Fig. 1. Aerial view of Salonika before the fire (taken by a French military photographer). La Contemporaine, Paris (album VAL GF07), by permission.
Reconstruction, Reform and Peace in Europe after the First World War

John Horne

Between 1918 and 1933 reconstruction in Europe meant repairing the material damage on the former fronts. But it meant more, extending to political, social and cultural reconstruction. For the war had revealed multiple meanings of the fatherland and state for which the sacrifice had been made. As dynastic empires fell in the east (Ottoman Turkey, Austria-Hungary, Tsarist Russia), nation-states replaced them. In western and central Europe nations underwent political change, sometimes radical. This was clearest with the Weimar Republic in defeated Germany. But in Belgium, too, universal male suffrage (the great pre-war cause) was conceded even if language equality was not. The nation, usually in the form of a parliamentary state, became the European norm in an era of political experiment.

The war also created obligations. Returned soldiers carried their combat experience (and trauma) into civilian life. Veterans’ organisations (especially the disabled) demanded rights and reforms in recognition of the debt contracted to their members by society. War widows added to the moral and fiscal burden. Everywhere, the military dead posed the issue of how to remember and commemorate. The fact that civilians had also suffered hugely in the war (including the hungry and millions of refugees) meant that this was the era that invented international humanitarianism.

In other ways, too, the world faced demands for social change. The Russian Revolution and the new Bolshevik state dramatised these in their most radical form. Yet because the war required the mobilisation of all resources, it had drawn on workers and farmers as well as soldiers and women across the board. These groups made their own sacrifice and consequently advanced their own post-war demands for a better future, whether in vanquished or victor states. Women’s suffrage, land reform, better housing, public health, child-care and a shorter working day were
among the principal demands. The war fostered competing visions of social reform.

The Paris peace conference (from which the defeated were excluded until asked to sign their treaties) fashioned the politics of the post-war settlement. This included the novelty of reparation, a legal and financial principle that made Germany in particular guilty, and so liable for the costs of the war, material and economic. Yet the peace conference innovated in creating the League of Nations as the basis of a new world order founded on the principle of sovereignty, international law and collective security.³ The defeated were not initially members of the League but the logic of peacemaking meant that in time they would be. Reconstructing the post-war world entailed a choice – to sustain wartime enmity or create peace via reconciliation. It was an era of diplomatic experiment, too.

For all its significance, physical reconstruction was less important to reconstruction overall than it would be after the Second World War, when material devastation was far more extensive. Had the Cold War turned hot, it is safe to say that physical reconstruction would have been the overriding concern of a post-war period that thankfully never happened. Yet since the built (and re-built) environment always relates to larger social, cultural, political and even diplomatic developments (shaping them and shaped by them), I propose to look at how four specific cases of physical reconstruction illuminate this larger process after the Great War: the city of Salonika, the universities of Leuven and Paris, the Parisian suburb of Suresnes and the Palace of the Nations in Geneva.

Salonika: Rebuilding the Nation

The first case concerns the role of both empire and nationality (so central to the Great War) in the largest urban renewal to arise from the conflict, and which began while the war was still taking place: Salonika (today Thessaloniki) in Greece. In 1912, it was the largest city in Ottoman Europe. Religiously and ethnically mixed, 39% of its 160,000 people were Sephardim Jews, the rest Turks, Bulgarians and Greeks.⁴ After the Balkan Wars (1912-13), Greece gained southern Macedonia and western Thrace in the biggest expansion of the new nation-state since independence in 1830. Salonica was its regional capital.

In 1915, a Franco-British force arrived in Macedonia, with the permission of neutral Greece, intending to help Serbia, which had been invaded by Austria-Hungary, Germany and Bulgaria. It failed, but established defences along the border against Bulgaria which now occupied Serb Macedonia. This turned into a major front of the Great War, with Salonika as the allied base-camp and military capital. The nationalist premier, Eleftherios Venizelos, had tried to bring Greece into the war so as to enlarge
the country further by the idea megali, the dream of a new Byzantium including north-western Anatolia and Constantinople. King Constantine, who favoured neutrality, dismissed him, so Greece entered the conflict only in June 1917, when the king was forced to abdicate. But prior to that, Venizelos also made Salonika the headquarters of his alternative government.

While pre-war Salonika had stood for a kind of Ottoman modernity (it was the birth place of the Young Turk movement), its western-style buildings coexisted with a tangle of wooden-built neighbourhoods abounding in domes and minarets. To British and French soldiers, it seemed distinctly “Turkish” or “oriental” (meaning the opposite of modern). In fact, the French and British behaved very much in the tradition of nineteenth-century colonial expeditions. Arriving in a land where they had not expected to stay, they found themselves occupying a city and region about which they knew little. In this, however, they were not so different from the new Greek administration. Both allies and Greeks saw the region as alien (its Turkish and Bulgarian minorities a possible internal enemy) though they also held cultural expectations derived from classical Greek antiquity (this was, after all, the homeland of Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great) or of Byzantium. In the manner of western military expeditions since Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, the allied armies also embarked on an imperial “civilising mission” – modernising transport, attacking malaria, carrying out ethnic censuses, listing the artistic patrimony and conducting archaeological digs.⁵

Then in August 1917 a terrible (but accidental) fire occurred that destroyed some 40% of the city, especially the wooden-built Jewish quarter, rendering 70,000 people homeless (Figs. 1-2). In a city already crammed with refugees it was a numbing calamity. The allies did what they could to control the fire and help the victims in its immediate aftermath, using all the resources of a modern army.⁶ However, for that same reason, the fire gave them a unique opportunity to collaborate with Venizelos (now premier) and the mayor of Salonika in rebuilding the city. Within a week of the blaze, Venizelos had set up an international committee composed of a small number of international experts, including the British town planner, Thomas Mawson, and the French architect and archaeologist, Ernest Hébrard, as well as two Greek architects.

Hébrard rapidly emerged as the key figure. In fact, as an officer in the French army he had already been conducting archaeological digs in the city. He was also a member of the influential Société Française des Architectes et Urbanistes whose 1915 booklet defined the principles of modern “urbanisation” (wide streets, squares and zones of different usage) that were to be used in reconstructing the towns and villages of the western front.⁷ The key in Salonika was collective expropriation with compensation, despite Jewish protests. The effect was to allow a single master plan for the city, which Hébrard, backed by the French army's engineering and technical services, was mainly responsible for delivering before the war's end, in June 1918.⁸
Given the circumstances, the allies enjoyed an almost colonial-style freedom in this work (Hébrard went on to become one of the architects rebuilding Hanoi as the capital of French Indochina). Yet this was not independent of the Greek state. On the contrary, Hébrard helped to turn Ottoman Salonika into the capital of the new Greek territories by an architecture that consciously reinvented both its classical and Byzantine past. For Hébrard replaced the city centre with a grid plan and hierarchy of streets that pivoted on two squares connected by a boulevard on a north-south axis so as to frame the distant view of Mount Olympus, south across the harbour. The square at the northern end of this boulevard incorporated the find of the original agora, while Hébrard aligned other axes on Byzantine monuments (Figs. 3–4).

The French thus provided the architect who designed modern Thessaloniki in tune with the Hellenisation sought by the Venizelos government. By an irony of history, this cultural vision was fulfilled socially in the 1920s when Venizelos’ failure to achieve the idea megali and create a “Greater Greece” in Anatolia after defeat at the hands of Turkey in the latter’s war of independence resulted in the first ever legal ethnic cleansing under the Treaty of Lausanne. As Greek Muslims left for Turkey, Greeks expelled from Anatolia (especially Smyrna) flooded into Salonika, while many Jews went to France or Palestine. The city itself became more “Greek”.
Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the (now lost) original plan for Salonika drafted by Ernest Hébrard (1919). Alexandra Yerolymphos, Urban Transformations in the Balkans (1820-1920): Aspects of Balkan Town Planning and the Remaking of Thessaloniki (Thessaloniki: 1996), by permission of the author.

Fig. 4. Aristotelous Square, with Byzantine-influenced colonnades, looking north to the agora. The statue is of Eleftherios Venizelos. Photograph by John Horne.
Salonika remained exceptional owing to the degree of destruction and because reconstruction dovetailed with the nationalist aspirations of the Venizelos government. Nonetheless, nationality assumed architectural form more widely after the Great War. It did this most clearly in symbolic ways, through myriad war memorials and battlefront monuments. The war dead, in other words, became part of the reconstruction of the fighting zones. But it might be instructive to look for it also in architecture and town planning, especially in the capitals of the new nation-states in Eastern Europe and Turkey, from Warsaw to Ankara, or in the independent settler dominions of the British Empire, such as Canada and Australia.

Inter-allied or International? The Universities of Leuven and Paris

However, post-war recovery was not a purely national affair. It entailed collaboration between countries, as shown by the work of foreign civic bodies and philanthropists, such as the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations, in rebuilding destroyed towns in Belgium and France. But there were two modes in which such collaboration might occur – inter-allied and international. The former meant prolonging the collaboration of the western allies beyond the war and also hoping that Germany would pay. The latter implied at some point establishing connections with the former enemy states and accepting German entry into the League of Nations.

Recent research has shown us just how extensive wartime inter-allied collaboration really was. As the USA entered the war in 1917 and Bolshevik Russia left, the allied effort became a kind of democratic crusade. For all the divergence of national interests and the failure of the USA to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, this collaboration continued after the peace conference against what was still seen as the enemy (even if defeated), especially Germany. We need to remind ourselves of just how powerful those wartime cultures were that hinged on total repudiation of the “barbaric” enemy and of how emotions like hatred persisted long afterwards.

Nowhere was inter-allied cooperation more evident than in the world of academics and universities. While the war had ruptured the collaboration on which international scientific communities had been based, it did not only drive academics back into their national shells because inter-allied collaboration was an alternative. Ideas, individuals and funding circulated especially between British, French and American institutions. However, both international scientific bodies and universities faced the issue after the war of whether it was better to maintain the taboo on the enemy or to re-engage with him. This brings me to my second case, that of Leuven.
The story of how this university and its library were rebuilt in the 1920s after their destruction by the Germans in August 1914 is well known. What I wish to focus on is the notorious balcony with its inscription: “furore teutonico diruta, donato americano restituta” (Destroyed by German fury, restored by American gift). The library had indeed been rebuilt by American generosity in a civic effort across the USA led first by Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University, and then by Herbert Hoover, founder of the Commission for Relief in Belgium. Since the Germans wrongly claimed the town had resisted in 1914, justifying the massacre or deportation of many of its inhabitants and the destruction of the library, the spirit of this project was resolutely anti-German. By the Treaty of Versailles, German reparations included restoring the library’s contents while the New York architect responsible for its neo-Renaissance design, Whitney Warren, had been outraged at German behaviour in the war, including shelling Rheims cathedral. Rebuilding the library was a personal mission for him in the spirit of wartime inter-allied solidarity. He added the motto for the balcony on the suggestion of Cardinal Mercier (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. The new library, University of Leuven. Sketch by the New York architecture firm, Warren and Wetmore (1922), incorporating the balustrade with the inscription (in Latin): ‘Destroyed by German fury, restored by American gift.’ Warren & Wetmore architectural drawings and photographs, 1889-1938, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.
However, in the climate of growing reconciliation in the mid-1920s, and above all faced with the need to restore scientific links with German scholars, the Rector of Leuven University, Monsignor Paulin Ladeuze, wanted to remove the offending motto although he himself had witnessed the German destruction in 1914. Butler (now president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) agreed, as did Hoover, who wrote that it was “time to eliminate war bitterness”. In fact, the American backers of the project had now firmly switched from inter-allied solidarity to international reconciliation. The New York Times wrote of the affair that “if the people are to go on indefinitely fighting the war, lasting peace will be an empty phrase”.12

That was to reckon without Whitney Warren and anger in both Leuven and Belgium. After a fierce dispute between Ladeuze and the architect, the inauguration of the library took place in July 1928 without the offending inscription, though it was marred by an aeroplane that dropped thousands of leaflets inscribed: “Furore teutonico diruta”. Felix Morren, a foreman on the library building, then smashed the empty balcony with his mason’s hammer, declaring: “We aren’t all Boches in Louvain yet”. In the end, Warren gave the inscription to Dinant where it was mounted on the memorial to that town’s martyrs of 1914 – before being blown into the Meuse by German tanks in 1940 just as Leuven library was destroyed a second time13 (Fig. 6).

The tensions involved in moving from the inter-allied to the international in reconstructing the academic world can be shown in another project. Right after the

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**Fig. 6.** Part of the Leuven balustrade ‘Furore Teutonico’, incorporated in the 1936 ‘national monument’ erected in Dinant to the German sack of the town in 1914, and destroyed by the German army in 1940. Contemporary postcard. (collection John Horne)
war, the French planned a new international residential campus for the Sorbonne in southern Paris on the site of the demolished nineteenth-century fortifications. The aim was two-fold: socially, the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris (CIUP), as it is still known, was to solve the problem of slum lodgings and tuberculosis in the Latin Quarter by a garden city for students; academically, it was to use German defeat to make the Sorbonne the academic Mecca of Europe. It was to be a place of international reconciliation but one firmly under the aura of inter-allied victory. As the dedication stone on the first residence to go up in 1923 put it, students from all countries would have “books, fresh air and sunshine” so as to “work together harmoniously to improve their minds and bodies, the progress of science and understanding between their nations” 14 (Fig. 7).

Initially, the emphasis was indeed on recruiting from friendly nations, which funded more residences. By 1927, however, reconciliation with the former enemy seemed possible as liberal circles in Germany proposed a Maison de l’Allemagne, welcomed by the French. But a suspicious German Foreign Ministry refused to back the idea, fearing that Germany would simply be paying for France to propagandise its best students at its own expense. Ten years later when a newly confident Nazi Germany raised the question again, the French refused, fearing infiltration by the ideological avant-garde of a new enemy. Only in 1956 did a thoroughly modernist Maison Heinrich Heine open its doors in a very different post-war period.

Fig. 7. The Deutsch de la Meurthe Foundation – the first student residence at the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris (1923-1925). Architect’s aerial view. Fonds Lucien Bechmann. SIAF/Cité de l’architecture et du patrimoine/Archives d’architecture du XXe siècle.
As the Cité Internationale shows, the antagonisms of the war persisted throughout the 1920s, only to grow stronger in the 1930s, and were manifest in other buildings and monuments. Among them was the memorial to the German victory over Russia at Tannenberg in 1914. This took the form of a neo-crusader castle inaugurated in 1927 by Field Marshal Hindenburg, victor of the battle and German president.

Nonetheless, it was the opposite mood of reconciliation between enemies (especially in the west) that prevailed from 1925 to 1933. By the Locarno treaties of 1925, Germany recognised its new western frontiers and the former enemies agreed to resolve disputes by arbitration. Germany entered the League of Nations in 1926. Above all, the French and German foreign ministers, Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann, led what amounted to the real peace process in Europe after the Great War. Both men believed the war had been a catastrophe, both were criticised within their own country, and both proposed a European Federation, the distant forerunner of the European Union. They were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1927.

Such diplomatic reconstruction might seem far removed from other varieties of the process. Yet the League of Nations (a predominantly European institution with its headquarters in Geneva) was central to the whole endeavour and was deeply involved in all manner of social reforms. These involved women, labour, intellectuals and veterans among others. Such activity reflected the belief of many who supported the League (from social Catholics to social democrats including a broad progressive centre) that peace and social reform were two sides of the same coin: without peace, no lasting social improvement; without social improvement, war would return.

This conviction found remarkable expression in a housing project built in the Paris suburb of Suresnes in the 1920s by Henri Sellier, socialist mayor and later Minister of Health in the Popular Front government of 1936. While large-scale social housing (drawing on Le Corbusier’s “city in the sky” principle) occurred in France only after the Second World War, municipalities undertook smaller experiments between the wars, often linked to slum clearance and inspired by the garden-city movement. This was the case with Suresnes, whose population had mushroomed during the war as Paris became the centre of French munitions production. Sellier was driven by the usual concerns with alcoholism and tuberculosis attendant on squalid living conditions and their impact on children. But a world free from war was equally part of his vision for what was a miniature town, with model dwellings of various kinds and also schools, retirement home, maison du peuple (or community centre) and church.

In 1932, Sellier declared the garden city a “quartier de la paix” in homage to Briand, who had just died. He was, as he put it, honouring the man “who proclaimed the need to smash the cannon and machine-guns” and his friend, Stresemann, who had “laid the foundations of a Franco-German union […] vital for world peace.”

Social Reconstruction and International Peace: Henri Sellier’s Suresnes
Fig. 8. Map of the Garden City of Suresnes (built later 1920s) dedicated as a ‘Peace District’ (1932). Reconstruction based on sources in the Archives Municipales, Suresnes. © John Horne.

Fig. 9. Declaration of the Rights of Children, League of Nations, 1924 (mosaic mural, Paul Langevin school, Suresnes). Photograph, John Horne.
The streets were named after philosophers of peace (Grotius, Kant) and Republican anti-militarist heroes (Victor Hugo, Romain Rolland), with a statue to Jean Jaurès, assassinated on the outbreak of war in 1914. The central square was named after Léon Bourgeois, French progenitor of a League of Nations, while others were dedicated to the League itself and to Peace. To this day, the main axes are the Boulevard Aristide Briand and the Avenue Gustav Stresemann and the old people's home is still the Locarno Residence. The church, naturally, is dedicated to Notre Dame de la Paix. Should you enter the school, you will find a beautiful mosaic of the first charter of Children's Rights (forerunner of the 1989 UN Convention), drafted by Eglantyne Jebb, the English founder of the Save the Children Fund, which was adopted by the League of Nations in 1924 (Figs. 8-9).

Of course, my contention is not that every European social housing project of the 1920s expressed this vision. Tackling the accommodation crises that afflicted many countries resulted in numerous schemes that combined with different political beliefs, including those of Fascist Italy. Rather, Suresnes was an architectural tribute to the belief that peace and social progress were inseparable. But because that belief was widespread, Suresnes was not the only scheme to embody it (one thinks of Villeurbanne in the suburbs of Lyon or the Karl Marx Hof in socialist Vienna).

**Geneva – the Palace of the Nations**

If there is one place one would expect to find the Geneva vision expressed in stone and mortar (or at least concrete), it is Geneva itself. The League of Nations provided the institutional framework for post-war reconciliation in a process that I have described elsewhere as “cultural demobilisation”.[16] This means dismantling wartime enmity and replacing it by collaboration. It requires a shift in language, behaviour and above all perception. After the Great War, it meant that former enemies reconciled enough to enable them to think of war as the real enemy. The politics of peace (arbitration, collective security, disarmament) were used to mobilise against war, not for it. Bodies working with the League, such as trade unions and political groups, caught this shift (Fig. 10). Briand expressed it as he welcomed the Germans into the League in a speech that echoed around the world.

Is it not a moving spectacle [...] that barely a few years after the most frightful war that has ever convulsed the world, when the battlefields are still almost damp with blood [...] the same peoples which clashed so roughly meet in this peaceful assembly and affirm mutually their common desire to collaborate in the work of universal peace? [...]

Messieurs, peace for France and Germany means that the series of painful and bloody encounters that has stained every page of history is over; over too, are the long veils of mourning for sufferings which will never ease. No more wars, no more brutal and bloody solutions to our differences! [...] Away with rifles, machine-guns, cannon! Make way for conciliation, for arbitration, for peace! 

Fig. 10. Cultural demobilisation: ‘War against war’: poster of the International Trades Union Federation, c.1924. Poster collection, La Contemporaine, Paris, by permission.
By the mid-1920s, when the Germans entered it, the autumn meeting of the League had become a fixture of the European diplomatic scene and its headquarters the focus of European reconciliation. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the competition held among member states in 1927 for a Palace of the Nations to replace the old church hall where the League had met up to that point. According to the rules, this was to house all the League’s functions and “symbolize by the purity of its style [and] the harmony of its lines […] the peaceful glory of the twentieth century”.\(^\text{18}\) The competition turned to controversy when a stunning design by Le Corbusier (floating on pillars, with walls of glass and concrete) was rejected. Yet the final plan, in a clean neo-classical style with a wealth of internal decoration, was deemed by many to be the best expression of the League. Built on the shores of Lake Geneva next to the International Labour Organisation, it was nothing less than a palace of democratic internationalism and a theatre for cultural demobilisation (Figs. 11-12).

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Fig. 11. Plan by Le Corbusier for the competition to build the Palace of the Nations, Geneva, 1927. United Nations Archives at Geneva.
The League’s vision is seen above all in the murals created for the Council chamber by the Catalan artist, José Maria Sert. Wall panels show the building of peace. First comes “Hope” represented as military demobilisation. It is followed by social and scientific progress, the prerequisite of peace. The murals culminate in the ceiling, “The Lesson of Salamanca”, in which scholars of that famous university lay the basis of international law during the Renaissance and show how Humankind can live in peace (Fig. 13). The Spanish Republic (itself on the brink of civil war) donated Sert’s murals in 1935-36. The Palace of the Nations was completed in 1938 – a bad year for Europe. Sert himself fled into exile and cultural demobilisation was over before its temple was even finished. Today, the building remains largely forgotten as the European headquarters of the United Nations. But in fact it is the culminating architectural expression of the hopes vested in reconstruction after the Great War.
Fig. 13: Mural of ‘The Lesson of Salamanca’ on the ceiling of the Council Chamber in the Palace of the Nations by José María Sert, Catalan artist. Donated by the Spanish Republic, 1935. United Nations Archives at Geneva.

Coda

The kinds of reconstruction discussed elsewhere in this volume were physical and material but also political, social, economic and cultural, as they would be in different proportions after the Second World War. Their architectural expression was less inclined to internationalism and modernism than would be the case 30 years later, perhaps reflecting how important a traditionalist sense of the national or regional had proved to be in response to the Great War, as shown by Hébrard’s plan for Salonika and Whitney Warren’s for the library in Leuven, though as both of these also show, tradition was quite compatible with modern planning and infrastructure.

However, what I have wanted to suggest is that when we focus away from the rebuilding of the devastated fighting zones, we also find architectural expressions of reconstruction in its broader sense. These were more diverse than I have been able to suggest here. Recovery from the Great War entailed radical ideological visions – proposals to re-enchant a disillusioned world – and both Soviet Russia and Fascist Italy, and later Nazi Germany, translated their visions into architecture and monu-
ments. One thinks of Vladimir Tatlin’s model in 1919-20 for an unbuildable tower, his monument to the Third International, or Mussolini’s complex for the never-to-be-held Rome World Fair of 1942, with its physical articulation of a corporatist Fascist state.

But we can find traces of other ways of rebuilding the world after the war, both within the new nations (as at Salonika) and in the British and French empires (not only Hanoi but also Delhi was being rebuilt as an imperial capital between the wars). We can find them, too, in projects that defied the enemy (as in Leuven) or reconciled with him (Suresnes and Geneva). In many of these projects, social reform and future peace were integral to the building (or rebuilding) that they involved. I have given a few examples. But I am convinced that if we take all of Europe as our canvas, we will find more physical expressions of this democratic reconstruction after the Great War (with all its inner tensions). It is a question of knowing how to see and where to look.
Notes
