Adisa BASIĆ:
For 'Writing In and Beyond the City'

Little cube, sweet little concrete cube…

"What an uuuugly neighborhood!" is the thought that crosses everybody's mind when they see it for the first time. Some are kind enough not to say it out loud.

My neighborhood is the so-called socialist *dormitory*. It's quite popular to call such rows of bleak apartment buildings a dormitory. As if we are there only to sleep – it's so awful that there's nothing else one can think of doing there. But there is. We sleep, eat, exchange kisses, and talk loud. We fight, bleed, make love and cuddle gently; we learn to play guitar, underline the most beautiful sentences in books that we find particularly true. In the dormitories, we go sledging in winter and fondle on a bench when it gets dark in summer. We play ball, eat ice-cream, we are bored. Sometimes we die and are laid to rest there.

A concrete cube is a bastard of architecture, an unpleasant sight that makes the squeamish turn their heads away feeling slightly sick. A concrete cube at the outskirts of the City is something you run away from: when we kids from the concrete cubes become successful and well-off, we look down on our old neighborhood, we notice how inhumane it is to live in, and how loud, ugly and somewhat stinking it is.

I was born and raised in a concrete cube. I've lived there mostly for the past 30 years. I often go to more beautiful and smart places, and then come back again. For 30 years I've been watching the world through a window of my little concrete cube and the world - just to entertain me - changes, turns somersaults, pulls the funniest and most terrifying things. From my window I've watched the changes of seasons, changes of ideologies, regimes and states. Several times I saw people die, hit by a sniper (when it's war) or a heart attack (when it's really hot). I saw them in war being buried in a too-short coffin made of a closet door.

I arrived in my little cube for the first time long, long time ago, in my mum's tummy. She smiled (as my dad told me, so we'll take him at his word): all roundish, she spread her arms saying "Is this really all ours? Could they've made a mistake? This is maybe for several families? You can play football here?" The doors had not been installed yet, so she and dad bribed the guard to let them in to see their future apartment. And they couldn't believe that such luck came upon them. And they'd only worked hard since they were kids, nothing more, and they earned their little concrete socialist piece of luck.

Later I was slightly disappointed to see socialist *dormitories* in Budapest, East Berlin and Belgrade. Ours was tiny and tame compared to theirs. It had nothing of the terrifying monumentality and uniformity that everybody spoke of, shocked at the modern socialist

architecture for a new better man. Too ugly for the West, too frivolous for the East, we spent our inappropriately happy lives in the suburb of Sarajevo.

From day one, our neighborhood provided plenty of ideas for anyone who would wish to write: all sorts of people - writes and workers, cleaning ladies, police officers, professors - moved in to those vertical streets. Poor building material and isolation made the intimacy disappear almost completely – smells, sounds and destinies were shared with your neighbors.

I realized the war came when everybody had covered their windows with dark sticky tape, as if they wanted to play tic-tac-toe. The tape was used to prevent the glass from bursting into thousands pieces once a grenade explodes. This way it would collapse in one piece. Somebody came up with a really god idea. Soon, there was no glass left, so we had plastic on our windows. That meant even less intimacy, but lives easily mixed through those semi-permeable membranes.

Sometimes, a grenade would hit one of the concrete cubes, knocking down the entire wall where the window used to be. Then you would see so much of someone else's life that it would be unbearable. In a split moment, one's concrete cube would turn into a doll house with a sliding wall. Other people's private items would sometimes found themselves on the street and this was often too much even for the most committed voyeurs. Soon, the buildings in my neighborhood were covered with holes and wounds that damaged their humble beauty even more.

The cellars where we used to keep tires, skates, pickled cabbage and all sorts of useless staff that we actually should had thrown away, became neat little rooms where one could find shelter during shelling. At first, we had fun down there playing cards and chess, but it soon became sickening. The feeling of despair made the fear turn slightly numb, and the live continued "as normal". My friends and I would climb onto the roof of the building wearing bikinis and putting on pre-war sunblock leftovers. It was wonderful, the sun was hot as if we were on a real beach, but we couldn't stand upright so we don't get noticed by snipers and killed in the midst of the summer idyll.

In winter, when it's war and there is no heating, the concrete cubes are very cold. My brother would dress for sleeping as if he was mounting an expedition to the South Pole. Jokingly, he used to call his room "a realm of eternal snow and ice". All four of us survived the war. And our little cube survived too, almost intact.

Mum would still smile, with her arms spread, wondering at the great luck that would suddenly come upon us. She would again buy fresh flowers in her favorite orange color and again we had glass panes on our windows. My mother never called our neighborhood a dormitory. She never thought of it as a noisy or inhumane place to live in. For her, 1979 remained the happiest year of her life. That was the year when she gave birth to me, and when she and dad got their little concrete cubicle.

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