Perched high atop the steep banks of the Neretva River in southwestern Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Ottoman city of Mostar was for centuries a shining example of multiethnic diversity in the heart of the Balkans, a region often rocked by war and conquest. Following the collapse of Communism in the early 1990s, however, the city came to symbolize the depths to which humanity can plunge in the name of religion. Today, as ethnic tensions fade, the city is witnessing a renaissance and becoming a cultural capital in central Europe.

Centuries before the Ottoman conquest of Bosnia in 1463, Mostar was a small hamlet sited at a strategic crossing of the Neretva. Its hinterlands consisted of a broad agricultural plain on the west bank and steep terraces on the east bank surrounded by barren mountains. Ottoman administrators—many of them indigenous Bosnians who converted to Islam—strove to integrate local inhabitants into the empire and extend their influence through architecture, which they used to express important social and economic changes in Mostar. It was during this period that the Stari Most, the town’s most distinctive feature, was built to replace a precarious wooden suspension bridge that had previously spanned the river. Facilitating travel, trade, and the movement of military troops, the Stari Most became a symbol of the benevolence and power of Ottoman rule; it also ensured Mostar’s primacy as the capital of Herzegovina. The name Mostar literally means “bridgekeeper.”

Although Mostar remained part of the Ottoman Empire well into the nineteenth century, the city enjoyed an unusual measure of independence. Ottoman legislation assuring religious tolerance between Christians, Muslims, and Jews had become an integral part of indigenous social and political values of the city, which functioned as a bonded, multicultural social entity. In Mostar, historicist architectural styles reflected cosmopolitan interest and exposure to foreign aesthetic trends, and were artfully merged with indigenous styles. Examples include the Italianate Franciscan church, the Ottoman Muslibegovića house, the Dalmatian Corovića House, and an Orthodox church built with a gift from the Sultan.

In 1878, Bosnia became a crown property of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in an effort to avoid a Serbian takeover. Though Mostar’s city council aspired to autonomy, it cooperated with the Austro-Hungarians to implement sweeping reforms in city planning: broad avenues and an urban grid were imposed on the western bank of the Neretva, and significant investments were made in infrastructure, communications, and housing, which facilitated the growth of the city well beyond its Ottoman town

Balkan Renaissance

Ravaged by war and ethnic intolerance a decade ago, the Ottoman city of Mostar is reclaiming its rightful place as a center of cultural diversity.
issance
limits. New monuments and architectural styles reflected the aspirations of Mostarians and
the Austro-Hungarian administration. Monolithic neo-Renaissance buildings towered over
their Ottoman predecessors and introduced sober, imposing street walls to the city. By the
early twentieth century, elements of Art Nouveau and Secessionist styles began to appear in
Mostar’s historicist buildings, such as Josip Vancaš’ Landbank constructed in 1910.

The inevitable hybrid that emerged from this period of intense building was a new monu-
mental style that combined the massing of European prototypes with Orientalist details.
This influence is illustrated well by Franc Blazek’s Gymnasium of 1902. Though its design
was derived from Islamic styles of Spain and North Africa and bears no genuine relation
with Mostar’s Ottoman past, it reflects the tendency of Austro-Hungarian administrators to
harmonize rather than suppress cultural difference within the empire.

World War I was triggered in nearby Sarajevo when Serbian “Black Hand” radicals exhibited
their distaste for the incumbent empire by assassinating its heir, Archduke Franz Ferdinand.
Fearing annexation by the Serbians, most Bosnians were loyal to the Austro-Hungarian Empire
during the war. Pragmatism and international pressure in light of a realigned Europe at the

THE FAMOUS STARI MOST
AS IT LOOKED IN THE EARLY
TWENTIETH CENTURY,
BEFORE ALL THE BLOODSHED
AND CONFLICT.

REHABILITATED STRUCTURES
EMBRACE A RECONSTRUCTED
STARI MOST.
THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

As a key part of the reconstruction of Mostar, World Monuments Fund and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture identified 21 buildings of architectural importance in dire need of restoration. Located on both sides of the Neretva, the buildings reflect the city’s long and diverse cultural history and include Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Muslim religious institutions; Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Socialist-era public buildings; and commercial, residential, and educational structures.

To date, seven of these buildings have been restored with AKTC/WMF funds while four others are being granted new life with monies from the World Bank and other donors, including the French government. Thirteen architecturally significant buildings, however, await donor funding or private investment, among them an Austro-Hungarian girls’ high school for which an innovative adaptive reuse scheme has developed, an Austro-Hungarian Gymnasium, and a Music School.

1. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY Designed by Milos Komandina and completed in 1898, this neo-classical building was once a private home. Current plans call its use as a city library.

2. KONAK HOUSING COMPLEX Built by the merchant families Dokić, Bilić, and Pesko in 1900, this building needs stabilization of its Prussian vaults, shoring up of its load-bearing members, and new flooring.

3. AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN GYMNASIUM Following restoration, Franc Blazek’s 1902 Orientalist-style high school will resume its life as a multicultural educational institution.

4. THIRD PRIMARY SCHOOL Designed by Franc Blazek, this Orientalist-style building is to be reused as a school and international meeting center.

5. ALAJBEGOVIĆA HOUSE This early eighteenth-century timber and masonry Ottoman residence has been restored by AKTC/WMF.

6. SERBIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL Designed by Dorde Knezić, this 1909 Art Nouveau building is to resume its role in education following restoration.

7. ĆEJVANBEG HAMAN This late-sixteenth-century Turkish bath was restored by the French government for use as an exhibition space.

8. KARADJOZBEG MOSQUE Completed in 1557, this mosque designed by Sinan has been restored by the Research Center for Islamic Art and Culture.

9. LANDBANK Josip Vancaš’s 1910 Secessionist-style building is privately owned by the Landbank, which plans to restore it.

10. MUNICIPALITY BUILDING World Bank has underwritten the restoration of this early twentieth-century Neoclassical edifice, returning it to service as a seat for local government.

11. BISHOP’S PALACE Built in 1847 for the Catholic Church in Mostar, this building is in urgent need of restoration.

12. HRVOJE HALL Built in 1897, this Neoclassical theater was badly damaged in the war and needs considerable reconstruction work.

13. KAJTAZ HOUSE This family dwelling, which has been in constant use since its construction in the seventeenth century, awaits restoration.

14. BIŠČEVICA AND LAKIŠIĆA COMPLEXES This late-eighteenth-century Ottoman housing unit has been restored by AKTC/WMF for use as a guesthouse and city museum.

15. MUSLIBEGOVIĆA HOUSE The grandest of the Ottoman period residences, this 1875 building has been completely restored by AKTC/WMF.

16. SEVRI HADŽI HASAN MOSQUE Built sometime before 1620, this Ottoman mosque has been restored by AKTC/WMF.

17. NAPREDAK CULTURAL CENTER Built for the Croatian Society, this 1906 Art Nouveau building is being restored with funds from the World Bank, City of Mostar Project Coordination Unit, and AKTC/WMF.

18. VAKUF PALACE Built in 1897 on the site of the original caravanserai of the Karadjozbeg Mosque, this former palace is being restored by the World Bank, City of Mostar Project Coordination Unit, and AKTC/WMF.

19. METROPOLITAN PALACE This 1903 Baroque Revival building, the former home of the Orthodox Bishop of Mostar, is being restored by the World Bank, City of Mostar Project Coordination Unit, and AKTC/WMF.

20. SCHOOL AT MUSALA SQUARE Built in 1880, the building, if restored, will find new life as a music school.

21. GIRLS’ HIGH SCHOOL Should funds be found for restoration, this late-nineteenth-century Austro-Hungarian building will become a mixed-use facility in the heart of the historic district.
close of the war forged the “Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes”—later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia—a constitutional monarchy that included Bosnia and Herzegovina under the leadership of Serbia’s Prince Regent Alexander. His attempts to “erase the old regional identities” antagonized all parties, culminating in a suspension of the constitution.

These internal conflicts were soon overshadowed by the advance of Hitler and the German alliance with an “Independent State of Croatia” (the NDH). A Partisan resistance in the region grew under the direction of Josip Broz Tito, and attracted large numbers of Bosnians. At the close of World War II, Tito was at the heart of a new socialist Yugoslavia. By 1974, Yugoslavia had become a federative socialist nation made up of discrete republics, one of which was Bosnia-Herzegovina. Under Tito’s rule, Mostar’s industrial base was expanded with the construction of a metal-working factory, cotton textile mills, and an aluminium plant. An influx of skilled workers dramatically broadened the social and demographic profile of the city. Between 1945 and 1980, Mostar’s population grew from 18,000 to 100,000.

Because Mostar’s eastern bank lacked adequate infrastructure, the city expanded on the western bank with the construction of large residential blocks. Commercial buildings in the functionalist style appeared on the historic eastern side of the city as well, replacing more intimate timber constructions that had survived since Ottoman times. In the 1970s and 1980s, a healthy local economy fueled by foreign investment spurred recognition and conservation of the city’s cultural heritage. An economically sustainable plan to preserve the old town of Mostar was implemented by the municipality, which drew thousands of tourists from the Adriatic coast and invigorated the economy of the city. The results of this ten-year project earned Mostar an Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1986. Yet, all of this progress would suffer a serious setback with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the death of Tito in the early 1990s.

At that time, ultranationalist leaders in the republics enjoyed political ascendancy that would have been unthinkable under Tito. Alija Izetbegović formed a new government in Bosnia, which included the representation of Muslim, Bosnian-Croat, and Bosnian-Serb parties. In May 1992, 64 percent of the Bosnian electorate voted for a state “of equal citizens and nations of Muslims, Serbs, Croats, and others.” Days later, however, Sarajevo was under siege. Bosnian Serb military and paramilitary forces pursued a campaign of terror and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Mostar was overwhelmed by Serbian military units, and shelled from the surrounding hills. Nearly 100,000 people were forced from their homes and more than 1,600 died.

A Croat-Muslim Federation was able to expel Serbian forces by June 1992. Shortly thereafter, local Muslims and Croatians became adversaries. The Bosnian-Croatian Militia (the HVO) took possession of the West Bank of the Neretva, expelling many Muslim families from their homes, and initiating a new round of hostilities in what has been termed the “second battle of Mostar.” More than 3,000 people were killed, and another 10,000 were sent to concentration camps.

Beyond the sheer human tragedy, many historic buildings in the old city were damaged or destroyed, including most of the city’s important mosques and the Stari Most,
which had been a favored target throughout the HVO’s assaults. On November 9, 1993, the bridge’s springline was hit at point-blank range by a Croatian tank shell. Within moments, Mostar’s 400-year-old symbol of civic unity crumbled into the cold waters of the Neretva River.

On March 18, 1994, President Izetbegović of Bosnia-Herzegovina and President Tudjman of Croatia signed a Federation Agreement that provided for an interim administration by the European Community in Mostar. Although the city remained deeply divided, further stability was achieved with the signing of the NATO-initiated “General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina” in Dayton, Ohio, which delineated a Muslim-Croat Federation that covered 51 percent of Bosnia’s territory and a Republika Srpska that would encompass 49 percent of the land. In June 1996, local residents of all backgrounds were able to participate in elections, voting for a unified city government.

Today, Mostar has a growing local economy and a joint administration, in which Muslim and Croat officials alternate in the post of Mayor and Deputy Mayor. Moderate and centrist politicians have put forward a conciliatory political agenda with increasing success and public support.
As wartime tensions have begun to fade, energies are being focused on new commercial and civic projects, among them the reconstruction of the Stari Most, a task underwritten and carried out by the World Bank and UNESCO.

Early in the rebuilding process, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and World Monuments Fund (WMF) realized that without the rehabilitation of Mostar’s historic neighborhoods, streetscapes, and important buildings the reconstructed bridge would be devoid of context and meaning. Moreover, it was important that any restoration or reconstruction work be carried out within the context of an overarching urban-planning program. In 1998, the organizations joined forces and drafted a Conservation and Development Plan for the Old Town, which was formally adopted by local authorities on May 15, 2001. The plan, funded by the AKTC and WMF’s Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve our Heritage, outlines a suite of urban conservation schemes and individual restoration projects aimed at regenerating historic Mostar. In concert with these planning proposals, the AKTC/WMF team worked closely with the Municipal authorities to ensure the establishment of an effective institutional setting and a solid management structure to sustain the implementation of the plan over the long term. To this effect, assistance and support was given to the technical department of the Old City Municipality—which eventually resulted in the establishment of the Stari Grad Agency.

While the AKTC focused its efforts primarily on vast urban renewal projects, WMF drew up a list of 21 individual buildings and building ensembles that were of particular architectural importance. Nearly half of the structures lay within the old Ottoman city wall, all are within the confines of the 1918 Austro-Hungarian town.
Among these properties were the Karadjozbeg and Sevri Hadži Hasan mosques, the Ottoman-period Muslibegovica and Bščevića houses, and Josip Vancas’ Landbank and Franc Blazek’s Gymnasium, the latter two from the Austro-Hungarian period. To date, seven of these buildings have been or are being restored with funds from AKTC/WMF (see page 41), while four others are being rehabilitated with monies from the World Bank, UNESCO, and other donors, including the French government. Ten architecturally significant buildings await donor funding or private investment. Aside from representing some of Mostar’s highest architectural achievements, the buildings, once restored, will serve as “anchor” sites within the various neighborhoods, attracting investment and stimulating economic growth during the long process of reconstruction.

In spite of the destruction and widespread introduction of modern construction technology and materials, traditional methods are still understood and practiced by a select group of local artisans and master builders. The AKTC/WMF projects have made ample use of local knowledge and have encouraged the training of young Bosnian architects who have participated in the project and formed the core of the AKTC/WMF Mostar office.

This rooting of the project in local ground has also resulted in the establishment of the Stari Grad Agency which, on behalf of the city, will have an important role in overseeing the ongoing implementation of the conservation plan, as well as operating and maintaining a series of restored historic buildings (including the Old Bridge complex) and promoting Mostar as a cultural and tourist destination. The Agency will thus be taking over the functions and responsibilities of the AKTC/WMF Mostar project office, as well as those of the World Bank Project Coordination Unit.

As old Mostar regains its physical identity, it should become a focal point for visitors from all over the world and—even more importantly—resume its function as a truly multicultural urban center, providing an example of a place where people of different cultures, religions, and ethnic affiliations live and work side by side. Our hope is that the joint restoration efforts of the city administration and the international community lead Mostar into a bright and peaceful future.