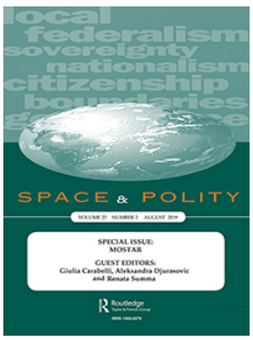

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Challenging the representation of ethnically divided cities: perspectives from Mostar

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction, we discuss the scope of the edited volume by outlining the position of Mostar within much broader academic debates on 'ethnically divided cities'. We question the representations of such contested cities as hopeless spaces of division, and suggest to explore instead the cracks that challenge overpowering logics of partition: the self-directed attempts at inter-ethnic solidarity, grassroots movements for social justice and dignity, and the inconsistent ways people in these cities inhabit and perform ethnic identities. We also introduce the themes of this Special Issue; Divided Cities as Complex Cities; Memories, Affect and Everyday Life; and Grassroots Politics.

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Urban complexities; divided cities; ethno-national conflicts; grassroots politics; everyday life; everyday life in contested cities

Introduction to the special issue

Since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreements (1995) that put an end to the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), much emphasis has been given to the importance of reconciliation in Mostar, the biggest city of the Herzegovina region and the political centre of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton (Federation, BiH). This is because Mostar is one of the few cities that did not become ethno-nationally homogeneous as the result of war-induced migrations, deaths, and demographic shifts across the country, but rather houses two communities (Bosniak and Croat), roughly equal in size, that are both contending the city's territory. The Serb community, once forming the third major group, was almost completely dispersed by the war. In 2004, after a decade of failed (international) attempts to foster a productive dialogue between the leaders of these two major ethno-national communities, the then High Representative to BiH, Paddy Ashdown, imposed the reunification of the city, which nevertheless remains contested (see also Bieber, 2005; Bing, 2001; Bose, 2017; Djurasovic, 2016; ICG, 2000, 2009; Soberg, 2008; Zdeb, 2017).

This Special Issue (SI) interrogates the legacy of the conflict and the ongoing post-war and post-socialist transition in Mostar from a bottom-up perspective. It discusses social, political, and cultural practices that show and comment on how people learnt to co-

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exist with the seemly-permanent division of the city – often reproducing it but also challenging it openly. Bringing together scholars whose research has provided critical and innovative approaches to the understanding of contemporary Mostar, the SI reflects on the absurdities, inconsistencies, and specificities of living in a reunited/divided city that is part of an equally contested nation state, which is still looking for its own political emancipation from the international protectorate. In so doing, the SI proposes ways to navigate urban complexities as a means to counter the reduction of Mostar to merely its ethno-national divisions.

We introduce the scope and topics of this edited volume by outlining the position of Mostar within much broader academic debates on 'ethnically divided cities'. Our aim is to question the representations of such contested cities as hopeless spaces of division, and suggest instead to explore the *cracks* that challenge overpowering logics of partition: the self-directed attempts at inter-ethnic solidarity, grassroots movements for social justice and dignity, and the inconsistent ways people in these cities inhabit and perform ethnic identities. We then offer a closer engagement with the essays that form part of this collection to introduce the themes they touch upon; Divided Cities as Complex Cities; Memories, Affect and Everyday Life; and Grassroots Politics.

Placing Mostar within existing academic debates

Since the end of the conflict, Mostar has attracted international peace-keepers and policy-makers, planners, and NGO workers, but also academics interested in exploring – often critically – the measures taken by the local and the international communities to lead the city towards a future of peace and stability. The accounts written in the first phases of post-war urban rehabilitation engage mainly with state and local actors – international representatives and organizations, and local community leaders and NGOs – to explore the many ways in which the peace and reunification processes have been co-opted (Armaly, Blasi, & Hannah, 2004; Bing, 2001; Bollens, 2009; Calame & Charlesworth, 2009; Grodach, 2002; Makaš, 2007). These studies account for how the ethnic divide remained very much alive, and focused on excavating the multiple pathways through which the two main ethno-national communities were continuing their conflict; this time without weapons, but rather through rebuilding, re-territorialising, bordering and authoring new narratives about what post-war Mostar had become and should be. In so doing, these initial works approached the city by drawing on much broader and long-established debates about the management of ethno-nationally-divided cities. These are cities where ethno-national aspirations to exclusive sovereignty manifests spatially into the desire to acquire more territory for one community at the expense of others. Accordingly, Mostar became an important case-study for comparative research assessing policies, strategies, and plans implemented to solve the problems created by the urban division (i.e. the financial and logistical burden of maintaining parallel infrastructures, widespread corruption, the rise of sectarianism, and the polarization of civil society).

Among key comparative works are *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia* (Calame & Charlesworth, 2009) and *City and Soul in Divided Societies* (Bollens, 2012), which group Mostar with Jerusalem, Belfast, Beirut and other cities that became synonymous with persistent ethnic wars, segregation, and divisions, requiring

international attention and coordinated diplomatic efforts. In other words, Mostar had also become, as with other cities in this list, an environment in which to test the practices of peace-building, state-building, and reconciliation that, if successful, may could have been exported internationally or, at least, scaled up towards a nation-wide triple transition model: from war to peace; from peace to power-sharing; and from socialism to neoliberal democracy.

These narratives powerfully shaped and normalized the representation of Mostar as a place of ethnic hatred, corruption, permanent political impasse, and failure. But by focusing on the facts of the ethnic divisions, these analyzes often obscured other – equally powerful – political, economic and social processes such as the transition from state-led socialism to neoliberal economy, the challenges derived from creating new political and democratic infrastructures for the newly-born independent nation state, and the social processing of war-induced personal and collective traumas, which were often reduced to direct consequences of ethnic division. In other words, the analysis of ethno-national polarization became the primary – and often exclusive – lens through which approach the analysis of Mostar. Surely, this was necessary in order to produce knowledge and data capable of creating meaningful comparisons between Mostar and other 'divided cities'. Yet, most recently, this comparative perspective has been questioned for two main reasons. Firstly, grouping very different cities under this category downplays how different they really are. Accordingly, the question becomes whether such a comparative approach remains useful, and for what purposes, as it often leads to simplified analyzes that reduce historical, economic, and political complexities to stereotypical representations of urban polarisations, which might limit the scope of urban research rather than broaden it (Allegra, Casaglia, & Rokem, 2012; Djurasovic, this issue). Secondly, to label these cities as divided normalizes their representation as places of permanent (and often unsolvable) partition, un-imagining the very possibility of social transformation. Proof lies in the fact that scholarly research about divided cities tends to be about management rather than change, which is often perceived as impossible (Carabelli, this issue).

In response to these critiques, from the late 2000s, a new generation of researchers began to produce new accounts of divided cities. Nagle and Clancy (2010, 2016), for instance, has researched the formation of supra-ethnic movements in both Belfast and Beirut (e.g. LGBT movements and feminist groups) as a means to challenge the mainstream approach to these cities as cases of permanent division. Other scholars such as Larking (2012), Pullan and Baille (2013), O'Dowd and Komarova (2011), Leonard (2011), Dumper (2014), and Fregonese (2015) – among others – focused on the everyday life of Jerusalem, Beirut and Belfast to explore the possibility for these cities to challenge ethnic polarization from the bottom-up. This was equally so for researchers on BiH – and Mostar – who began exploring how the process of post-conflict reassessment had affected the everyday life of the country by focusing on the citizens' expectations for the future, their memories of the past, their struggles to deal with the consequences of war, and the ethnic, class, and gender divides produced by it (Björkdhal & Gusic, 2016; Carabelli, 2013; Forde, 2018, 2019; Hromadžić, 2016; Laketa, 2015, 2016, 2017; Moore 2013; Palmberger, 2008; Summa, Forthcoming; Vetters, 2007). By focusing on the micro-politics of the everyday, this new wave of research has attempted to challenge ossified representations of Mostar as a failing entity, and BiH as a hopeless state. Such critical perspectives provide new insights that shed light on the processes of re-articulation, re-assessment, and

recalibration occurring at the grassroots level. Despite a diversity of topics and methods, this most recent scholarship questions the limits of engaging with Mostar as a 'divided city' because it recognizes how this very label restricts the possibility to look beyond its ethnic divides. For example, in the last decade, Mostar has been approached from the angle of its socio-economic transition to explore how this impacts the present socio-political dynamics of the city (Djurasovic, 2016; Fagan, 2006). Other researchers have emphasized the limits of classifying people according to their ethnicity because of the ways in which identities are conflictual, multi-layered, and complex (for example, Carabelli, 2018; Hromadžić, 2016; Laketa, 2016).

Contributions of the special issue

This special issue brings together researchers working in a variety of disciplines including international relations, sociology, anthropology, architecture, human geography, heritage, and peace and conflict studies, whose common interest is in the relationships between space, place and politics. They reflect critically on the representations and meaning of power, the reterritorialization of space in Mostar, as well as how to account for and engage other similar works that have been published in recent years on the city of Mostar. Overall, we wish to make two interrelated contributions. *Firstly*, we challenge the existing representation of Mostar as permanently 'divided'. While one cannot negate or ignore the existing borders, we acknowledge that they are not solid nor fixed and, by exploring how they become material or immaterial, we move closer to gaining a deeper understanding of the city's dynamics. Accordingly, we pay attention to how ethnic divides materialize or lose importance according to socio-political contingencies; we examine events, groups, and spaces that promote reconciliation from the bottom-up, not necessarily to assess their success and failures, but rather to look at how they create networks, gain trust, form platforms and opportunities that generate novel understandings of ethnic loyalties and party memberships. *Secondly*, and drawing on ongoing debates also hosted by this journal on divided cities (e.g. Diez & Hayward, 2008; Kostovicova, 2004; Koureas, 2008; Marshall, 2013; Rafferty, 2012; Shirlow, 2006), we wish to push forward and revitalize the discussion about how to approach and frame research in these politically fragile environments. By engaging with *complexities*, we are not arguing that cities like Mostar (i.e. divided cities) are more complex than others. Rather, we argue that divided cities are too often researched and represented as if ethno-national divisions were their only features. This not only impacts out methodological choices (what we look at when we approach a divided city) but it also defines the interventions we design for these cities (almost exclusively to ameliorate the ethnic conflict). On the contrary, we believe that these cities are more than their ethno-national divisions. We argue for the necessity to engage with socio-political and economic complexities in order to shed light on how ethnic conflicts (and resulting spatial partitioning) are often just the surface of much more complex dynamics that are far less easy to disentangle and represent. In other words, we call for a novel approach that engages with these cities without prejudice, which means that we wish for new investigations to consider what doesn't fit into the normalized representation of what a divided city is and does. Much of the research presented in this SI accounts for grassroots movements or small groups of citizens who re-act to ethnic divisions by creating spaces of inclusion (or spaces in

which ethnic politics are contested). These initiatives are often downplayed because of their size or judged for their (lack of) impact on general urban politics. And yet, we claim that including these stories when accounting for divided cities challenge significantly the dominant narratives, as it sheds light on how ethnic divisions are just one (if still the strongest) among many features of these places. Overall, we hope to encourage further conversations among scholars of divided cities by asking what would change if we knew more about how these cities challenge (rather than reinforce) their ethnic divisions.

The SI articulates and expands on three interconnected themes:

Divided cities as complex cities

Djurasovic's article opens the SI with a much-needed discussion on the meaning of urban complexity by positing that engaging complexities is key to re-shaping the discussion about Mostar and ethno-nationally divided cities. The author argues that the divided city framework has simplified very diverse and complex urban realities to assess the processes of post-war urban rehabilitation while ignoring the various dynamics that contribute to making Mostar a unique case study in the context of multifaceted transition (i.e. post-war, post-socialist and neoliberal).

Memories, affect and the everyday life

Drawing on theories of the everyday life and, in particular De Certeau (1984), Summa and Forde engage with urban complexities by exploring the excess of the everyday that challenges rehearsed narratives of ethnic divisions. These essays explore how ethnic borders are created, reinforced, ignored or erased by mapping out everyday mobilities and the meanings associated to ethnic divisions in mundane conversations and spatial practices. Laketa describes and discusses how young people inhabit and perform *division* and *unity* in their everyday life sustaining practices of inclusion and exclusion that are never coherent or simple. Rather, they re-inscribe the complexities of post-war Mostar in the urban landscape. Together, these three articles offer the possibility to reflect on the potential hold by considering the division as a process rather than a fact – a process that can be observed, supported but also countered and challenged.

Grassroots politics

Carabelli, Wollentz, Barišić and Sammar introduce examples of grassroots activism to discuss the potential and limits of interventions designed for the city as one (rather than two entities). Whereas Carabelli interrogates the meanings of activism in Mostar by interviewing key political activists in the city, Wollentz, Barišić and Sammar explore the links between cultural activism, the making of heritage, and dignity. These essays converge with other recent publications that similarly explore grassroots activism in places of deep ethnic divisions such as Belfast and Beirut (Nagle, 2016; Nagle & Clancy, 2010) arguing for the importance of investigating what is not statistically significant in divided cities such as organized groups that work above and beyond ethnic divides. To further this discussion, the SI also includes a visual essay curated by Abart, a platform for urban research and art production in Mostar, that documents one of their site

specific interventions: the *Art in Divided Cities* project (2010–11). In their essay, Bogojević, Puzić and Žuljević offer an example of how local activists make use of the urban infrastructures creatively to produce new and more inclusive spaces from which to re-act to imposed divisive politics and directives.

In lieu of a conclusion, we asked four scholars whose writings have inspired much of the research presented in this Special Issue to read and comment on our work by adding their final intervention. Azra Hromadžić, John Nagle, Liam O'Dowd, and Monika Palmberger have long reflected on the issue of violently divided cities by focusing (respectively) on youth and education in Mostar (Hromadžić, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016); grassroots movements in violently divided cities (Nagle, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2018a, 2018b); urban development (O'Dowd, 2014; with O'Dowd & Komarova, 2011, 2013); and public memory and memory across generations (Palmberger, 2008, 2016, 2017, 2018). We asked them to reflect on how the essays part of this SI resonate with their own work and the broader scholarship on ethnically divided cities so that the contributions we make could be highlighted, positioned, and new directions for research gestured.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Giulia Carabelli is an interdisciplinary urban scholar interested in ethnic conflicts, the construction and contestation of national identities and grassroots activism especially in South-East and Central Europe. Her first book, The divided city and the grassroots. The (un)making of ethnic divisions in Mostar was published in 2018 by Palgrave in the Contemporary City series.

Aleksandra Djurasovic holds a Ph.D. from the Institute for Urban Planning and Regional Development, HafenCity University Hamburg, Germany. She obtained her Bachelor's Degree from the University of California Davis (UC Davis) in Landscape Architecture and her Master Degree in Urban Planning from the City College of New York (CCNY). Djurasovic's academic interests lie in post-socialist, neoliberal and war-to-peace transitions in Southeast Europe, urban planning, urban sustainability, urban division, and general position of planners in transitional contexts, among other topics. Her most recent publications on transition in Bosnia and Herzegovina include a book titled Ideology, Political Transitions and the City: The Case of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina and a chapter in an edited book on planners titled Lost in transition: Fledgling planners in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Renata Summa holds a PhD in International Relations from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and was a visiting PhD student at Open University, UK. She holds a M.A. in International Relations from Sciences-Po Paris. She teaches at the Institute of International Relations of PUC-Rio and was a visiting researcher at the Centre for SouthEast European Studies at the University of Graz, Austria. Her book Everyday Boundaries, Borders and Post Conflict Societies is forthcoming by Palgrave.

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