Richard Holbrooke is an architect. While he is frequently called the ‘architect’ of the Dayton Peace Agreement, the title is not simply a metaphor. To negotiate an end to the Bosnian War, Holbrooke acted as an architect, drawing on an understanding of spatial organization, large-scale planning, and architectural techniques to design a nation. He employed urbanistic strategies, drafting the future political boundaries to incorporate multiple, often conflicting demands concerning access to transportation routes, the distribution of infrastructures, the locations of resources and populations, and the physical management of urban centers. Just as importantly, Holbrooke orchestrated the space of the talks, using his spatial knowledge to design the relations of power of the negotiation. He led the warring parties from the site analysis of the existing Balkan territories, to the schematic design of the preconditions for negotiation, to the design development at the site of the talks in Dayton, to the construction drawings that mapped the future boundaries, and through the construction administration carried out by NATO to ensure that his design was executed. He worked through multiple scales of intervention, from the master plan of the geopolitical divisions in Bosnia, to the composition of the buildings at Dayton, to interior details like the table at which the treaty was signed, asserting his position through spatial relationships and symbolic power.

Holbrooke’s activities in the field of architecture demonstrate potentials that other architects might choose to explore. Peacemakers must become architects in the process of negotiation, but architects already possess the knowledge necessary to approach the most complex and intractable conflicts. The world needs architects more than ever.
Holbrooke designed fields of activity at multiple scales, from the geo-political relations to the seating at the negotiation table. At the outset of the process, he operated internationally, understanding that bringing the Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats to the table would itself require considerable negotiation. He employed ‘shuttle diplomacy’, acting as a third-party mediator ‘shuttling’ between the Balkan leaders, who at the time refused to talk directly, and flying to meetings with foreign ministers of several European nations. He insisted on locating the negotiations in the U.S. to assert his government’s commitment and authority in settling international disputes, and for the aesthetic potential of symbolic demonstrations of its military power. Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio allowed for physical and psychological control of the negotiations, enforcing limited press access as well as reminding the Balkan leaders of America’s potential for military action.

When he finally brought the leaders together at Dayton, they were edgy, angry, and distrustful. To overcome their wariness, he arrived at the idea of ‘proximity talks’, which he called ‘shuttle diplomacy by foot’, as a way to compress the shuttling to a walkable distance, creating a field of diplomatic potential through impromptu encounters in the parking lot between the diplomats’ quarters.

Holbrooke also employed a variant of shuttling that he called ‘napkin diplomacy’, carrying notes written on napkins by Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and Bosnian Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic between the two men’s tables at opposite ends of the dining hall, which eventually lead to face-to-face talks once agreement on basic principles could be reached.

Holbrooke’s use of proximity talks provided opportunities for tactical improvisation, achieving concessions in an informal setting, like a walk around the base, dinner at the officer’s hall, or late-night drinks in a presidential suite, which could then be locked in at official summits. Holbrooke even led the Balkan leaders on a tour of the base’s Air Force Museum, where they dined under the wing of a B-2 bomber. Proximity was crucial to his approach, allowing him to control the pace of the negotiation and move quickly when rapid closure was needed.
Holbrooke drew on his knowledge of political geography to design the site of the peace talks. Geographers describe the shape of a country’s borders as compact, prorupt, elongated, fragmented, or perforated. At Dayton, a perforated condition was created by nesting the buildings of the proximity talks within the boundaries of the base, thereby isolating the Balkan parties from the world outside and forcing them to commit to engaging each other in a strictly delimited space. A prorupt condition was produced by housing the European diplomats outside the quadrangle of buildings accommodating the Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and U.S. diplomats, significant in that most of the discussions took place in and between the four buildings. A compact condition was created by the selection of a circular negotiating table and the limiting of the proximity talks to a space of about three-square blocks.

For the conference room at Dayton, Holbrooke requested nameplates without country names and asked that only the flags of the Contact Group countries and the EU be displayed, thereby asserting the power of the NATO countries while symbolically minimizing the national identities of the Balkan diplomats. For pre-Dayton talks in Geneva, he ordered a custom table, specifying that it be round and seat no more than nine people, so that there would be no room at the table for the combatant parties (Bosnian Serbs, Bosniaks, and Bosnian Croats). The negotiations were instead carried out on their behalf by presidents Milosevic of Serbia, Izetbegovic of Bosnia, and Tudjman of Croatia, a diplomatic structure that was carried through to Dayton.

The compact space of the negotiations was consistent with Holbrooke’s strategy of allowing narrow participation of the minimum necessary number of parties. His spatial organization – evident in the choice of the location of the venue, the arrangement of the conference buildings, and the design of the negotiating table – not only brought together the selected parties, but narrowed the scope of issues and participants involved, keeping the chosen parties in and everyone else out.
In diplomacy, details matter. During the 1968 peace talks with the North Vietnamese, we had famously wasted more than two months arguing [with Hanoi] over the shape of the negotiating table, while the war continued.

Richard Holbrooke, To End A War
Holbrooke was determined not to let the temporary ceasefire boundary harden into a permanent partition of the country along ethnic lines. Milosevic nonetheless demanded a 51-49 percent division of the country, favoring the RS. Two areas, dubbed ‘The Egg’ and the ‘Clark Corridor’, were exchanged to arrive at the percentage, but the inadvertent effect was a much longer border.

To end the conflict, Holbrooke engaged in architecture’s most sophisticated practice: he drew a line. An ‘inter-entity boundary line’ was created within Bosnia and Herzegovina, creating two political entities within the nation, the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The line was intended as a provisional measure to enforce the ceasefire, yet it was intensely fought over by the Balkan parties at Dayton.
Holbrooke visualized and presented the site with models, such as three-dimensional geographic simulation software called PowerScene that he used to break stalemates about physical geography by allowing the Balkan presidents to fly over disputed territories. Dayton was the first occasion when three-dimensional simulations and digital mapping were used to negotiate boundaries in an official treaty. PowerScene provided a seemingly neutral reference for contentious debates about borders, but it also served as a reminder of American military power and intelligence, a virtual ‘shock and awe’. In fact, it was used by NATO to preview targets in Bosnia. PowerScene enabled Holbrooke to assert control over what he knew from the outset would be the most contentious issue of the talks – the mapping of boundaries along the ceasefire lines of the war and the creation of two political entities within Bosnia-Herzegovina.

While many U.S. officials thought that the two entities needed to be more compact and militarily defensible, the length of the border, combined with Holbrooke’s insistence on the short-term and provisional nature of the line, have created greater interdependence between the Federation and the RS and required a long-term commitment to peaceful coexistence.

Today, the boundary line is no longer patrolled and can be freely crossed. As the focus shifts from Bosnia and Herzegovina’s internal division to its connection with the rest of the continent and its possible accession to the European Union, the boundary line may disappear entirely in the coming years.