

Destruction and Memory. Museum.



Moving away from Kobane's chaotic and lively streets, the shouts of street vendors and the constant buzz of fuel oil generators gradually fade away.

The scale of destruction is biblical – entire multi-storey apartment blocks pancaked and collapsed into piles of concrete with wrecked metal studs spiking out of the heaps. Between the carcasses of buildings, cars used by suicide bombers are twisted into the strangest metal ornaments. Posters of killed fighters cover makeshift billboards and blown-apart walls.

Rohat – an officer in Rojava's armed forces, the YPG – shouts out from his car. "Want a tour?" he asks in broken English. Since the preservation project is under the military's thumb, Rohat is also the director of the so-called museum.

We walk slowly across a street dotted with craters and pieces of bricks. There might still be unexploded ordnance, but laughing children play among the ruins regardless. Although people from this neighbourhood-turned-museum were given plots of land in another part of Kobane, many remain living here for lack of financial means to build new homes.

The museum's materialisation is "a slow process," says Rohat. "Big [construction] machines are not available, they're all on the frontline."

The area carries a heavy emotional load and preserving it as a museum may help locals in dealing with PTSD. Like many people in Kobane, Rohat tears up when speaking about the massacre of June 2015. "All the bodies bloated from the heat in every street, I will never

forget [it],” he says. “Fighting in Kobane is not a problem, it’s war. But civilians,” Rohat shakes his head. “[The museum] is for the memory of the Kurdish people, like Stalingrad.”

The Kurds sought to immortalise the victory over ISIS that staved off a very likely genocide. German and British planners also faced a similar question during the post-World War Two reconstruction – namely, what to do with the traumatic history? Some cities chose to rebuild destroyed areas with exact replicas – in what some called ‘Disneyfication’ – while others decided to preserve elements of the destruction to embed the period in collective memory.



Yet others chose to purge the dark chapters in their history by erasing repressive Soviet and Nazi structures, or the destruction left behind by either totalitarian regime, and building a modernist future-facing urban fabric instead.

Critical of the decisions to leave destruction as a showpiece, Bevan quotes journalist Eric Fredericksen, who argues that leaving fragments of architecture towering “above human lives” at the site of the destroyed twin towers in New York may end up in a “flirt with aestheticising murder”. Yet to leave “no physical trace of the devastation would have been to abnegate the trauma,” wrote Robert Bevan in reference to Hiroshima’s reconstructive approach, leaving a destroyed dome at the site of nuclear detonation.

The Kurds approached healing in the same way as many post-war European cities, which displayed defiance by preserving bullet-pocked buildings in Warsaw and shells of burnt-out churches across the UK, and immortalising other sites of mass terror across the continent.

Yet the Kurds in Kobane did not have to grapple with a built legacy of their oppressors, ISIS, as their onslaught brought outright death rather than a period of totalitarian occupation,

ideological construction, and destruction of vernacular urban memory. This came at a high cost to Kobane, which saw attempts of 'urbicide' and full-scale destruction.

Having successfully defended their home, keeping it intact ideologically if not physically, the Kurds were free to choose the best way to honour their lionised memory. The option to preserve a destroyed area of Kobane both commemorated the highly traumatic fight against ISIS and displayed defiance in the face of continuing threats from Turkey.

Read more: <http://rojava-story.herokuapp.com/#/chapter/3>