A memorial in exile in London’s Olympics: orbits of responsibility

Susan Schuppli

Two sets of extraordinary statistics attached to contemporary events are not connected to each other in a relationship of cause and effect but through a chain of associations and a series of responsibilities not faced and thus acted upon.

In 2005 ArcelorMittal made a commitment to finance and build a memorial on the grounds of Omarska, the site of the most notorious concentration camp of the Bosnian war. Twenty years after the war crimes committed there, still no space of public commemoration exists. Grounds, buildings, and equipment once used for extermination now serve a commercial enterprise run by the world’s largest steel producer. In the absence of this promised memorial, London’s Olympic landmark - the ArcelorMittal Orbit - must be reclaimed as The Omarska Memorial in Exile.

Access denied

The story that links London to Omarska forcefully came to my attention when a group of us from Goldsmiths University of London, the Belgrade/Prijedor/Graz- based collective working group on the ‘Four Faces of Omarska’ along with survivors of the persecutions of the Bosnian war drove around the perimeter of the Omarska mining complex on April 13.

Were it not for the survivors’ moving personal accounts and commitment to helping us comprehend the tragic events, we might well have succumbed to a form of dark tourism as our bus moved through a landscape still drained of colour after the winter. As an organiser of the trip I had written to Predrag Šorga, Office Manager of ArcelorMittal Prijedor requesting access to the site. This request was denied on 23 March 2012 for reasons of health and safety.

At a certain point we pulled off to the side of the road where a white building was barely visible in the
distance. It was the notorious White House. Most who went in during 1992 were never seen alive again. Witnesses who testified in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) described an accumulating pile of bodies rising in a deadly mound beside it. Anxiety mounted as we lingered to talk and take some pictures, the survivors fearful that ArcelorMittal might view this unauthorised bus stop as a transgression and make access to the site even more difficult. I was staying in the home of one such survivor, Emsuda Mujagić, who lost 40 members of her immediate family. She now runs Through Heart to Peace an organisation for women refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Facts and figures

Rising to the soaring height of 114.5 metres and outstripping even the Statue of Liberty by two metres, the ArcelorMittal Orbit boasts an impressive compendium of statistics: 1,500 tonnes of steel, 35,000 bolts, 19,000 litres of paint, 770 visitors per hour / 5,000 per day, vistas of 20 miles into the distance, and a overall price-tag of £22.7million, £19.6million of which was funded by ArcelorMittal.

Another series of facts: 3,400 Bosniaks and Croats from Prijedor went missing or were killed during 1992, the summer of the massacre. At least 3,334 were imprisoned in the camp at Omarska, 700-800 were exterminated, 37 female detainees were repeatedly raped and tortured, upwards of 150 men singled out daily for execution. Still missing - 1,000 men, women, and children from the Prijedor region. The facts and figures of the ArcelorMittal Orbit, the towering showpiece of London's 2012 Olympics, are tragically intertwined with the history of war crimes that took place on the very grounds from which ArcelorMittal subsequently began to extract not only its soaring global profits but iron ore that the Director of ArcelorMittal Prijedor boasts has been used in the construction of the Orbit. Although these two sets of data mirror each as extraordinary statistics attached to contemporary events, they are not connected to each other in a relationship of cause and effect but through a chain of associations and a series of responsibilities not faced and thus acted upon.

ArcelorMittal Prijedor

In 2004, ArcelorMittal assumed 51% ownership of the Ljubija mining complex (LNM) in Prijedor Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, an acquisition that included the Omarska mine. When word of the purchase first came to light in 2004, Ed Vulliamy raised the spectre of buried bodies and even potential mass graves at the Prijedor mines, "Work has just concluded at one mass grave only two miles from the Omarska site, from which the remains of 420 men murdered in the camp were retrieved. In October 2001, another mass grave containing 353 bodies was found within another mine in the complex bought by Mr. Mittal, called Ljubija." "There is no doubt whatsoever that there are bodies as yet unfound within the mine of Omarska and its vicinity," said Amor Masovic, president of the Bosnian government's Commission for Tracing Missing Persons, which exhumes the graves. "We are not talking about dozens of bodies here, we are talking about hundreds." (The Guardian, 2 December 2004) Buildings and equipment used to administer the lethal project of ethnic cleansing repurposed as a lucrative mining operation.

ArcelorMittal Orbit embraces Olympic spirit with steel from every continent. ArcelorMittal today confirms that the 2,200 tonnes of steel being used in the ArcelorMittal Orbit will contain symbolic quantities from every continent in the world where the Company has operations, reflecting the spirit of the Olympic Games, which draws together athletes from across the globe. (29 June 2011)

In a chance meeting with Mladen Jelača, Director of ArcelorMittal Prijedor, on 14 April 2012 in the parking lot of the World War II monument on Mrakovica, Kozara mountain, Mr. Jelača confirmed to Professor Eyal Weizman, Director of the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths University of London and artist Milica Tomic of the Monument Group, Belgrade, that the ArcelorMittal Orbit is fabricated with iron ore that comes from the Omarska mine. According to Weizman and Tomic, "Mladen Jelača said that parts of the Mittal Orbit will be made from Omarska resources. He was very proud. He also said that metal (iron) is being taken out from three different mines in Europe. One of these is
Omarska.” In the same public document of 29 June 2011 cited above ArcelorMittal neglects to mention that it even has mining operations in Bosnia.[1] Is this an embarrassment for them? A simple omission or a deliberate oversight to prevent one from connecting the dots between the London Olympics and the Omarska concentration camp? Is the ArcelorMittal Orbit literally a material witness to a crime?

Recently ArcelorMittal Prijedor made a rather significant gesture in announcing eight more visitation days to the Omarska site in addition to the annual commemoration day on August 6. “During these visits, normal working operations around the White House area and access roads are suspended so that people can safely visit to pay their respects to the victims of the 1992 conflict.” In the same press release they acknowledge the events in Bosnia and Herzegovina as “tragic”, and are careful to note that ownership of the mine came twelve years later. “ArcelorMittal’s mining operation at Omarska, near Prijedor in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, includes some areas where well-documented war crimes took place in 1992. It continues to be controversial, as demands for access to the site and a permanent memorial intensify during this 20th anniversary year. ArcelorMittal acknowledges the suffering of the victims of the conflict of the 1990s, and fully respects the feelings of survivors and relatives of those affected.” (Press Release 5 May 2012). Yet how does one rationalise the fact that “normal working operations” take place around a site of such extreme violence, one described by Judge Almiro Rodrigues during the war crimes tribunal in 2001 as a “hellish orgy of persecution”[2]

Surely the ArcelorMittal Orbit, as both the symbolic embodiment of universal humanity that underscores the Olympics (regardless of whether we might view the Olympics as a flawed project) and the material consequence of wealth generated out the world’s largest and most lucrative set of mining operations (Prijedor producing 1.5 million metric tons of iron ore concentrate annually) needs to be able to stand up to the tyrannies of history and not merely swagger over London as a fanciful tourist attraction.

**Refusals**

Some of our local Bosnian colleagues claim that denying access to University of London researchers in April as well as a group of survivors on May 9 contributed, in part, to ArcelorMittal’s recent overtures as these refusals have been disseminated widely in various media and online forums. If our presence there did indeed, in some way, help to raise the public stakes and bring about this modest change, then we can only continue to hope that our presence here in the UK as citizens, as Londoners who contribute directly to the cultural and financial resources of the city, will also be a contributing factor in compelling ArcelorMittal to act in accordance with its Human Rights Policy and Vision Statement and thus follow through on its 2005 public commitment to building and financing a memorial at Omarska that is accessible to all.[3]

What is the reason for a refusal of what should otherwise be a basic moral response and public duty in the aftermath of an acknowledged history of violence? In its articles of corporate governance ArcelorMittal Prijedor states: “We are fully aware of our responsibilities towards the Municipality in which we operate, towards the people who live in the region and towards our employees.”[4] One must then ask to whom does the company extend this sense of responsibility?

Prijedor is in the region of Bosnia and Herzegovina that is referred to, after the Dayton Peace Agreement, as Republika Srpska, an area whose demographics were dramatically affected by the war and where ethnic cleansing was the most intense and successful. In addition to the more than 70,000 Bosniaks killed (a figure that includes both civilians and military), more than 25% of their overall population now live in exile. Bosnian Muslims we spoke to, who had returned under the Agreement, complained of daily harassment and continued discrimination. Today the local municipality of Prijedor has a hard-line Serbian Mayor in Marko Pavic, who exemplifies the culture of denial that persists in the region, an attitude which is aided by ArcelorMittal’s reluctance to build a memorial. Pavic insists that Omarska was only used as a transit and interrogation centre. Just a few weeks ago he prohibited the use of the word ‘genocide’ in any upcoming public commemorations, although the ICTY has indicted both Karadžić and Mladić for the crime of genocide in Prijedor.[5] The desire to see a memorial and the
desire to stop one are once again divided across ethnic lines. ArcelorMittal claims it is fully aware of its responsibilities towards the local community and its employees. However given that the mine's post-war workforce is comprised almost exclusively of Bosnian Serbs, their about-face in building the promised memorial, seems to have been swayed by local pressures that are not fully representative of who actually comprises the local community.

Although local organizations representing the survivors are not always in agreement as to the formal aesthetic attributes the memorial at Omarska should take – some survivors advocate for the complete termination of a commercial enterprise on a site of genocide, others are focused upon gaining access to the White House, while yet others insist that investigations into the possibility of a mass grave must be conducted before anything permanent can be erected on the site – all agree on the need for year-round access to a space of collective public mourning so that the trauma does not continue to be endured privately but is shared amongst a community of survivors that are increasingly scattered around the globe. It comes as no surprise that consensus amongst survivors and local stakeholders is exceedingly difficult to forge. Such is the conflictual nature of extraordinarily traumatic and violent events.

**Not taking sides**

*ArcelorMittal is not taking sides in this debate without engagement or prior agreement of the local communities and local / international stakeholders concerned. The company has always shared the aim of finding a long-term solution and will remain prepared to participate in discussions or co-operate fully with any agreed solution concerning this sensitive topic. (5 May 2012)*

As the largest steel producer in the world, ArcelorMittal can surely use their considerable influence to overturn the local politics of denial and actively participate in healing the fractured communities out of which their very fortunes are generated. Yet they insist on not taking sides. Not taking sides in an area where persecution and injustice continue – is not neutrality but taking a political position by default. Not taking sides maintains the impasse of the present and forecloses the possibility of moving forward. Not taking sides means the perpetuation of violence by other means.

Surely extracting mineral and capital resources out of the physical infrastructure of massacre is a form of taking sides - the sides of a perpetrator whose historic actions continue to contaminate the very means by which ArcelorMittal’s material wealth is generated. According to a recent report in Reuters, ArcelorMittal is currently in negotiations to acquire the remaining state-owned shares of the Ljubija mine complex. What percentage of ownership is necessary for figures to be converted into incontrovertible facts that truly matter for a people still traumatized by the Balkan wars of 1990s? Must they wait for 100% ownership before full responsibility is assumed for the production of a memorial? On August 6, survivors will return to the ArcelorMittal Prijedor mine to remember those who were tortured and killed as well as those who survived but who endure their pain and trauma in private. With no space of collective public mourning to confront the wounds of the past, and until such time that a memorial is constructed at Omarska we, here in London, reclaim the ArcelorMittal Orbit as a memorial in exile - a towering public acknowledgement that the orbits of corporate responsibility are always also close to home.
On behalf of all those who implored us, who live in London, to act and make public this dreadful connection between a city we love and place of death. I especially wish to acknowledge Sudbin Music, Emsuda Mujagić, Satko Mujagic, Adisa Pamukcic, Refik Hodzic and Milica Tomic, Srdjan Hercigonja, Dejan Vasic, Mirjana Dragosavljevic, Jovanka Vojinovic, Vladimir Miladinovic, of the Four Faces of Omarska, and Branimir Stojanovic and Jelena Petrovic of the Monument Group (Grupa Spomenik).

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[1] To reflect the shared focus on sustainability of both the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG) and ArcelorMittal, the bulk of the steel comes from Western Europe to ensure 60% comes from recycled scrap metal. However, ArcelorMittal has used its global reach to secure small quantities of steel from Africa, Asia and North & South America to be part of the ArcelorMittal Orbit as well. ArcelorMittal has a presence in the following countries on these continents: Europe - Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Romania, Spain, Ukraine, Poland, Africa – South Africa, Asia – China, India, N. America – Canada, United States, S. America – Brazil, Argentina, Mexico. June 29, 2011. Press Release: http://www.arcelormittalorbit.com/media-centre/words/arcelormittal-orbit-embraces-olympic-spirit-with-steel-from-every-continent

[2] Five Bosnian Serbs were found guilty yesterday of committing crimes against humanity during a "hellish orgy of persecution" against Muslims and Croats at the most notorious concentration camp [Omarska] of the 1992-1995 Bosnian war. Judge Almiro Rodrigues of Portugal passed sentences of up to 25 years and told the men that they had all known about or participated in rape, murder and persecution aimed at extinquishing the non-Serb population of northern Bosnia. Dragoljub Prcac, Milojica Kos, Miroslav Kvocka and Mlado Radic were all camp commanders, and a local taxi driver, Zoran Zigic, was a regular visitor to Omarska and other camps, where he beat prisoners, often to death... "You enjoyed using force, you enjoyed inflicting pain ... You also enjoyed humiliating detainees by forcing them to lap up water like dogs or to drink their own blood," the judge told Zigic. (Andrew Osborn in Brussels The Guardian, Saturday 3 November 2001 11.58 GMT)

Rights; The International Labour Organisation’s Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work; and The United Nations Global Compact.


[5] Legally only Srebrenica was classified as a genocide by the international courts because no “special intention” to exterminate the non-Serbian population was found, although other legal criteria governing the charge of genocide were fulfilled. However both Karadžić and Mladić have now been indicted for the crime of genocide, in which case the ICTY will need to draft another opinion as to whether there was a genocide in the Prijedor.

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