, 2010), 111–29, here 111.

<sup>7</sup> Suada Kapić, *The Siege of Sarajevo 1992–1996* (Sarajevo: FAMA, 2000), 22.

**fig.1** Survival Map 1992–1996, "The Siege of Sarajevo." → 86/87



8 Graham, "Disruption by Design" (see note 6). Looting and crime occurred in Sarajevo from the beginning of the siege. See "Survival Questionnaires," in Kapić, *Siege of Sarajevo* (see note 7), 836–1029.

fig.2 A leaf from *Warchitecture: Sarajevo Urbicide*.

9 See Mesud Šadinlija, "Izgradnja i značaj sarajevskog ratnog tunela," *Korak*, no. 30 (2013): 23–37.

10 Vildana Selimbegović, "Objekat D-B: Tunel na kraju svjetla," *Bosanskohercegovački dani*, April 1996; "Sjećali se Sarajeva?" *Nezavisni news magazin* (special edition), April 5, 2002, 30–34.

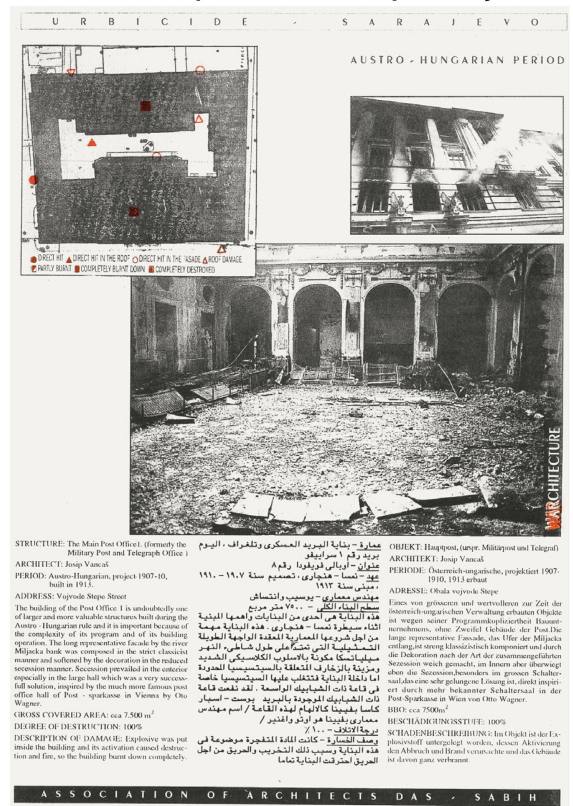
11 See Merisa Karović Babić, *Masovna ubistva civila u Sarajevu za vrijeme opsade 1992–1995* (Sarajevo: Institut za istraživanje zločina protiv čovječnosti i međunarodnog prava Univerziteta u Sarajevu, 2014), 144, 209–10.

The markets were empty, stores vacant. With the complete blockage of the city's arteries, everyday life was transformed into a struggle against darkness, cold, hunger, immobility, and disease, as well as the fear of violence and crime. 8 How did Sarajevo's inhabitants survive under these conditions? How did they adopt their living environments to fulfill their most basic needs? How did life continue in the besieged city?

### Survival in an Annihilated Urban Environment

The defenselessness of Sarajevo, the hardship and privation of its citizens, as well as the insufficiency of arms and ammunition prompted the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina to look for an underground connection to break the complete isolation of Sarajevo. From March to December 1993, the army built a tunnel underneath the airport runway. Objekat D-B, also known as the "Tunnel of Hope," was primarily used for military purposes, including the transportation of munitions and military units to the war zones outside the city, especially in the Igman and Bjelašnica mountains. 9 The tunnel was also used for civilian purposes, but only for those with special permission (wounded civilians, political delegations, cultural workers, journalists, etc.), and it served as a channel for supplies of food and electricity, as well as for smuggling. The tunnel, however, did not ease the hardship of civilians, since the food and fuel transported through it were insufficient and sold for immense amounts of money. 10 The struggle for survival continued for the next two years.

Open spaces, especially in public areas and on the streets, represented life threats to those present in them. The crowds of civilians searching for food, water, and alternative solutions to overcoming the cold were particularly at risk of attack. The most horrific civilian massacres during the siege took place on Ferhadija Street and in the open market, Markale, as people stood in line for the trucks distributing bread or gathered at the deserted market searching for food. 11 Even children were targeted while playing



in front of their houses, buildings, and courtyards.<sup>12</sup> These threats and attacks brought forth new uses of public spaces and new ways of moving through them. Sarajevans learned to complete tasks, whether going to work, getting water and food, or visiting family and friends, as quickly as possible. The practice of walking through the city was replaced by running over bridges, through squares, and across crossroads, since the widest intersections, as the *Survival Map* shows, were often the most exposed to the gaze of the enemy and were therefore continually attacked. The reality of imposed war resulted in a completely new relationship to and perception of the built environment, its qualities, and its uses. What are normally considered to be great assets in cities — open, green, and public spaces — become inimical to life in modern warfare. Bridges that once connected people, communities, and neighborhoods now exposed Sarajevans to the gaze of the sniper. Spaces for socializing and recreation, such as parks and green areas, were transformed into graveyards and potential sources of food and heating alternatives.

These conditions gave birth to a network of hastily constructed barricades and barriers across streets, preventing the movement of the enemy as well as limiting the gaze of the sniper. The Bosnian army erected a defense system on the lines of demarcation, while civil defense, with the assistance of United Nations (UN) troops, constructed walls of containers, vehicles, and remnants of destruction on the major crossroads.<sup>13</sup> Bombed-out, overturned cars, trams, and buses served as unintended shelters, and even moving UN armored vehicles were used as shields. Various forms of improvised fields of fortification and obstruction — from sandbag barriers to medical cabinets and even clothing and sheets — provided protection, or the illusion of it.

### **The Role of Interior Living Spaces**<sup>14</sup>

Those residential buildings not ruined were damaged, and consequently houses and apartment buildings became monuments of both destruction and survival. Walls pockmarked by bullets or dented by grenades, the holes of burned-out apartments, detonation-shattered windows covered with plastic or cardboard boxes, doors or closets, even mattresses or books,<sup>15</sup> as well as old stove flues sticking out from windows, forced the inhabitants to develop different modes of living. Housing units played an important role within this built environment under siege by instigating new relationships between interior and exterior spaces and inciting the reorganization of the former. Every household in Sarajevo was affected. Basic human needs, including sleeping and eating, took place in completely different ways. Spaces for living and sleeping

<sup>12</sup> Zilha Mastalić-Košuta, "Masovna ubistva djece u Sarajevu pod opsadom 1992–1995," in *Politički i vojni značaj odbrane Sarajeva 1992–1995* (see note 3), 578–601, here 592–94.

<sup>13</sup> Robert J. Donia, *Sarajevo: A Biography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 305–6.

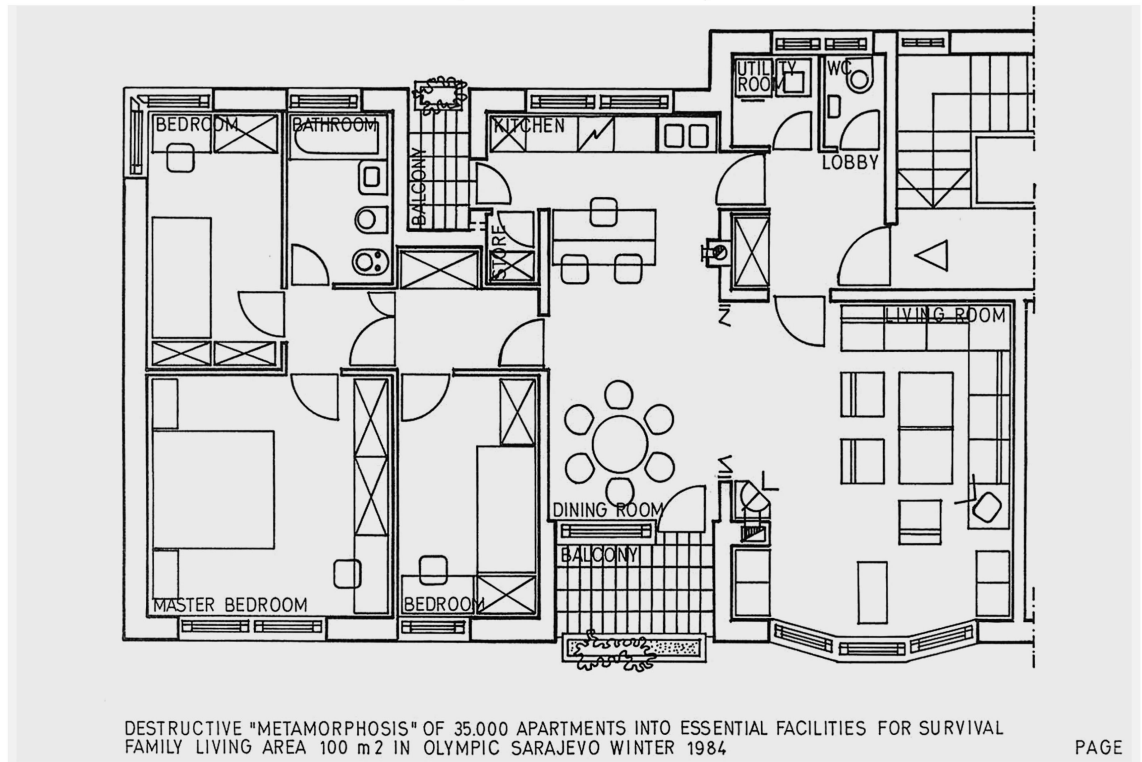
<sup>14</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the information presented in this section is based on the author's lived experience and the testimonials of her friends and family members who lived through the siege.

<sup>15</sup> Prstojević, Razović, and Wagner, *Sarajevo Survival Guide* (see note 2), 11.

moved to the somewhat protected areas, often to the hallways, which became a multifunctional space used for cooking, dining, sleeping, reading, conversation, and study. Particularly housing units in multistory buildings were modified, transformed, and adapted to satisfy basic human needs.

A paramount example of these transformations is illustrated in two drawings by Sarajevo architect Zoran Doršner, who lived and worked in the city throughout the siege. In them a modern three-bedroom apartment floor plan is juxtaposed to its modified state as a half-destroyed shelter adjusted for down-to-earth

**figs. 3 a–b** Zoran Doršner, "Destructive Metamorphosis of Sarajevo Concentration Camp, 1992, 1993, 1994...1995?" Floor plan, 1994.



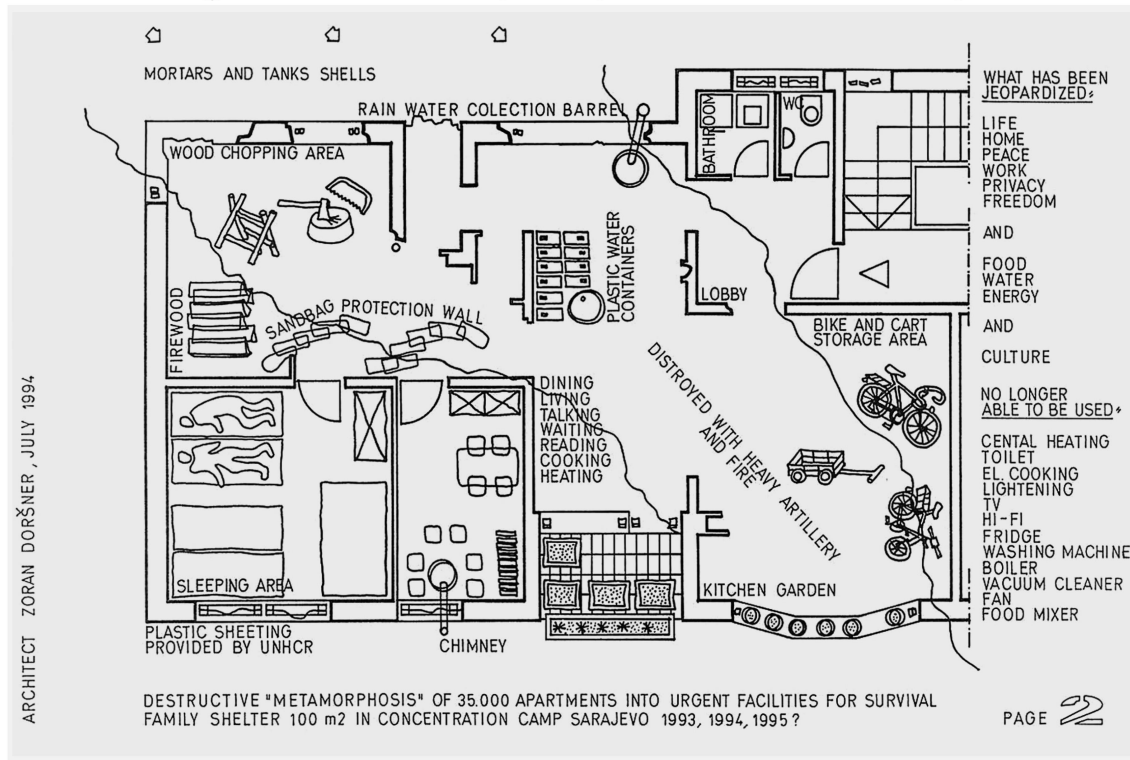
survival. The transformed interior includes survival elements such as sandbag wall protection, firewood, canisters, and empty window sockets, reflecting the people's endurance and adaptive abilities. **figs. 3 a–b** The drawings reveal a new functional disposition of rooms – the result of the infrastructural paralysis and destruction of the largest functional space (consisting of kitchen, dining room, and living room). The small bedroom has been turned into a multipurpose room where a wood stove, with flue sticking out the window, has been installed for cooking and heating. Doršner's drawings, along with his text describing the metamorphosis of apartments into "facilities for survival," was published in the Sarajevo daily newspaper *Oslobodjenje* in 1994. He writes,

*"The largest, functional, apartment space is used for parking bicycles and carts as the main means of transportation of food, water, and wood, whereas the other part of that space is used for chopping and sawing the wood brought from the nearby parks. The technical water used for sanitary facilities and washing*

was collected from the gutter along the eaves that catches rain-water and collected in plastic canisters. In the summertime the open space of the loggia was used for planting vegetables in concrete and wooden crates and large plastic bags." 16

Lacking electricity, gas, running water, and food, the kitchen spaces in Sarajevo households often did not function as places where food was kept, prepared, or cooked or where dishes were washed. Electrical stoves were replaced with various types of wood stove, often handmade and improvised from found materials. Cooking areas were frequently moved to a balcony. With the

16 Zoran Doršner, "Kad gradove ubijaju," *Oslobođenje*, December 10, 1994, 7. Translation by the author.



shortage of wood and coal, people were forced to use whatever they could find in their living space. Furniture, books, shoes, cardboard packaging from humanitarian aid, even plastic bags were turned into combustibles. 17 Forced into down-to-earth survival, Sarajevo's citizens designed necessary items from whatever was available; for example, barbeque pots, stoves made from metal medical cabinets, sewage pipes, or cans; push carts made from crates, tables, and sleds; and the *kandilo*, a lamp made from oil and water. 18

Modern apartments, with lighter and more flexible spaces and horizontal window openings with large glass surfaces, needed more spatial intervention and reorganization, since the large window openings made them difficult to heat and reduced protection from sniper bullets and grenade shrapnel. The hardships of adapting apartments to the new urban war condition were particularly felt in high-rise buildings with nonfunctional elevators and lacking chimneys, basements, and green areas, although

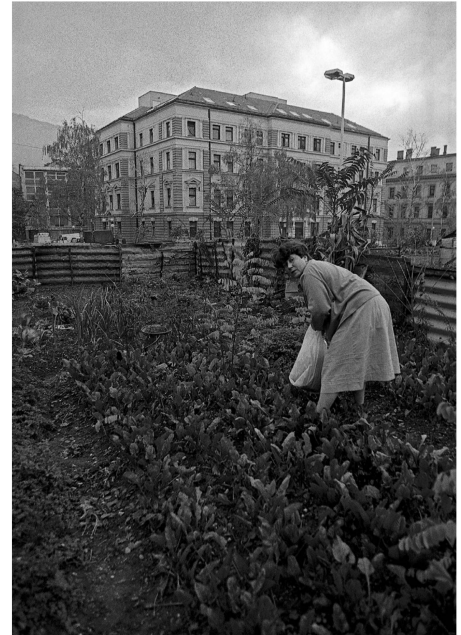
17 Prstojević, Razović, and Wagner, *Sarajevo Survival Guide* (see note 2).

18 Jelena Mrkić, "Sarajevski ratni izumi: Umijeće stvaranja," *Bosanskohercegovački dani*, November 1994, 93–94.



flat roofs provided ideal surfaces for planting vegetables. Consequently, survival in multistory apartment buildings gave rise to new uses of spaces inside and outside of the buildings. Common areas and basements were given new functions. Staircases and main entrances became thresholds and were used for provisional protection and communal gathering, enabling social encounters with neighbors and casual passersby who required temporary shelter from shelling.

Shelters played a special role in the creation of new spaces for social life. Due to the frequent shelling, residents moved underground to shelters, basements, and cellars, where various activities took place: schooling, play, communication, and social integration. Common building areas fluctuated between inside and outside, between private space and common space: schools were organized in the



hallways and stairways of apartment buildings, as well as in basements, shelters, and utility rooms, all of which might serve variously as children's play areas, as gathering spots where neighbors could communicate and exchange food, water, and war recipes, or as improvised communal cooking areas. <sup>19</sup> The apartment blocks in the modernist housing projects that had been built in the new parts of the city (after the Second World War), once known for "weak sociability," <sup>20</sup> for containing individuals and families within the walls of their homes, now became centers of community life. In addition, the spaces between buildings were used for various functions, including planting vegetables, playgrounds, and common cooking areas. <sup>21/fig.4</sup> The closer proximity of buildings in the apartment blocks provided protection from the sniper, although not from mortar shells, so it was not physical security but more of a psychological sense of security that allowed these spaces to take on a new role of fostering interaction among residents.

**fig.4** War Garden, Sarajevo, 1992–95.

<sup>19</sup> Staircases were often used as shelter in apartment buildings that did not have basements. Children often played in these transitional spaces. See, for example, David Berman, "The War Schools of Dobrinja: Schooling under Siege in Sarajevo Community," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 1,705 (2005): 1–63.

<sup>20</sup> See Rajka Mandić, "The Architecture of Syncretism: Culture as Context in Housing," in *Rethinking Globalism: Case of Transforming Old Cities*, ed. Sengul Oymen Gur (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010), 93–119, here 97–107.

<sup>21</sup> In his war journal, Dane Olbina wrote about common cooking areas. See Dane Olbina, *Dani i godine opsade* (Sarajevo: I. U. Istorijски arhiv Sarajevo, 2002), 81.

## “Watch Out, Sniper!”

The wall barriers, barricades, and boundaries that were installed on the crossroads and in the areas exposed to permanent sniper fire throughout Sarajevo offered opportunities for expressions of resentment and for rebellion against oppression. These surfaces allowed people to communicate directly with passersby and to attempt to help one another. The surfaces of barriers and facades were used as canvases or signboards for various forms of graffiti and text messages, including antiwar mottos (“I Want Freedom!” “Peace!”), anarchist slogans, messages of despair (“Welcome to Hell!”), and warnings and information signs (“Watch Out, Sniper!” “Shelter!”). <sup>fig.5</sup> Such textual signs also offered social commentaries on the situation and conditions in the besieged city and drew meaning from references to physical locations, as well as the totality of Sarajevo. Inscriptions on buildings, walls, boards, street fur-



fig. 5 Skloniste (“shelter”), Upadaj (“get in”), Sarajevo, 1994.

niture, and even on pieces of textile nailed to a tree, represented the new city signage and street markings. These small moments, ruptures in the visual scenario of Sarajevo, had a social impact and can be perceived as ways of reclaiming the city.

In the context of opposition to collective modes of oppression and protection of urban ways of life, cultural resistance played a significant role in besieged Sarajevo. The city experienced a cultural revival, including an intense program of film screenings, theater, opera, and ballet performances, as well as the organization of about one hundred solo art exhibitions, a dozen group shows, and around one hundred concerts in various locations. <sup>22</sup> Cultural workers and artists working with rubble, debris,

<sup>22</sup> Asja Mandić, “Formation of a Culture of Critical Resistance in Sarajevo: Exhibitions in/on Ruins,” *Third Text* 25, no. 6 (2011): 725–35, here 726.



and various fragments of destruction used a wide variety of spaces, from open public space to damaged cultural institutions and ruins, such as the Public National Library <sup>fig.6</sup> and Sutjeska cinema. These momentary interruptions, infiltrations, appropriations, and spatial interventions fostered social interaction, participation, and engagement in public spaces under siege. Instead of avoiding spaces of potential risk, people consciously risked their lives to attend cultural events, hence contesting and challenging mechanisms of power and control and the degradation and dehumanization they impose.

**fig. 6** Vedran Smajlović, concert in the National Library, Sarajevo, 1993.