

# Britain at war: an introduction\*

*Carlotta Coccoli\*\**, *Andrea Pane\*\*\**

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This monographic issue of «Storia Urbana» is another tile of the now vast mosaic representing the war damage and the reconstruction of the architectural and urban heritage after the Second World War, gotten under way about ten years ago by Gian Paolo Treccani.

After the issues on Italy (2007), Germany (2010), Japan (2013) and France (2017), it is now the turn of Great Britain, one of the most emblematic countries in Europe for the specificity of the issues that revolved around reconstruction, whose modes could begin to be discussed very early on in comparison to the countries marked by defeat and invasion, opening a debate that enjoyed the widespread participation of an attentive and cognizant public opinion and that constitutes a unique case in the European panorama of the Second World War.

Relying on a vast bibliography now available on the subject, the six essays that make up this issue deal, in a precise logical sequence, with some emblematic phases of the architectural and urban heritage in Britain during and after the war. The specific topics analysed are: the vulnerability of the British cities affected by the bombings; the role of planners in the reconstruction process; the more general issues of memory and urban identity in comparison to other European contexts; the emblematic case of St Michael's Cathedral in Coventry; the debate on the fate of the churches in the City of London; and a related case study of the church of St Alban's.

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\*\* Carlotta Coccoli is Associate Professor of Architectural Conservation at the University of Brescia, Department of Civil, Environmental, Architectural Engineering and Mathematics.

\*\*\* Andrea Pane is Associate Professor of Architectural Conservation at the University of Naples Federico II, Department of Architecture.

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This issue deals with the topic of the post-war reconstruction of British cities, taking its place in a line of research that – from an idea by Gian Paolo Treccani – the review «Storia Urbana» has been covering for over a decade, with the aim of investigating the impact of the Second World War on ancient urban fabrics and on the architectural landmarks of countries involved in that conflict, analysing the debate that developed in each instance over the fate of the damaged cities.

Following the end of the series of monographic issues published between 2007 and 2013 and dedicated to the Axis countries (1), with the 155/2017 issue on the reconstruction in France (2), the survey has turned its attention to developments in other European countries, revealing similarities and differences in how the warring nations faced the daunting problem of reconstruction after the end of the conflict.

The present in-depth view on Britain, one of the most emblematic countries of Europe, targets the specific issues concerning reconstruction. Specifics first of all in historical terms, since here we are dealing with one of the winners of the conflict, thus spared from defeat and invasion, both phenomena which marked, in different ways and times, both France and the Axis countries, profoundly affecting their respective experiences of reconstruction. Also thanks to this luckier circumstance – to which must be added the smaller amount of damage suffered by architectural landmarks compared to other countries – Great Britain was able very early on to start discussing the modes of reconstruction, in a debate that engaged the broad participation of an attentive and well-informed public opinion. Although this did not always give rise to rapid and consistent action, owing to the political and economic circumstances after 1945, certainly the substance of the British debate, together with its widespread dissemination to all sectors of the population, was unique on the European scene after World War II. For these reasons, a close examination of its specific events is an indispensable step toward completing the previously mentioned picture.

Studies on the British architectural and urban heritage, during and after the conflict, have become very numerous and detailed. They range from comprehensive investigations of the bombings and the consequent damage to cities – covered here in the essay by Richard Overy, an authoritative British historian specializing in the Second World War – to research on the events of post-war planning, as well as on the architectural interventions in individual

1. *Danni bellici, centri storici, ricostruzione nel secondo dopoguerra*, edited by G.P. Treccani, monographic issue of «Storia Urbana», XXX (2007), 114/115; *Danni bellici e ricostruzione dei centri storici: il caso della Germania*, edited by G. P. Treccani, monographic issue of «Storia Urbana», XXXIII (2010), 129; *Monumenti, paesaggio e città nella ricostruzione postbellica del Giappone*, edited by C. Coccoli and M. Ugo, monographic issue of «Storia Urbana», XXXVI (2013), 140/141.

2. *La ricostruzione in Francia dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale. Monumenti e patrimonio urbano nelle politiche di trasformazione*, edited by F. Malservisi and M.R. Vitale, monographic issue of «Storia Urbana», XL (2017), 155.

cases. These latter two aspects are covered here, respectively, in the essays by Peter J. Larkham and Louise Campbell, both authors of numerous in-depth studies in their respective fields. To these names we add those of Junichi Hasegawa, Nick Tiratsoo, Nicholas Bullock, Robin Woolven, Barnabas Calder, Nicola Lambourne, Mark Clapson and Catherine Flinn, to name just a few, all authors of specific studies on the war and the post-war period in Britain, with special reference to the topic of architectural and urban heritage.

We add to this picture some broader views that place the British experience in the more general framework of European reconstruction, as in the volume series *Living with History* (2011) (3) and *A Blessing in Disguise* (2013) (4), both conceived in a comparative perspective of the events that took place in different European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland), in which Italy is strikingly absent. Along the same lines, but with a greater focus on Great Britain in some comparisons with Germany, Alsace and Lorraine and Japan, is *The Blitz and its Legacy* (2013) (5).

Starting from this context of reference, the six essays collected here, in their precise logical sequence, address some emblematic aspects of the architectural and urban heritage in Britain during and after the war.

The report opens with Richard Overy's essay (*The Bombing of British Cities in the Second World War*), which deals with the vulnerability – in a physical but also a social sense – of the British cities stricken by the German bombing between 1940 and 1945. In particular, it analyses the relationship between the perception of risk that developed in the years prior to the outbreak of the war and the true extent of the destruction, showing how it only marginally and temporarily affected the functioning of the cities in social, residential and productive terms. In essence, Overy highlights how maintaining the system of assistance to the population (in the organization of the shelter network, health care, timely repair of damaged housing) by relying on the very involvement of citizens and their moral commitment, averted the collapse of the social network, enabling the cities to resist the shock of the bombings. At the end of the war – as happened in countries in much worse conditions – the physical damage caused by the bombings offered an opportunity to redevelop the cities through the repair or reconstruction of the damaged landmarks, and especially the rearrangement of housing in densely populated residential areas marked by low quality construction.

Peter J. Larkham's *Planning in Britain during and immediately after the Second World War: planners, processes and plans* deals with the urban planning of the British cities damaged in the conflict. Larkham, departing from

3. *Living with History 1914-1964. Rebuilding Europe after the First and the Second World Wars and the Role of Heritage Preservation*, edited by N. Bullock, L. Verpoest, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2011.

4. *A Blessing in Disguise. War and Town Planning in Europe, 1940-1945*, edited by J. Düwel, N. Gutschow, DOM Publishers, Berlin 2013.

5. *The Blitz and its Legacy. Wartime Destruction to Post-War Reconstruction*, edited by M. Clapson, P.J. Larkham, Ashgate, Farnham 2013.

the studies carried out so far, which have focused mainly on the plans entrusted to well-known professionals outside the administrations or on the most heavily bombed cities, highlights how most of the plans drafted in the period known as the “reconstruction replanning era” were conducted by local administrative personnel, in certain cases with the help of external consultants. These also for the most part offered a chance to realize ambitions that had already emerged before and during the conflict, aiming at an overall modernization and redevelopment of cities in residential, infrastructural, economic and social terms, even in areas far broader than those actually affected by war damage. Larkham’s essay examines the little known cases of the plans drawn up for Accrington and Brierley Hill, kindred industrial centres by virtue of their medium-small size and the extent of damage suffered, both of which were entrusted to well-known external experts, though engaged to a very different degree of detail and rendered obsolete by the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947.

Catherine Flinn’s essay, *Forgetful or purposeful? Memory and the remaking of place after the Blitz*, reinterprets the topic of reconstructing British cities through the perspective of memory and urban identity, asking why many of the reconstruction plans often favoured modernist interventions and ignored the “sense of place” and history that characterized the plans of many more heavily bombed European cities.

Flinn in particular analyses the cases of Poland and Germany, where many cities were rebuilt “as they were” before the conflict, especially their more ancient centres, stressing that there is no evidence of a real debate in Britain on the possibility of rebuilding the bombed cities with this criterion in mind, while it seems that one of the main priorities of re-planning was to guarantee access to motor vehicles and provide for parking lots and commercial activities. From this first comparative analysis it seems that, while the serious destruction in continental Europe (especially in the Nazi-occupied countries) induced a need to restore the identical physical landscapes of historic cities, the war in Britain triggered a strong impulse toward urban modernization.

Louise Campbell, already an author of important contributions on the subject, including the most complete monographic study published so far (6), with her *Reconstruction, Englishness and Coventry Cathedral* broaches the task of outlining the most emblematic story of post-war reconstruction in Britain, that of St Michael’s Cathedral in Coventry, burnt down in the bombing of the city on November 14, 1940. Starting from the important role played by the architectural historian John Harvey and his interpretation of perpendicular Gothic architecture, Campbell highlights how the “modern” project of the Scot Basil Spence – winner of the competition for the new cathedral in 1951 – was the result of a truly British, but above all English, sensibility assumed by Spence. In the context of this “Englishness” – which included the age-old

6. L. Campbell, *Coventry Cathedral: art and architecture in post-war Britain*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996.

appreciation of ruins, the revaluation of the Gothic as an expression of national identity and trust in contemporary architectural language – Campbell emphasizes the most significant phases of the story, through which Spence achieved a rigorous conservation of the remains of the bombed cathedral by constructing beside it a new building which, though highly criticized during and after its completion, today stands out among the few successful instances of coexistence between old and new in the spirit of a “war memorial”.

Precisely on this last topic, Andrea Pane’s article *Ruins for remembrance: the debate about the bombed London City churches and its echoes in Italy*, focuses, within the more general framework of reconstruction in Great Britain, on the bombed churches of the City of London, around which an intense debate took place in the years 1940-1945. It was a debate that galvanized most of England’s architects, historians and intellectuals, who addressed the matter of what should become of the City’s churches with the typically British sense of appreciation of ruins, heightened during the London “Blitz”. Pane examines the bibliographic sources of the time, pinpointing the rise and fall of the idea of conserving certain churches as “war memorials”. This concept combined the picturesque taste for ruins with respect for their authenticity and the desire to preserve tangible traces of the war in a city, London, that was already on the brink of radical urban transformation.

Pane’s article concludes with a reference to the early Italian echoes of this debate, which reveal a remarkable attention by Italy’s architectural and urban culture to every phase of British reconstruction.

Paola Martire’s article, *A Case study in the City of London: St Alban’s church in Wood Street*, complements Pane’s essay by exploring a specific case among the churches of the City, namely that of St Alban’s, Wood Street, which is pictured as the most controversial example of the failure to implement the idea of “war memorials” due to the pressures of speculators and the inexorable drive for urban transformation. Basing herself on original archival research, Martire investigates the process that led to the progressive isolation of the church’s remains, excluded from the Ministry of Works’ list of those that could be rebuilt, up to the demolition proposals advanced by the Barbican Redevelopment Scheme of 1954. What emerges is a picture that highlights the difficulties of protecting the architectural heritage in the British post-war period, in the face of intense building development programmes, difficulties whose results led to the preservation of what remained of the church – its tower – as an incongruous fragment of a completely altered ancient urban fabric.