

FROM ALEPPO TO DRESDEN WITH LOVE

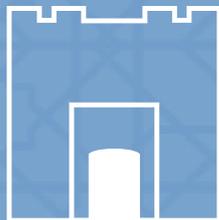
SEEKING COMPASSION IN A CITY STRUGGLING WITH ITS OWN IDENTITY

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The installation in Dresden (Source: [Zeit Online](#))

THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

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INTRODUCTION



The barricades in Aleppo (Source: [The Daily Mail](#))

Three Buses in Dresden

One of the most enduring images of the conflict in Aleppo is a photograph of three buses lifted upright to stop government snipers firing on civilians across the frontline. The picture, taken in 2015, shows the barricade that cut a road once connecting two central neighborhoods.

It was the ultimate symbol of closure. What used to connect people—buses that once took Aleppians from their homes to their jobs—was turned into a towering wall to hold apart two sides committed to nothing less than the extinction of the other. The wall of buses was a haunting image of civil war and the terrible price civilians have paid.

For Manaf Halbouni, a German-Syrian artist, the buses represented the desire for dignity, understanding and community that Syrians sought. To remind people of the need for tolerance and discussion, he installed a replica of the barricade in Dresden's most hallowed public space, the Neumarkt. Aleppo and Dresden, two cities that have become by-words for destruction and the terrible price of war, are now linked by a challenging and thought-provoking work of art.

To those unaware of Dresden's deeply conflicted identity, it may be surprising that the installation, which Halbouni called Monument, has sparked large-scale protests and opposition. (See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/07/dresdens-bitter-divide-over-aleppo-inspired-bus-barricade-sculpture>).

To understand this 'Dresden state of mind' one needs to look at the city's history of reconstruction and memory, tainted by totalitarian exploitation throughout the period of communism and then historical neglect after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The seemingly ignorant opposition to the installation is deeply rooted in the lack of dialogue and understanding about what Dresden is and what it should be.



Dresden in 1945 (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Dresden under Communism: A closed vision of an idealized future city

Over 60 years two visions of Dresden emerged, both fundamentally opposed to and at no point in dialogue with each other. The first vision of Dresden emerged almost immediately after its destruction. Dresden's first communist mayor, Walter Weidauer, outlined his vision for reconstruction:

We do not want palaces for the rich and huts for the poor but democracy in the housing program. Better, more functional living conditions produce greater human productivity. We no longer want a 'Residenzstadt' with its parasitic character, but Dresden must become a city of work, of culture, and prosperity for all (Fuchs, 2012, p. 102).

This plan suggested a critical break with Dresden's history. It was radically idealist and aimed to build a socialist utopia to replace the entirety of the previous city. The new vision for the city was centrally planned. Public deliberations on reconstruction were entirely discarded. The psychological effects of destruction, of the large-scale loss of space and buildings that were intrinsically linked to the identity of its inhabitants, were discarded. Instead, as Fuchs argues, "The construction of a new Dresden was perceived as the unique opportunity to map political ideology onto all aspects of planning" (2012, p. 99). After the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was founded in 1949, a certain number of historical buildings were reconstructed, yet city planning and the means of commemoration were taken out of the public realm and politically centralized. Many traces of the pre-1945 city were erased with a clear vision of the future but no consideration for the past or the present.

Post-1989: A nostalgic vision of Dresden

When the Berlin Wall came down and Dresden became the capital of one of the 16 states of a reunited Germany, something very similar to 1945 happened. The communist utopian reconstruction efforts of the GDR period were immediately discredited and labelled Dresden's "second destruction" (Christmann, 2004, p. 259). A radically forward-looking idea of Dresden was largely replaced by a radically backward-looking one. The ideal of what Dresden ought to be changed from the communist city of the future, inspired in equal parts by Bauhaus aesthetics and large-scale social engineering, to the Dresden of the past, inspired by a handful of paintings from Dresden's baroque period, detached of any consideration of future purpose. In Dresden, the fall of the wall did not spark a sense of forward-looking enthusiasm to a new, open, democratic society yet rather an all-encompassing nostalgia for an idealised past of a pre-war and innocent city. The idea of an "old harmony" (Christmann, 2004, p. 281) took hold of a large part of the population. This idea became ever more eminent the more the negative effects of transition through the loss of jobs, the alienation of families and the departure of many young and capable men and women towards Western Germany were felt. The "old Dresden" became an apologia for the inherent inability of many Dresdeners, raised and socialized under communism, to deal with the new challenges of an open and capitalist society.

Soon enough buildings which did not fit the narrow and closed conception of the "old Dresden" were perceived in a similar vein as those built during communism. What was called "cultural bolshevism" became "cultural-capitalism" (Christmann, 2004, p. 272). The existence of an ideal of Dresden lost in the past through 'Anglo-American bombing', 'grey communist reconstruction', and partly in the present through 'obscenely capitalist' construction became all-encompassing.

The strong feeling of nostalgia among Dresdeners found most of all its manifestation at the Neumarkt, on which the temporary installation of the three upright busses was recently erected. The church in its center, the "Frauenkirche", was left in ruins during the GDR as an anti-war memorial, and the square itself was left mainly unconstructed. Soon after the fall of the wall, the Frauenkirche became the main focus of "old Dresden" nostalgia. Through an unprecedented effort to raise money from private donations and public funding, first the Frauenkirche and later the whole Neumarkt were rebuilt in a meticulous replica of their pre-war state. Any trace of destruction was eradicated. If not for the concert hall Kulturpalast, built in the late 1960s directly next to the Neumarkt, one is mesmerized by the sight of the new Neumarkt and its entire erasure of any trace of Dresden's destruction in 1945.

In 2000, Andreas Ruby of the newspaper 'Die Zeit' described Dresden as the "Las Vegas on the Elbe" in stark contrast to most Dresdeners' perception of it as "Florence on the Elbe". Ruby mourned how from Dresden's lively history one particular moment was picked, enshrined in the Baroque paintings of Canaletto, and declared the one and only manifestation of the city. The idea, raised by Ruby, that this picture of Dresden is itself the product of the radical and, at its time, highly modernist reconstruction of Dresden under Count August II in the early 18th century is still relatively unknown in Dresden.



Neumarkt by Canaletto from the 18th century (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))



Neumarkt during the 1980s (Source: [Bild](#))



Present-day Neumarkt (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Today: A closed city slowly opening up?

What we see from the reconstruction of Dresden in the post-1945 and the post-1989 era is that at both times the idea and the vision of the city was absolute and radical without consideration for compromise. The post-1945 vision was radically forward-looking with an idealist perception of a future society. The post-1989 vision was radically backward-looking with an idealized vision of the past. What both these visions did not demand was debate, deliberation or compromise. The fact that both these visions were closely manifested in each period of reconstruction further cemented the perception that debate, deliberation and compromise were in fact not necessary, as the idealized vision manifested itself more and more, from year to year, in the cityscape. If not for the fall of the wall in 1989, Dresden may look like the archetypical communist town of the future now with any trace of its pre-1945 past eradicated. As of now, Dresden will increasingly resemble an idealized picture of its look during the 18th century. Both visions are closed and only refer to Dresden itself. Moreover, both do not foresee any form of adaptation. In the 18th century version of Canaletto's Dresden, there is no telling of its future destruction, as well as no telling of the guilt of Nazi Germany and Nazi Dresden. There is also no telling of refugees, how to deal with the complexities and problems that come with capitalism, nor the demands a liberal democracy has towards Dresden's citizens. That picture has no value for both the challenges and amazing opportunities Dresden has as a town in a multicultural and prosperous Germany in an open Europe. All it can show us is that Dresden is different now. The inherent inability of many Dresdeners to come to terms with this fact has manifested itself in the Pegida movement and as of now in the resistance against Halbouni's memorial.



Protesters against the installation in Dresden on 7 February 2017 (Source: [Bild](#))



Protesters against the installation in Dresden 7 February 2017. Posters read, from right to left: “Manaf [the artist], your place for peace is in Syria”, “Mayor Hilbert’s trash-site: open daily”, and “Memorial of disgrace?” (Source: [Bild](#))

Despite all this, there is considerable hope. Many Dresdeners promote a more forward-looking and open idea of Dresden. Already in the 1990s many foreigners and West-Germans moved to Dresden due to a boom in tech companies in the city. Organisations such as “Dresden Place to Be” organize intercultural community events (see <http://www.dresden-place-to-be.de/>). Dresden, as many other German cities, saw a considerable wave of solidarity during the increase of refugees in the past years. A historic beer-hall, in which a representative of the German right wing party Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) denounced Germany’s World War II commemorations, donated all the profits it made from the event to an organization helping to rescue refugees in the Mediterranean. At the start of this year’s commemoration of Dresden’s destruction, Mayor Hilbert emphasized that Dresden was not innocent during the war. This resulted in death threats against him, to which he reacted with a sturdy: “Jetzt erst recht!” (Now more than ever).

Whereas the first night after the installation was erected saw considerable protests against it, it also saw spontaneous rallies for the installation and an appeal by Hilbert to defend the memorial. Slowly but surely a more complex and contemporary vision of Dresden is developing. People moving to Dresden and Dresdeners looking beyond the confines of their city have already created a new and more diverse dialogue that will hopefully contribute towards the increasing opening up of Dresden as a modern and confident city of Germany, Europe and the world.

It is of course not appropriate to say that the reconstruction of Dresden provides lessons X, Y and Z for a reconstruction of Aleppo that will hopefully start sooner rather than later. Yet Dresden demonstrates the negative consequence that comes with building a city on a closed and idealized vision of the past or the future. A modern and open city needs to be built on a clear vision of the present, an understanding of the past and hope for the future. For this, neither ideology nor nostalgia provide guidance. It can only be done by upholding the key principles of an open society: open dialogue, the willingness to compromise and a respect for the dignity and voice of everybody calling him or herself a citizen of the city, irrespective of nationality, ethnicity or religion.

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This article is the result of Stefan’s reflections on the most recent erection of the Aleppo Monument as well as other negative developments in his hometown, such as the rise of Pegida. The author would welcome any comments on the text at: RochS@ceu.edu

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