

Split the Difference An Essay

The Roman emperor Diocletian is known for many things, not usually as an inadvertent pioneer of dynamic civic space, but that is how I think of him. Diocletian, born son of a slave in 245 AD, worked his way up through the army to reign over an empire that extended from Britain to Persia. But unlike many men of power (or any other Roman Emperor) he relinquished his, choosing to retire to the coast of Dalmatia to grow vegetables. (There is a mention of cabbages.) For that he built a modest retirement home *cum* fortress the size of 6 football fields. The miracle is that Diocletian's Palace in the town of Split in modern Croatia is still inhabited and stands today as one of the glories of the Adriatic Coast, and, for a fan of engaging public squares, it's an inviting pilgrimage.

I grew up in suburban Philadelphia; like any American suburb, the ideals there were individuality, privacy, the nuclear family: single family dwellings with lawns, fences. In the evening, most families turned inside, their focal point the blue glow of the TV. Social institutions, not built environments, created what community there was, but I can't think of anything that gathered everyone in the same space. The experience left me with a hunger for a different way of relating spatially and socially.

My quest as a traveller is to find unique places that express through their architecture the forces that created them, spaces where history is written in stone.

American cities are so young that they offer less instruction in how we humans have been altering our environment; we have few ruins to remind us.

Also, as a traveller, I'm aware of skimming the surface of the places I visit. Unless I can settle down for some months, or I'm visiting a friend who lives there, I remain on the outside looking in. As a consequence, I seek villages or towns where those of us passing through are far outnumbered by people who live and work there; then I seek ways to slip into the stream of life as it is lived. The best way is to locate a plaza tucked between busy buildings with open-air cafés where people gather to grab a coffee on their way to work, or stop to meet a friend, where little kids kick balls around. These public spaces can be on the formal side, like the Place des Vosges in Paris, or less so, like a village square with a café under a chestnut tree. But each creates an intimacy within it; each invites the passerby to stop, to linger over food or drink, to let time slow. For the locals, it functions as a focal point and gathering spot, the closest these days to the old idea of the commons. There I can sit unobtrusively observing daily life.

Sitting, I can try to imagine what it would be like to inhabit this place, to belong to it. I don't get far; I know that I know too little, but it's a way of trying to "un-other" the people around me. I listen to the sounds of the language, guess at what they're expressing, and observe social interactions: do people meeting each other kiss on one cheek, or two, or shake hands? Is a crying toddler hushed or hugged? What newspapers do these businessmen read? Do young lovers kiss openly?

We are so inundated with global information that it's hard to latch on to singularities within the flood, hard to maintain proportion in caring. After five years of photos of Syrians fleeing as their country is destroyed, what reservoir of emotion do we (distant, unable to help) have left for these atrocities? It's a daily desensitization. Us/them crevices crack our humanity, and the wider they spread, the easier demagogues can exploit them. In Split I was particularly conscious of this, remembering how nationalist leaders had provoked those divisions to drag the remnants of the former Yugoslavia to war not so long before.

Croatia was new to me; a part of the world I had much to learn about. Here, within and adjacent to Diocletian's Palace, I found two public squares that taught me more than I expected.

My friend and I approached the Palace from the Riva, a broad marble esplanade along the bay lined with palm trees and cafes under crisp white awnings. Turning our backs on the sea, we faced the long southern wall of the Palace. Shops filled the ground floor; the second floor was apartments, whose white shutters were thrown back against yellow walls. Above that three stories of ancient colonnaded limestone towered over us, two clearly lived in, the third with windows showing sky beyond. A passage between apartment doorways led down into the Palace's mostly empty cellar a story and a half tall, which raised the palace commandingly above sea level. Walking between the rough-hewn limestone-block walls, we felt dwarfed by its echoing vastness. After crossing to the far side, we mounted broad steps to emerge directly into the one end of the Peristyle, one of the world's strangest and richest public squares.

In Diocletian's time, anyone entering thus from below would feel his subservient position acutely as he surfaced to face the vestibule of the emperor's apartments, where Diocletian appeared for ceremonial audiences. And stand on ceremony he did, being the first to demand that subjects kiss the hem of his garment. This was a man who identified with the gods.

As it is now, on first arrival I felt more like a groundhog popping up to 360 degrees of surprise. The Palace is one of the most impressive Roman ruins anywhere—and not only still lived in, but a vibrant neighborhood of 3,000 souls and 220 businesses. It is impressively Roman, but also, having been inhabited almost continuously for close to two thousand years, it's a lively hodgepodge of architectural styles wedged into a Roman framework.

The Peristyle is a rectangle set several feet below the buildings that surround it, with three shallow steps leading up to the surrounding buildings. This lends it the feel of an interior, a room, despite the blue Adriatic sky over head. Two extensive, free-standing Roman colonnades line the sides of its long axis, defining the sunken courtyard. To the right, a bit of Roman booty, a black granite Egyptian sphinx from the 5th century BC, stretched out like a self-satisfied cat between two columns, and the heavy-bodied octagonal Cathedral of St. Domnius. Originally Roman, in the seventh century St. Domnius was converted to a church; it was crowned with a bell tower in the thirteenth.

Our heads swiveled as the dizzying mix of centuries and cultures continued. Two imperial lions perched on columns beyond the cathedral, followed by a medieval building or two; a small Renaissance church; and, behind the second

colonnade, the glass façade of a modern hotel. Some buildings from each era had been demolished to make way for the next, but what struck me more was how many of these testaments to the human quest for power and transcendence had been preserved.

The white polished marble of the Peristyle floor and Roman buildings bestow a lightness, a freshness, to the stone despite its antiquity. The square draws locals and tourists alike to wonder. Waiters from the hotel lay red cushions on the three long steps opposite, then serve coffee on round silver trays to those who sit, improvising elegance. Perched there, coffee cup on my knees in the warm October sun, I felt held in the palm of a vast hand as I contemplated Diocletian, a man with a passion for order. He streamlined the Roman army and administrative apparatus, dividing the empire into manageable-sized pieces, and in so doing, prepared the way for the Byzantine Empire in the east, while salvaging the collapsing empire in the west. He's often remembered for his thoroughness and cruelty in persecuting Christians, but, to be fair, he had to be talked into it by an ambitious subaltern, Galerius, who later married Diocletian's daughter. His last public act was to build this magnificent palace, and, central to it, his own mausoleum dominating the Peristyle. Ironically, after the Christians he'd tried to eradicate took power, they booted his bones from the mausoleum when they converted it into a church dedicated to Sv Duje/St. Domenicus, a victim of one of his purges.

From the Peristyle we wandered onward through the labyrinthine Palace, finding a similar extreme mix of history around every corner: mini-Renaissance palaces, computer stores, bars, Roman baths and temples, laundry strung across

narrow passages, and old women dressed in black leaning out of windows to gossip, but always framed by Diocletian's walls.

The Scottish architect Robert Adam came to Split in the mid-eighteenth century on the last leg of a Grand Tour; the architecture of the Palace also struck him as a revelation. He studied it, wrote about it in the influential *The Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia* in 1764, and used it to develop his version of the neoclassical style, building on the work of Andrea Palladio and others who had reacted against the Rococo. Adam had a profound effect on British architecture. In turn, his neoclassicism was taken up by architects in the newly hatched United States, notably by Charles Bullfinch, whose work can still be seen in Charleston, Providence, New York, and in Boston, where he designed much of Beacon Hill, the edges of the adjacent Common and the State House.

Just outside but contiguous with the western wall of the Palace lies Narodni Trg, or National Square, Split's town center in the fourteenth century, a larger, relaxed space more central to the life of locals.

We came into this broad, irregular plaza from the Palace through a Romanesque arch. The long history of Split is again laid out in the surrounding buildings. Charlemagne's Franks conquered Dalmatia in 800 AD, leading to the conversion of the populace, which has remained largely Catholic to this day. In 925, the Croatian Kingdom was born, but Dalmatia was variously subjected to the Byzantine empire, the Venetians, or the Hungarians throughout the centuries, though most often Venice, with a total of 800 years of domination.

The Venetian influence was everywhere. The Ciprianis-Benedetti Palace, built in 1394, with its ground floor loggia and triple arcade with pointed windows, would have been at home on a canal in Venice. The old town hall, built about a century later, and the Cambi Palace echoed the Venetian Gothic. Turning back towards the way we entered, next to the arch I saw a square, late Gothic tower decorated by a sunburst clock below a cast-iron bell. Narrow passageways out of the square hinted at more to explore beyond.

The rough triangle of the square welcomed us to linger in any one of the outdoor cafes that rimmed the gleaming marble paving. (The people of Split stay out late; I imagined a crew of cleaning elves arriving at 5 a.m. to scrub it; otherwise how could it always look so clean, so pure?) There we relaxed, enjoying the harmony of the painted buildings in yellow, ochre, or banded white and buff limestone, some with dove gray shutters. We sipped coffee there in the morning, stopped by for lunch, came back in the evening to watch the slow coming of twilight over a grappa. In the packed living quarters around us, this was precious common space where waiters greet regulars by name, where workmen come in paint-spattered clothes as often as coifed women in high heels, where church bells ring while grandmothers push babies in prams and students stop in after school. Where old and young are not segregated, where daily interactions between rich and poor, intellectual and worker, old and young knit the community together.

Sitting in that peaceful square, we almost found it hard to believe that the Balkan conflict of 1990 to 1994 was fought so viciously nearby. Split was luckily untouched, but Dubrovnik, 140 miles to the south, was bombarded for three

months, while Sarajevo, a bit farther to the north and east suffered a brutal four-year siege in which close to 14,000 people died.

We'd recently been in Sarajevo and seen buildings large and small pock-marked with bullet holes. The National Library, which the Serb nationalists had intentionally destroyed, was slowly being rebuilt behind a cocoon of cloth. It was another city with welcoming and intriguing public spaces, particularly in the heart of Baščaršija the Muslim quarter, which looked, smelled and sounded like Istanbul, with its minarets, pungent coal smoke, the call of the *azan*, and, above all, its outdoor cafes where we'd enjoyed many cups of Turkish coffee. The people of Sarajevo had been proud of their city as a center where Serbs, Muslims and Croats mingled in those squares to produce a vibrant culture together. We'd heard plenty of speculation that a motivation for the particularly venomous siege of that city was that the Serb army, intent on building a unitary state, was determined to crush that embodiment of tolerance and multiculturalism. The Serb army also methodically destroyed built evidence of Muslim history throughout Bosnia in an orgy of razing libraries, monuments, cemeteries and mosques.

Not that the Croats were innocent; in the perverse dynamic created by war, where they controlled territory, they destroyed monuments to Serb heroes of the Nazi resistance or the Communist era. Buildings don't lie; buildings that told the wrong story were destroyed by all three sides in that trilateral conflict. Seeing this, I fear what coming generations will believe, absent evidence contradicting the narratives they're told.

In Narodni Trg, as in most European urban spaces like this, we observed groups of friends sitting late at dinner, talking for hours each night. No waiter hurried anyone through a meal, nor were the diners in a hurry to move on.

An American friend, referring to those three-hour European dinners, asked me once, only half joking, “What *do* they find to talk about?” I don’t know, but I know that from Madrid to Motovun, from Sorrento to Split, in the warmer months Europeans find intense enjoyment conversing together night after night in outdoor cafes and restaurants. These Europeans are well-heeled; I assume they have TVs if they want them, but they seem to prefer actively inhabiting their own lives.

But then they have these marvelous communal spaces that invite them to do so. Back in the U.S. I miss these intensely. Our cities have parks: greenspaces put aside for dog-walking, strolling, maybe ball playing. Rarely have our city planners nestled European-style squares ringed with restaurants within neighborhoods, nor do they typically emerge from unplanned development. I’m aware of recent attempts to create something of the sort, such as the pedestrian spaces in downtown Burlington in the summer, or New York City’s blocking off Herald and Times Squares, but these are afterthought reconfigurations, rarely ringed by the cafes that encourage conviviality, and rarely as successful. Is this because we haven’t valued our collective life as much as Europeans do, or do we not value collective life because we haven’t grown up with this model of it, we don’t know it exists?

On my return from Croatia to the U.S., I was struck again by how fast we move, how rarely we linger, and how atomized and privatized our spaces are. American teens looking for a place to gather often end up hanging out in malls;

that's also where seniors go to walk in the mornings. Starbucks has become the new American living room, though there we don't talk to each other as often as we check email and text. And to state the obvious, both are commercial, not public, spaces. We don't have Narodni Trg; we don't have lovely spaces to draw us together.

Our intentions rarely control long-term outcomes. Diocletian built his Palace/fortress to keep people out, but it has become a location that, *par excellence*, invites them in. He built it to glorify himself; now it serves the multitudes: his palace has become an environment that gathers its inhabitants together. Diocletian was an emperor who identified with Jupiter, but centuries later his architecture inspired a building style identified in the new United States with republicanism and radicalism. For those of us who travel to his Dalmatian Palace from that new country, it's a reminder of a different kind of commons, and how the built environment shapes us, even as, in the long run, we shape it.

