Architecture of Destruction and Healing

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Abstract

On November 29, 2017 Slobodan Praljak, the architect of the destruction of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s, had committed suicide. Libraries, bridges, museums, universities, mosques and squares were purposefully destroyed by him. For these crimes – against buildings, public spaces and landscapes – he was not tried. In one of Praljak's 'main acts', he ordered the destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar. The story of the Old Bridge is that of Mostar's multi-ethnicity. Many books, plays and films have been devoted to it. It was that very story that had to be destroyed. And that was precisely Praljak's expertise. Before becoming a general, Praljak was a creator and manager in the cultural field, like many of his fellow criminals. Slobodan Praljak's actions show us that architecture can be used consciously and unconsciously to dislocate and destroy human relationships and the environment. I call this architectural disaster. Rebuilding is impossible if the disaster is reduced to an individual problem or responsibility, no lessons are learned from it, and the history of violence, exclusion and segregation keeps repeating itself. What are ways to reconnect and build these relationships? How can we work on recovery, so that victims get a perspective for the future?

The Perpetrator

On November 29, 2017 I was in Rotterdam, having a meeting in a café, when I received a text message. I had been nervous all day because I knew the court would be announcing its ruling. Would he get a life sentence, or one of those senseless punishments that war criminals often receive and which leave the surviving victims utterly disillusioned? The text message said: "he has poisoned himself." Nothing more, nothing less. I had seen him years before, after he had just turned himself in to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague. I attended one of the hearings where he was on trial with his fellow war criminals (Mačkić, 29 November 2017). I sat in the public gallery, and to my horror, I was not surrounded by other victims, but by the perpetrators' relatives. I got disappointed when I saw the lawyers and judges staging a legal performance. At no point did the proceedings focus on the future of the affected communities. In fact, the violence continued. Research showed that the criminals at the tribunal were hugely productive while in prison, writing dozens of books disseminating their inhuman nationalist ideologies. So, the punishment achieved little (Horsthuis, 4 juni 2021).

The text message startled me. During the meeting, I kept checking news sites on my phone to see what had happened. Slobodan Praljak was sentenced to twenty years for crimes against humanity, violations of the laws or customs of war, and grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, specifically murder, willful killing, persecutions on political, racial and religious grounds, deportation, unlawful transfer of civilians, imprisonment, unlawful confinement of civilians, unlawful labor, inhumane acts, inhuman treatment, extensive destruction of property not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly, destruction or willful damage done to institutions dedicated to religion or education, unlawful attack on civilians, unlawful infliction of terror on civilians, extensive appropriation of property not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly, and plunder of public or private property through the third category of joint criminal enterprise liability (The Hague Tribunal, 29 November 2017). Praljak also ordered the destruction of Stari Most (*Old Bridge*) in Mostar, footage of which was televised on news channels around the world. After the sentencing, Praljak stood and said: "Judges, Slobodan Praljak is not a war criminal. With disdain, I reject your verdict," and then drank a bottle of poison. Shortly after, he lost consciousness, and the curtain in front of the public gallery was hurriedly drawn. It felt like a play, a Greek tragedy. The architect of the destruction of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s had committed suicide.

Figure 1: *Slobodan Praljak drinks a bottle of poison in the courtroom in The Hague, November 29, 2017* (photograph by International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia).

Destroyed cities have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I have memories of air-raid alarms, hiding in the basement, TV pictures of the Old Bridge in Mostar being destroyed, family visits to cities whose apartment blocks are pocked with bullet holes, houses with their roofs blown off, and potholes in the road from artillery shell fragments. This experience showed me that architecture can be used consciously and unconsciously to dislocate and destroy human relationships and the environment. I call this architectural disaster. Landscapes, cities and communities can be destroyed in a fraction of a second; rebuilding and making a new start is the difficult part. It is impossible if the disaster is reduced to an individual problem or responsibility, no lessons are learned from it, and the history of violence, exclusion and segregation keeps repeating itself. What are ways to reconnect and build these relationships? How can we work on recovery, so that victims get a perspective for the future? These questions are what drove me to become an architect and answering them is the core of my architectural practice. How can an architect help to connect and rebuild human and spatial relationships?

The Victim

On November 9, 1993, the Stari Most—Mostar's oldest inhabitant—was destroyed. The bridge and the city were always one. Mostar is named after

“With the bridge gone, Mostar would cease to exist, and along with it the city’s soul. And that is exactly what happened. When Praljak ordered the bridge’s destruction, Mostar seemed to take its last breath of air. The city was a mere mortal; Mostar was dead.”

p. 239

Figure 2: *The destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar on November 9, 1993* (photograph by Evan Genest, *Two Dishes But To One Table*, 2006).

the bridge keepers, *mostari*, who kept guard from their fortified towers, checking those crossing the Stari Most over the Neretva river. In addition to symbolizing the city and joining its two parts, the bridge also represented tolerance and unity. The city was the bridge, and the bridge was the city. It was a meeting place. For generations, it was the place young couples would meet on their first date, and was where Mostar held its famous annual diving competition. The attack on the bridge was an attack on the concept of multi-ethnicity. With the bridge gone, Mostar would cease to exist, and along with it the city's soul. And that is exactly what happened. When Praljak ordered the bridge's destruction, Mostar seemed to take its last breath of air. The city was a mere mortal; Mostar was dead.

Before it collapsed, the bridge was hit by sixty shells in twenty-four hours. Besides the bridge, other structures that furnished public life were also destroyed: libraries, museums, universities, mosques, squares. The destruction of these places was part of a broader war strategy in which Praljak used the demolition of public and cultural buildings as a means to erase a specific culture and identity. Milan Kundera's description of geno-

cidal strategies in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (p. 159) are directly applicable to those Praljak and his fellow war criminals employed:

> *"The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then you have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long, the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was." (Kundera 159).*

The Motive

I have often wondered what kind of person Slobodan Praljak, this architect of destruction, was. Did he have a military past? Did he spend his entire life in a bubble of nationalism and hatred? Did he act out of ignorance, or even stupidity? The opposite turns out to be the case. Before graduating from the film and television academy, Praljak had obtained three university degrees in electrical engineering, philosophy, and sociology. In the 1970s and 1980s, he was director of several theatres, including in Mostar. In her article "The Cultured Destroyers of Culture," Gordana Knezević describes how "the man of culture became a general":

> *"Some of the most notorious acts of destruction of cultural heritage—aimed at removing all traces of the Muslim population from areas of Bosnia that the Croats considered to be "theirs"—were masterminded or carried out by men who before the war had built a reputation as "promoters of culture." (Knezević, 29 November 2017).*

Praljak, it seems, was acutely aware of the consequences of destroying cultural heritage and public architecture. He knew very well that architecture could become part of his war strategy precisely because he had gained so much knowledge and experience in the Croatian and Bosnian cultural milieu. His experiences taught him its symbolic value and significance. By obliterating important public places that made the city vibrant and tolerant, spaces where it didn't matter what your religion or ethnicity was—because one was always a *Mostarac* or a *Mostarka*—Praljak knew that he would also erase Mostar's identity. Praljak knew Mostar well and fully understood that the Old Bridge and its significance were integral to the identity of the city's inhabitants. The bridge was always there, not only as a structure in the city, but also as a cherished icon depicted in the many tattoos, paintings, sculptures, embroideries and key rings of *Mostarce*

and *Mostarke.* And among the residents, whether Bosniak or Croatian, the bridge's significance transcended religion. The book *Mostar '92 Urbicid* cites Džemal Čelić's explanation for the destruction of Mostar's bridges:

> *"Studying the old bridges, we shall experience and understand the whole history of our country where bridges appear as road signs of positive movements of culture and civilization in any span of the times passed. Therefore we cannot accept their destruction in the latest war as a result of strategic necessity, but as a violence against the identity of our peoples." (Čelić in Šego et al. 27).*

The Target

Because the Old Bridge was built during Ottoman rule (and was therefore Turkish/Islamic), Praljak associated it with those people who had an Islamic background, as if the bridge belonged to them. However, it belonged just as much those of Croatian descent. The destruction of the Old Bridge and the killing and purging of Muslims destroyed any possible kinship between the Croats and Bosnians. The two religious groups were physically separated from one another and any breath of connection, multiculturalism, and tolerance eradicated.

After the war, Mostar was further segregated, and architecture and public areas were used to appropriate space in the city for singular ethnic identities. In her dissertation architectural historian Emily Gunzburger Makaš writes about post-war identity politics in Mostar: "Within the city, on the other hand, the Islamic Community and especially the Catholic Church and clearly Croat institutions, have used architecture to reinforce distinct identities and manipulated it to accentuate national differences and clearly mark national territory" (Makaš 337). Many religious symbols and monuments, especially on the Croatian western side of the town, were added to public space; streets were renamed often with nationalistic significance; and ethnically and politically-colored institutions were given prominent places in the city. The two groups now live separately, each with their own schools, history books, hospitals, postal services, football clubs, and so on.

Stari Most was rebuilt in 2004. It looks the same as before the destruction, only a little cleaner and paler. The Old Bridge was rebuilt in the way monuments used to be built. But to build it this way only reinforces Praljak's and his fellow war criminals' aims. After all, they destroyed not only the site but also the residents' experience of the bridge. The Old Bridge

was a place from where you could look past differences and where common experiences could be shared. Praljak destroyed this place, just as all the city's places have been destroyed. Mostar will never be the same again. The bridge now symbolizes the separation of the two parts of the city and contains an abundance of fragmented, imaginary, self-proclaimed, and self-imposed memories. The goal seems to have been achieved.

Counter-Attack

I was born in Čapljina, just like Slobodan Praljak, on the Bosnian-Croat border. During the war, Praljak and his fellow war criminals also took over this city, expelling the non-Croatian population and setting up concentration camps for the Bosnians. Praljak was in charge of Camp Dretelj, where my father was imprisoned. When I was in Čapljina last year, I saw graffiti on an apartment building near my old house that portrayed Praljak's face, along with his last words before drinking poison. Many in Čapljina still consider him a hero. I feel increasingly uncomfortable in Čapljina's public spaces. After the war, I spent a lot of time there because Bosnian Croats still occupied our house in Čapljina. In the summers we spent in Mostar, I got to know the city better, and the fierce divisions in the city became apparent. I learned that

Figure 3: *Graffiti drawing of Praljak in Čapljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina.* Text reads: "Slobodan Praljak is not a war criminal. With disdain, I reject your verdict." (photograh by Arna Mačkić).

some parts of the city were out of bounds since my surname would reveal my Islamic background. But as I got older, I began exploring both parts of the city because I refused to participate in the politics of division.

Architects and architecture critics are eager to discuss, criticize, celebrate, or loathe new buildings. Yet when buildings, monuments or even entire neighborhoods and cities suffer deliberate destruction, they are less vocal. Indeed, the architect's responsibilities should also include understanding why and how destruction takes place and the possible responses. How can an architect help to connect and rebuild human and spatial relationships in a city like Mostar, where many monuments, cultural buildings and institutions, and public meeting places have been destroyed, and where new monuments and buildings are ethnically divided?

Looking Pain in the Eye

One way to connect and build is to look the painful past in the eye and to look for new ways of living together with affected communities. For doing this I sought inspiration from Stari Most, which is both the pain and the pride of the city. One of Mostar's most important historical traditions is diving from the Old Bridge, which first took place in 1567. It used to be a ritual in which young men would dive from the bridge to prove their masculinity and impress young women, but later became a tradition that was carried over from one generation of Mostar men to the next regardless of religious belief. The diving competition still takes place annually, with renowned high divers (both men and women and from different religious backgrounds) coming from around the world to take the plunge. For Mostar, it is a tradition that stems from the city's origin and being. Even after the war, with the Old Bridge gone and before a temporary cable bridge appeared, a platform was created from which people could dive.

Since the Old Bridge is now part of Mostar's eastern half, which is mostly home to Bosnians, Croatians from the city's western side hardly visit the bridge. Although the Old Bridge's unifying significance has ceased, its age-old diving tradition could play a role in restoring the unity between different religious groups. To investigate this, I designed a speculative diving school on the border of the western and eastern part of the city where residents can learn to plunge into the water from a great height. It is an urban activity for all residents of the city, regardless of nationality, religion, gender or age.

The diving school would be situated opposite a high school where students with a Croatian, Islamic, and international background study (although classes are still segregated). It is freely accessible and has no win-

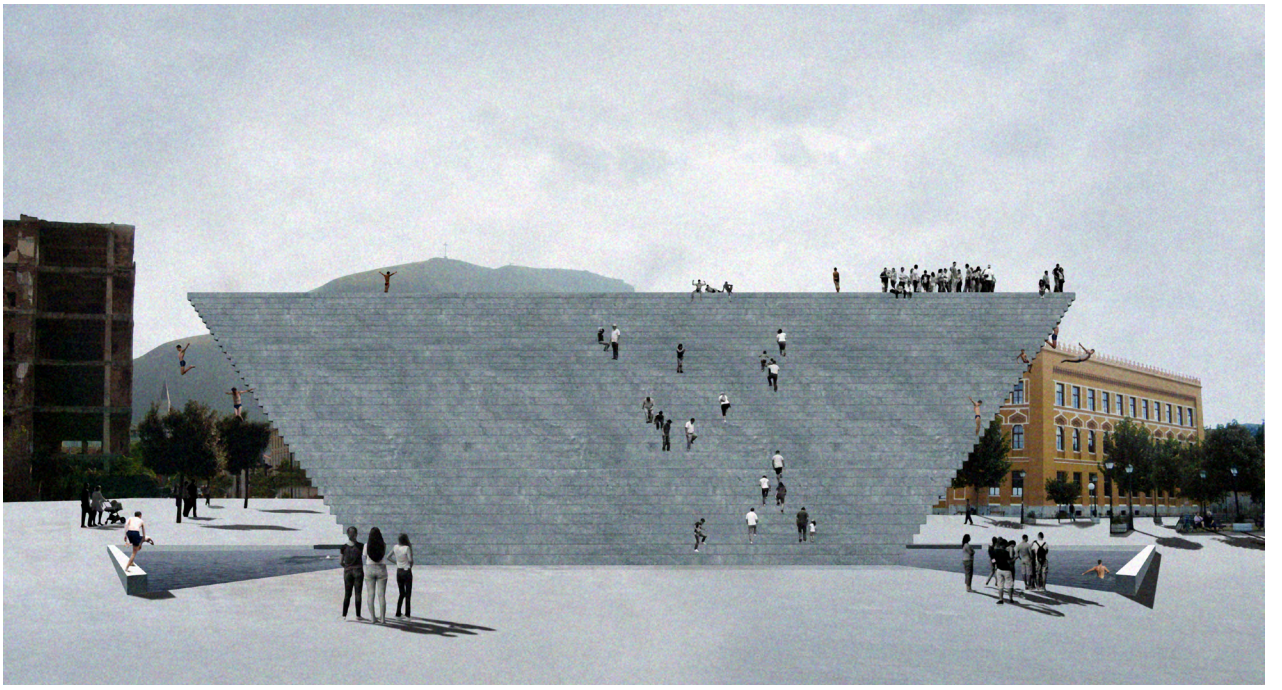

Figure 4: Arna Mačkić, *Design of a speculative diving school* in Mostar (back), 2019 (by the author).

dows, doors, or roof. Its access is a vast inverted trapezoidal staircase that ascends to create two protruding points on either side. The fifty-centimeter steps encourage learning higher diving in half-meter increments. The steps also function as a tribune where people can sit and gather. Swimming and diving teach Mostar's inhabitants to keep their heads above water, literally and figuratively. The three-second plunge into the water gives a feeling of weightlessness and freedom, disconnecting you from everything around, including Mostar's fraught public space.

In Practice

I never intended to realize my design of the diving school. Rather, the idea was to propose new, collective public space that would encourage discussion among Mostar's residents and authorities. What kind of public space is desirable? Do we want a public space that connects different—now estranged—groups? Are we able to meet the other through shared experiences? Is my proposal a good example of this?

My book *Mortal Cities & Forgotten Monuments* was translated into Bosnian the week after Praljak drank poison to kill himself. Mostar was tense. Praljak's supporters were honoring him with candles and flowers and shouting nationalist slogans in the square in front of the cultural center where the book launch would take place. The situation was uncomfortable. Not only because of my family's suffering through Praljak's crimes,

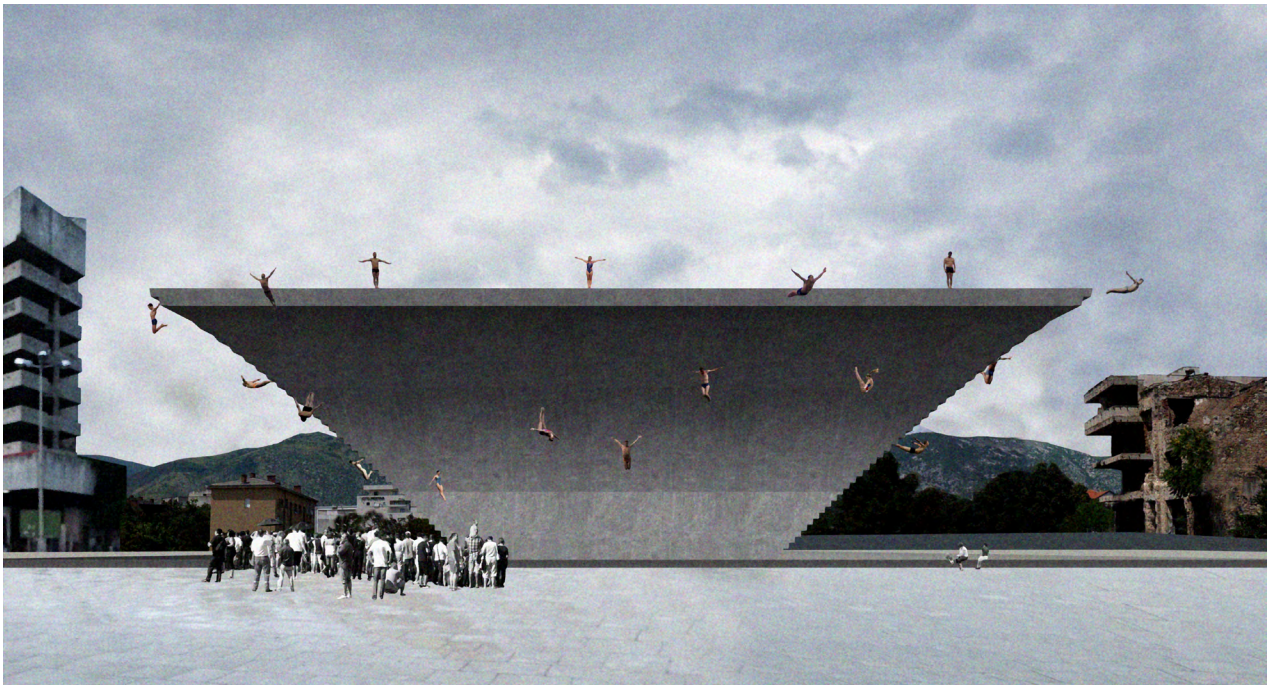

Figure 5: Arna Mačkić, *Design of a speculative diving school in Mostar (back),* 2019 (by the author).

but also because I was promoting a book about connecting architecture and humanity in a context where unity was hard to find. The event had a somber atmosphere, with just a handful of people in the audience, most of whom were family members. Those gathered asked hardly any questions, and there were no comments about my proposal. Anxious and despondent about what was going on outside, everyone seemed numb and afraid to talk about connecting to others through public space.

However, my impressions changed the following day. Aida Kalendar, director of the NGO Akcija Sarajevo, organized a diving workshop for children at a nearby bathhouse. Local hero Lorens Listo, multiple winner of Mostar's annual diving competition, gave lessons to a group of children from both sides of the city. Naturally, the children were thrilled. Listo taught them diving techniques and also about the tradition's significance for the city. Despite their different perspectives and backgrounds, the shared, playful experience of learning to dive and discussing history inspired togetherness. A few years later Listo started his own diving school in which he teaches diving to teenagers from Mostar as well as from the Bosnian diaspora. And last year, a training platform for diving was built next to Stari Most on the initiative of Listo.

My design did not lead to its physical realization, but to a process in which people from the local community, such as Lorens Listo, started to implement the design in their own way. In this implementation, a new

Figure 6: *Diving workshop in Mostar, led by Lorens Listo* (photograph by Jan Konings, 2015).

Figure 7: *Diving workshop in Mostar, led by Lorens Listo* (photograph by Jan Konings, 2015).

generation has committed itself to the city and thus acquired a face, a generation that playfully learns to look beyond differences and that develops both physically and mentally.

Public Center for Architectural Disaster and Collective Healing

The example of the designed diving school has given young people a perspective for the future and has reconnected them with each other. The design thus contributes to the recovery of the architectural disaster. But it is an exceptional example, because recovery for affected communities hardly occurs after architectural disasters. Look at the damage caused by earthquakes as a result of gas extraction in Groningen. The gas is no longer extracted, and there are options for compensation and the construction of a new earthquake-resistant house. But the risk of earthquakes is still present and the social structures in the villages are not taken into account in the rehabilitation of houses and villages. How can villages be rebuilt without losing the soul of the villages? How can residents in the area continue to live without the constant fear of tremors and damage to their homes? It is precisely this future perspective that residents should be offered, but this is not what politicians are focusing on. Who can victims turn to for recovery and future perspectives?

The conventional legal system always operates on the basis of a perpetrator and a victim. As much evidence as possible is produced to prove the innocence or guilt of the suspect. Even if a sentence is imposed, the system is not aimed at repairing the damage suffered by the victim and developing a future perspective for them. This traditional legal system is not suitable for healing architectural disaster – the destruction of human and ecological relationships. That is why I advocate the creation of a new institute: *Public Center for Architectural Disaster and Collective Healing*.

The Public Centre for Architectural Disaster and Collective Healing uses the building that housed the International criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia from 2009 to 2017. This is located in the international zone of The Hague, near the Peace Palace and other buildings that deal with European and international justice and security. It was designed for an insurance company by Ad van der Steur in 1953. The classical stone building, with its columns, ornaments and bronze statues, has not been publicly accessible over the past decades. What happened inside happened behind closed doors, and the building's architecture was an expression of monumentality, power, security, inscrutability, and legal tradition. It will literally make space for its new function.

Figure 8: Arna Mačkić, *design of Public Center for Architectural Disaster and Collective Healing* (photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn, 2022).

The strategy for the existing building will be both a break with the past and a reconciliation. To make the Public Centre for Architectural Disaster and Collective Healing publicly accessible, the existing building will be cut down to a large sloping plaza. A new floor will be poured using concrete containing crushed fragments from the demolished building, between and on top of the remaining walls. The floor will be polished, leaving traces of the cut-down walls and built-in furniture visible on the new plaza,

as a reminder of the building's former function. This drawing of memories will give the plaza a human dimension, so that visitors, the public, and other interested parties can walk around between the old building and the new centre.

The centre will enable people affected by architectural disasters (victims, those responsible, and communities) to undergo a healing process with the support of a team of researchers and mediators. These will be specialists from different areas such as architects, lawyers, economists, psychologists, educationalists, heritage specialists, and mediators. The story and perspectives of those affected will play an important role in working towards recovery and positive systemic change in society. There will be five 'Voice Pavilions' where people can share their stories, either individually or in the presence of other affected people and researchers. These will be recorded and documented, and used there as research material. In the 'Space for Collective Healing' work will be carried out with all stakeholders using contextual mediation to develop architectural solutions, possible action to remedy the disaster, and new design methods to prevent similar events from recurring. This form of mediation provides a perspective of the future and of positive change for everyone involved. It creates a dynamic between those responsible, victims, and the communities of which they are part, in which they can discuss the damage in a social, political, economic and historical context.

Figure 9: Arna Mačkić, *design of Public Center for Architectural Disaster and Collective Healing* (by the author).

Figure 10: Arna Mačkić, *design of one of the Voice pavilions* (photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn, 2022).

The *Space for Collective Healing* is definitely not a safe space, but one in which people with differing needs and experiences are brought together and given support in sharing what has happened, listening to one another, and moving towards change together. It is a circular space with a big circular table. Stakeholders are surrounded by a podium with architectural tests on it: full-scale mock-ups, models, materials, produced by the researchers in the 'House of Knowledge Production'. The architectural tests are used to guide the discussion on planning solutions and new design methods.

The *House of Knowledge Production* is one of the biggest additions to the centre. It consists of long raised wooden shelves running alongside the plaza. Here the emotional is transcended and voices, dialogues, and memories are used to store, produce and share knowledge. The material stored on the shelves consists of the shared stories of people affected by architectural disasters recorded in the Voice Pavilions, and stored here in the form of sound recordings, and fragments of objects such as a piece of stone from a destroyed bridge, fragments of wood from broken trees, a beloved kitchen tile from demolished social housing, studies of architectural tests (lifesize mockups, models, materials), and completed studies by the researchers.

Figure 11: Arna Mačkić, *design of the Space for Collective Healing* (photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn, 2022).

Victims of architectural disasters from all over the world can contact the mediation centre. If it turns out that there is enough information to start a mediation procedure, an investigation will be conducted to find out which parties are involved. These could be e.g., companies, architects, governments, developers, investors or communities. The victims are invited to follow the healing process. The gained knowledge and design proposals will be shared with the public, educational institutions and policy makers. This process will not only lead to recovery, but also to a new architectural movement, new fields of expertise and changes in government policies.

The centre is dedicated to the damage caused by *architectural disaster* and promotes positive systemic change in society and in architectural practice. This strategy of intervening in a sensitive location requires an architectural language which doesn't ignore or deny the past, but rather responds to it without judging or imposing truths. A language that looks to the future while simultaneously making use of old location-specific traditions. Clear, elementary and radical, the design creates freedom for the user to relate to it in various ways. I believe this is a prerequisite to facilitate healing and to facilitate a new beginning.

Figure 12: Arna Mačkić, *design of the House of Knowledge Production* (photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn, 2022).

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