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Building the New Old Bridge

January 3, 2002

One of Bosnia's most beautiful sites is being rebuilt to boost reconciliation

This article originally appeared in the World Bank's internal newspaper, 'Today'. The story was written by Julie Poucher Harbin, foreign editor for ONASA news agency and the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting - IWPR.

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Braving the scorching mid-July sun in Mostar, Cisic, who is a Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim), and his deputy Tihomir Rusic who is a Croat, stood side by side on the bank of the river surveying the reconstruction work.

"This is one of the largest projects regarding culture in the whole of southeastern Europe, maybe in the whole of Europe," said Cisic. "We must have a lot of luck and good health."

They watch as townspeople and tourists lean over a temporary bridge and look down nervously at construction laborers hanging by support cables who are hard at work among the ruins.

The bridge in question is the Mostar bridge. Built in 1566 by the Ottoman architect Mimar Hajrudin, it spanned the magical green Neretva river in a small town which was at the time the Turkish outpost in southern Bosnia. On the day of the bridge's official unveiling, following five long years of planning and construction, legend says Hajrudin fled into the hills fearing that magnificent arch wouldn't hold.

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But it did survive, and eventually came to be known as "Stari Most" or Old Bridge. The Turkish outpost grew into a city and was named after the bridge—Mostar, or "keeper of the bridge." The bridge and surrounding cobble-stoned old town didn't change much even after the two world wars which raged throughout the region.

A temporary span

That is until November 9, 1993, when one of Bosnia's greatest cultural treasures was destroyed by artillery and tanks.

The bridge had been not only the symbol of the city, which is divided between Croats and Bosniaks, but also a symbol of Bosnia's historic tolerance for diversity among its peoples. Now the City, through a \$15.4 million dollar project, aims to help reconstruct the old bridge and restore that tolerance by preserving the character of Mostar's historic old town. The project is based on the belief that reconciliation among the peoples is a pre-requisite for economic revitalization and social cohesion in Bosnia's post conflict period. Financing includes a \$4 million IDA Learning and Innovation Loan being supplemented by grant money from other donors. The reconstruction works, already in full swing, are being coordinated by the city's Project Coordination Unit, led by Rusmir Ciscic. Reconstruction of the bridge will be started in 2002 and is expected to be completed within about one year.



Construction work underway

It will not be easy to reconstruct the 16th century bridge and its 27 meter span as an exact copy of the destroyed original. The desire to build a new Old Bridge identical to the original one was so strong that local authorities initially arranged for the remaining original building blocks to be plucked out of the Neretva river. However UNESCO experts decided to use new replicas which would be safer and more secure.

Those 30 or so blocks that were hauled out of the riverbed are all that remain, and will likely be displayed in a simple outdoor museum on the river banks. The unique "tenelija" marble for the new bridge comes from a town 5 kilometers south of Mostar and is the same material from the same place as what was used in the original bridge.

According to Ciscic and Rusic, there's been a positive response by citizens from both sides of town who've given their full support to the project. "It's a very important component in breaking down all barriers between two peoples; Croats and Bosniaks; one of the last barriers between these two peoples," Ciscic says. "Citizens of the city of Mostar realize what this bridge meant to them when it disappeared into the river. Citizens of this city almost lost their identity when the bridge fell down."

Says Rozic, "If there was no cooperation the project wouldn't be in this place. Its one of the conditions for the project to succeed. We think there won't be any problems regarding this cooperation and there are no reasons not to finish the project on time."

However, the Mostar Old Bridge is not only important for the people of Mostar. It's fame, beauty and symbolism go far beyond city limits and all over Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Because of this, many people from throughout the country stop in Mostar on their way to or from Adriatic coast, to see the bridge ruins and witness reconstruction works.

"I'm very glad to see this reconstruction is going on and that's exactly the reason I came here," said 49-year-old tourist Ibri while sipping a cold drink at a café by the ruins of one of the bridge towers. Ibri said he was determined to come back to Mostar when the bridge is completed.

Related links:

[Reconstruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar starts on June 7, 2001](#)

[UNESCO and World Bank to assist city of Mostar in rebuilding its old bridge](#), Paris, July 30, 1998

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