ForeWord Reviews

CULTURE

Maintaining tbe Sacred Center: The Bosnian City of Stolac
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Warriors throughout time and across the world have demonstrated that destroying a place people believe to be sacred can be as devastating to a community's identity and sense of power as the annihilation of its people. Witness all of the religious buildings throughout history that were conquered and then converted—from Egyptian temples to modern-day synagogues—their iconographies and architectures erased entirely or reconfigured to reflect the invaders' beliefs.

Now imagine an entire city targeted and ruined because its buildings and the layout of its streets represented a centuries-old harmony between its Muslim, Christian, and Jewish populations. In *Maintaining the Sacred Center*, Muslim scholar Rusmir Mahmutcehajic walks us through the destruction of his hometown of Stolac, Bosnia, which suffered repeated attacks over the twentieth century. He locates Bosnia as the geographic and psychic heart of Europe and then directs our sights to the potential (and outright necessity) for Stolac to once again represent peace among disparate peoples.

The center of this Bosnian town, and the book's focus, is the *carsija*, the market square or public area, equivalent in many ways to the ancient Roman Forum where people shopped, worshipped, and communed. "The act of coming together is oriented by a focal point, a central point that is in the world but also in each of us," explains the author. "The *carsija* is the great representation of our needs and our desire to meet them." Throughout his meditative and fascinating study, the author imbues the disciplines of urban design and architecture, and the practice of commerce, with a sacred component he claims that modern society has ignored in the building of contemporary cities.

"Nowhere is our active relationship with the Creator, and so with the totality of the heavens, the earth, and everything in between, shown so clearly as in the coming-into-being and continued existence of the traditional city," says Mahmutcehajic. "The town is in our image," he explains, outlining Stolac's physical references to the human body, with the *carsija* functioning as the heart and all roads to and from it the arteries bringing life. "The human heart is a vessel … The valley is therefore an image of the human heart. When we lay waste the valley, we lay

waste our heart."

Maintaining the Sacred Center is divided into easily digestible sections addressing both embodied and metaphorical concepts such as the House, the Garden, the Call, the Guest, the Labyrinth and the Tree.

A former Bosnian statesman and revered scholar of the Muslim intellectual tradition, Mahmutcehajic's text is devotional, praising the wisdom and love of God throughout: "Both sacred art and sacred science have their earthly forms, but the beauty and the significance they radiate have been sent down from higher levels of existence," he states. "Their role is to raise those of us who live in and by them up towards our highest possibilities."

Belief in a singular Truth that underlies all religions is a foundation of the perennial philosophy the author espouses. His inspiring efforts will be welcomed by academics focused on Islam, urban planning, and the history of urban life worldwide.

Julie Eakin