Re-bordering Memory: Negotiating Post-Armed Conflict Reconstruction in Jaffna through Lessons from German Bordered Spaces

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Introduction: Borders, Memory, and Architecture

Traditional conceptions of borders as fixed territorial demarcations fail to encompass their profound cultural and symbolic dimensions (Newman, 2003, 2006). As Newman (2003) argues in his theoretical framework, borders function not merely as physical boundaries but as dynamic institutions that shape how societies imagine themselves, construct historical narratives, and negotiate contested identities. These bordering processes become particularly complex in post-conflict contexts, where the spatial politics of memory intersect with architectural reconstruction (Drozdzewski et al., 2016).

In conflict-affected societies, the ruins of culturally significant buildings—libraries, administrative centers, and churches—transform into what can be understood as "bordered spaces": contested sites where multiple narratives of loss, resilience, and cultural continuity intersect (Silberman et al., 2014). These architectural remnants function as repositories of collective memory while simultaneously becoming battlegrounds for competing visions of post-conflict identity (Till, 2005). As Bevan (2006) demonstrates, the destruction and subsequent reconstruction of built heritage represents a form of cultural warfare that extends beyond immediate physical damage to target the symbolic foundations of community identity.

The architectural profession's engagement with such bordered spaces requires moving beyond technical restoration toward what Newman (2006) terms "bordering practices"—processes that actively negotiate boundaries between memory and forgetting, tradition and innovation, continuity and rupture. This research positions architectural reconstruction not as neutral technical exercise but as fundamentally political act of cultural re-bordering, with profound implications for how post-conflict societies negotiate relationships with traumatic pasts and imagined futures.

Theoretical Framework: Re-bordering Through Architecture

This study employs border theory as its primary analytical lens, understanding borders as performative processes rather than static lines (Newman, 2003). In post-conflict

contexts, architectural ruins become what can be termed "bordered spaces"—sites where competing narratives of identity, memory, and belonging intersect and require negotiation through design intervention.

The concept of "re-bordering" emerges from this understanding, describing how architectural reconstruction actively redefines cultural boundaries through spatial practice. Unlike traditional restoration approaches that seek to return buildings to previous states, re-bordering acknowledges that post-conflict reconstruction inevitably creates new relationships between past and present, local and global, tradition and modernity (Halbwachs, 1976; Lynch, 1972).

Memory studies scholarship demonstrates that collective memory is not simply preserved but actively constructed through spatial practices (Till, 2005). Architecture becomes a medium through which societies negotiate what to remember, what to forget, and how to position themselves temporally and culturally. This theoretical framework positions architects as active participants in cultural bordering processes, making decisions that fundamentally shape post-conflict identity formation.

German Post-War Reconstruction: Lessons in Cultural Re-bordering

Germany after 1945 represented a fractured bordered space—divided politically, territorially, and culturally. The ruins of major cities became sites where national identity, historical guilt, and cultural continuity were actively negotiated through architectural intervention (Glendinning, 2013). Four case studies illuminate distinct approaches to reconstruction as re-bordering:

Paulskirche, Frankfurt: Democratic Re-bordering

The Paulskirche reconstruction under Rudolf Schwarz represents architectural re-bordering through symbolic purification and political reframing. Rather than faithful restoration, Schwarz employed "interpretative simplification," removing decorative elements while preserving essential spatial relationships (Rose, 2015). This approach created what Hils-Brockhoff and Hock (2003) describe as a "purified" space for democratic collective catharsis. The building's re-bordering shifted its identity from monarchical parliament to democratic symbol, demonstrating architecture's capacity to reframe collective memory and political identity simultaneously.

Goethe House, Frankfurt: Cultural Continuity through Faithful Reconstruction

In contrast, the Goethe House represents re-bordering through cultural continuity, employing meticulous reconstruction to restore pre-war spatial and symbolic relationships. Vees-Gulani (2005) argues this approach served to reconnect post-war German identity with pre-Nazi cultural traditions, effectively "jumping over" the

traumatic period through architectural time-travel. However, critics warned that such "historical restoration" risked idealizing the past while downplaying National Socialist complicity in cultural destruction.

Alte Pinakothek, Munich: Interpretative Preservation

Hans Döllgast's intervention at the Alte Pinakothek exemplifies what can be termed "interpretative re-bordering." Rather than concealing war damage or pursuing complete reconstruction, Döllgast preserved visible scars while introducing modernist insertions that created dialogue between past and present (Nerdinger, 1996; Lattarulo, 2014). His approach treated ruins not as dead remnants but as "living dialogue partners" with contemporary interventions, creating a bordered space where multiple temporalities coexist productively.

Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, Berlin: Productive Scarring

The Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church represents perhaps the most radical approach to post-war re-bordering. By preserving the bombed tower as ruin while adding Egon Eiermann's modernist additions, the project created what can be understood as "productive scar tissue" in the urban fabric (Eiermann, 1963/2013; Aousten, 2023). This approach embraces trauma as constituent element of post-conflict identity while enabling functional continuity through architectural hybridity.

Jaffna's Bordered Spaces: The Case of the Old Kachcheri

Architecture in Jaffna has long functioned as repository of contested identity. The systematic destruction during Sri Lanka's civil war—including the burning of the Public Library in 1981, bombing of churches, and destruction of civic buildings—represented deliberate targeting of Tamil collective memory (Murray, 1984; Leary, 1983). The Old Kachcheri, located in Old Park, embodies multiple intersecting borders that require careful negotiation:

Colonial vs. Indigenous Identity: Built by British colonial administration but appropriated into Jaffna's urban memory, the building represents complex layerings of power and cultural belonging (Cordiner, 1807/2013; Tennent, 1859/1999).

State vs. Community Claims: Occupied by military forces during the war and later reclaimed by civilian populations, the building embodies contested sovereignty and territorial control.

Ruins vs. Reconstruction: As bombed remnant, it simultaneously serves as trauma reminder and potential site of renewal, requiring careful negotiation between memorialization and functional restoration.

The question facing Jaffna is not whether to rebuild, but how: should reconstruction pursue faithful restoration, hybrid integration with modernist additions, or preservation

as productive ruin? Each choice represents different approach to cultural re-bordering with distinct implications for post-conflict identity formation.

Towards a Framework for Architectural Re-bordering in Jaffna

From the comparative analysis of German post-war reconstruction, what emerges is not a singular prescription but rather a framework for analysis that stakeholders in Jaffna can employ when approaching post-conflict reconstruction. The intention is to offer a structured set of analytical lenses through which architects, consultants, policymakers, and communities can evaluate different re-bordering approaches, rather than impose a definitive solution (Aousten, 2019; Aousten, 2023).

This framework draws from both German precedents and Jaffna's own historical and cultural realities, positioning architectural reconstruction as an active process of cultural re-bordering. The framework operates through four interconnected categories that provide analytical tools for negotiating between memory and modernity, continuity and rupture, heritage and innovation within Newman's (2003, 2006) broader understanding of bordering practices:

Partial Preservation as Memory Container: Ruins can function as what Bevan (2006) terms "containers of memory," serving as material anchors for collective identity formation. In Jaffna's context, retaining fragments of the Old Kachcheri may allow collective memory to remain embodied in architecture while creating space for new spatial relationships. This approach acknowledges Zannad's (1994) insight that lived memory requires material substrates for social continuity, particularly crucial in post-conflict contexts where cultural erasure has been systematically attempted.

Modernist Integration as Temporal Dialogue: Following Döllgast's interpretative approach at the Alte Pinakothek, modern architectural interventions can coexist productively with historic fabric, creating what can be understood as temporal dialogue within bordered space (Nerdinger, 1996; Lattarulo, 2014). For Jaffna, adaptive reuse strategies aligned with present civic needs become vital for ensuring functional continuity while preserving historical consciousness. This approach treats ruins not as museum pieces but as living elements capable of accommodation contemporary requirements through sensitive intervention.

Symbolic Continuity as Identity Affirmation: Places contribute fundamentally to identity formation and cultural belonging (Halbwachs, 1976; Rose, 1995; Lynch, 1972; Tilley, 1994). Reconstructing the Old Kachcheri offers opportunity to reaffirm political and cultural identity for future generations while negotiating complex relationships between colonial legacy and post-conflict aspiration. This dimension of the framework recognizes that architectural reconstruction inevitably makes statements about cultural values and collective priorities.

Community Involvement as Cultural Authenticity: Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that post-conflict reconstruction must actively engage local skills, traditions, and aspirations to avoid becoming form of cultural imposition (Jeleński, 2018; Hoteit, 2015). Without meaningful community participation, reconstruction risks becoming what can be termed "whitewashing"—superficial restoration that fails to address deeper questions of cultural ownership and identity formation (Aousten, 2019). This requires participatory design processes that position local communities as active agents in re-bordering practices rather than passive recipients of external interventions.

By framing reconstruction as act of re-bordering, the Old Kachcheri can be understood as multi-layered bordered space—simultaneously colonial and indigenous, traumatic and hopeful, scarred and resilient. The framework therefore functions as decision-making compass rather than rigid blueprint, helping stakeholders weigh historical significance, emotional bonds, political symbolism, and practical functions in ways that remain both critical and open-ended. This approach aligns with Newman's (2006) understanding of borders as dynamic processes requiring continuous negotiation rather than fixed solutions.

Implications: Re-bordering as Post-Conflict Resilience

This research demonstrates that post-conflict architectural reconstruction cannot be reduced to engineering or aesthetic considerations but must be understood as fundamental process of cultural re-bordering. The Old Kachcheri and similar ruins embody contested histories and identities requiring careful negotiation through architectural intervention.

German post-war reconstruction demonstrates that ruins can be reframed into bordered spaces of resilience, continuity, and productive hybridity rather than simply restored to previous states. By applying these lessons within appropriate cultural context, Jaffna's reconstruction can move beyond technical rebuilding toward cultural re-bordering that preserves heritage while enabling renewal, embeds historical consciousness without denying continuity, and negotiates collective identity in ways appropriate to post-conflict society.

This framework emphasizes reconstruction as ongoing process rather than fixed outcome, requiring continuous negotiation between competing claims, identities, and temporal orientations. Through this lens, architectural practice becomes form of cultural diplomacy, actively shaping how post-conflict societies imagine themselves and their relationships with traumatic pasts and aspirational futures.

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