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Spomenik. Architectures of sublime memory

Abstract

Spomenik is a synonym for 'monument' in memorial architecture and art. They are one of the outcomes of the civil strategy for resistance to Nazi fascism in Yugoslavia. This civic art corresponds to a brutalist expression, a sign of modernity and differentiation of Tito's Yugoslavia within the world of "Soviet Realism" and a conscious action of the need to project so many pluralities of different cultures and histories into a unified national idea. Despite being constrained within their own compositional and functional natures, the two arts come together in these installations – spatial designs, objects, or hybridized elements in their relationship of scale and function. After a phase of neglect and culpable oblivion following the Balkan conflicts, architectural critics show widespread interest in these monumental sculptures. This is proven by various international exhibitions and research works, which enhance their artistic, architectural, and cultural aspects along with the architects and artists who designed them.

Keywords

Art/Architecture — Monument/Ritual — Landscape

Introduction

Spomenik is the word for "monument" in Serbo-Croatian language. It refers to memorial architecture and art altogether as the outcome of a civic resistance strategy to Nazi-Fascism linked to Tito's government in Yugoslavia. He knew the need to project so many pluralities of different cultures and histories into an idea of a unified state. The result is countless signs and symbols made over about fifty years, hard to list in their entirety. This mosaic still overrides geographical, administrative, and cultural boundaries today in a time of new divisions. A high membership value was entrusted to the characters of civic art, conveyed through the plastic expressionism of form and scalar relationship without direct figurative and rhetorical connotations. Thus, it could dialogue with the landscape scale without renouncing possible evocative and poetic references. They are monolithic and assertive signs, shaped by the time of light and shadow, along with the display of the solid matter represented by concrete, typical of a *brutalist* expression. They are a sign of Yugoslavia's modernity and differentiation within the world of "Soviet Realism" and indeed represent new constructive dialectics in the postwar Western debate beyond mute international rationalism.

Historical events and critics' discovery

The first approach to the monuments-symbols of recent Balkan history can be considered the photographic campaign by Jan Kempenaers between 2006 and 2009, shown in a traveling exhibition between Belgium, Holland, and the United States. It was then documented in the book *Spomenik* (Kempenaers, 2010), published in collaboration with the Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent. The Antwerp-based photographer's gaze captures and captures sculptur-

al constructions in a precise atmospheric condition, choosing the abstraction of diffuse twilight. The imposing masses of granite, reinforced concrete, or steel are framed in a condition of nature not inhabited by living beings, pure and isolated, casting no shadows on the ground to tie their presence to their location. Instead, they look like timeless apparitions. In presenting the first stage of the exhibition, Willem Jan Neutelings introduced an important point of view on the theme of time. *Spomeniks* sprung up in places that hosted horrendous war events during World War II but also led to civil confrontation between the different cultures of the multi-ethnic Yugoslavia: partisans, ustaše, and chetniks against each other in the fury of destruction. At the dawn of reconstruction, after the establishment of the republican federation, the objects of memory could not carry any still-divisive symbols. Instead, they had to free themselves from any figuration in the abstraction and boldness of pure sculpture. Rather than the image of a mournful past, they had to be the beginning of future, widespread, and universal equality. Even so, as Neutelings invited to reflect, the internecine warfare a few decades apart and the blind desire to dismember the *spomeniks* violently called into question not only the socialist state but the very possibility of coexistence. Perhaps this is why Jan Kempenaers's photographs deny the monuments any form of life other than vegetal or mineral.

Architectural critics began to show widespread interest in these monumental sculptures with the exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia. Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948-1980*, held at MoMA New York between July 2018 and January 2019 under the curatorship of Martino Stierli and Vladimir Kulić. The exhibition is, in fact, the first retrospective on socialist architecture designed and built in the Balkan territories of the former Yugoslavia. Its great merit was to highlight the richness and complexity of a physical reality designed and constructed to give concrete form to a new political and social reality. Balkan socialist architecture represents the spatial pattern for a moment of great historical transformation involving thousands of people under one ideal.

Few moments in history have witnessed a condition of total interdependence and simultaneity between the construction of a new form of society and the construction of the landscapes, the city, and the buildings intended to house it. One was considered inseparable from the other. The New York exhibition features four sections arranged as follows: "Modernization," examining the role of architecture in the rapid urbanization and industrialization of a largely rural country; "Global Networks," which examines the role of Yugoslavia's foreign policy in shaping its tourism and creating large-scale construction projects at home and abroad; then, "Everyday Life," exploring the country's mass housing projects and the emergence of modern design in a socialist consumer culture. Finally, the "Identities" section addresses the relationship between Yugoslavia's regional diversity and national unity.

These sections give vast space to collect, catalog, and display the projects, photographs, models, and documentary films of the *spomeniks*. They highlight the continuity across the monuments' ideational moment – when the artistic-architectural project takes shape – realization and spatial and evocative results.

Since this pivotal starting point in the rediscovery of such a conspicuous heritage, attention to the architecture of the Federated Balkans has grown exponentially. Indeed, the past five years have witnessed many scholarly research works, photographic projects, and film documentaries themed on the extraordinary story of a realized utopia.

**Fig. 1**

Boško Kučanski, *Il Pugno*, Makljen, Bosnia Erzegovina, 1978. Photo by Alberto Campi, +38, 2017.

Some of the most relevant ones – to mention the leading and best known – include the work of Donald Niebyl with the *Spomenik Database* site and volume (Niebyl, 2018); Boštjan Bugarič, who was one of the curators of the exhibition *Architecture. Sculpture. Remembrance. The Art of Monuments of Yugoslavia 1945-1991*; Alberto Campi with +38 (Campi, 2020), a poignant photographic reportage of his journey across all the member states of the former Federal Republic; the very recent exhibition *Stones Between the Fronts. Anti-Fascist Monuments on the Territory of Former-Yugoslavia*, which opened on September 14 this year at the Architekturstzentrum Wien under the curatorship of Melanie Hollaus and Christoph Lammerhuber, in collaboration with MuseumsQuartier Wien and Architekturstzentrum Wien. The exhibit includes full-scale analog models of two *spomeniks* and virtual reproductions of some environments, attempting to render the complexity of the memorials through augmented reality. Most importantly, it also has countless sketches and technical drawings by Bogdan Bogdanović, of which the Architekturstzentrum Wien holds 12,500 examples in imperishable memory.

In an interview with Dániel Kovács (Kovács, Bugarič, 2020) for the web page of “Domus,” Boštjan Bugarič explained the correlation between the exhibition *Architecture. Sculpture. Remembrance* and MoMA’s encyclopedic exhibition. He pointed out that the diffusion of Yugoslavia’s architectural culture has even earlier origins, traced back to the exhibition of the national pavilion at the 39th Venice Biennale in 1980. There, the architects themselves – Bogdan Bogdanović, Dušan Džamonija, Slavko Tihec, and Miodrag Živković – presented their work and made it known on a global scale. They were aware that they had accomplished and shaped a cultural revolution. After being destroyed shortly after that, their work was revived in the first decade of the ‘00s by the Association of Croatian Architects in collaboration with the Maribor Art Gallery in the project *Unfinished Modernisations - Between*

**Fig. 2**

Miodrag Živković and Ranko Radović, *Memoriale della battaglia di Sutjeska nella valle degli eroi*, Tjentište, Bosnia Erzegovina, 1971. Photo by Alberto Campi, +38, 2017.

Utopia and Pragmatism, first organized regionally, then becoming a more extensive network, leading up to the conception and realization of the New York exhibition. Meanwhile, Donald Niebyl's impressive cataloging work, *Spomenik Database*, began. Through an ever-developing website, he attempts to reconstruct a comprehensive map of the places of monumental architecture in the Federal Republic. The *spomeniks* and President Tito's houses, memorials, cemeteries, charnel houses, and museums have been marked at their geographic coordinates. In addition to the inventory of thousands of works, the catalog includes the protagonists of this cultural revolution, the architects and artists who left memories of a nation united under the sign of culture across the federated states. Through this activity of research, study, and popularization, the fate of the *spomeniks* continues to bounce from one part of the world to another, perpetuating – if not the sense of an ideal, egalitarian, and widespread society – at least its deep and radical trust in the capacity of the forms of art and, peculiarly, architecture to memorialize it.

Dialectic art and landscape

«After the dispute with Stalin in 1948, a new artistic expression was born,» says Boštjan Bugarič, «Abstract Modernism became the main artistic expression in Yugoslavia with its innovative approach, monumentality, and great expressiveness in the landscape» (Kovács, 2020)

Even today, despite the maps of the former Yugoslavia producing a sense of disintegration and a dismembered geography, the *spomeniks* identify an ideally unified territory through their quantity and quality. They form a network of points and routes that mark places and characterize landscapes without the need for geographical boundaries or cultural, political, or ethnic constraints. They still live by their artistic and architectural expressiveness in a time suspended between the visible and invisible: «The invisible is part of the visible, it is inherent in the visible: it is the very condition, indispensable



Fig. 3
Miodrag Živković e Svetislav Ličina, *Monumento al coraggio*, Ostrava, Serbia 1969. Photo by Alberto Campi, +38, 2017.

to the revelations that lead us to knowledge. » (Turri, 2004) It is visible in its relationship with the landscape, the essence of nature and history, nature and culture; it is invisible in its ability to narrate places as an overlay of memories and human events filtered through the idea of “commemoration.”

So, if landscapes «are a field for reading the world» (Venturi Ferriolo, 1995), these are “talking” places, where *spomeniks* – memorials – serve as the most appropriate megaphone for a society in search of symbols and moments of collective identification in a specific historical period. In this sense, the architectural and sculptural presences of the *spomeniks* represent “the remnants” of a past and an ideal and political tension. They are analog to landscapes bearing signs of the past, with evocative “ruins” that add new and different meanings in time and space. Undoubtedly, their scale of intervention and expressive and plastic research reveal their landscapes. Yet, at the same time, they become landscapes. Beneath a willingness to forget and often to remove, there are silent ruins, mysterious and primordial megaliths in their apodicticity, perhaps belonging now to an imagery of a fantastic archaeology that retains all the expressiveness and emotional pull proper to “unspeakable” objects as in Le Corbusier’s acceptance. Therefore, on the one hand, we stand before ongoing “desacralization” processes (*spomeniks* often become locations for advertisements or commercial events) of sites linked to events, commemorations, and collective rituals. On the other hand, these constructions’ expressive and evocative capacity, where architects and artists have dealt with cognitive and transformative actions of the sites involved through a close and virtuous relationship between art/nature/landscape, remains intact.

This relationship shows the non-rhetorical character of the *spomenik*, which instead characterized the post-revolutionary evolutions of socialist art. In the former, the language of art was not chosen to enhance monuments’ figurative aspects and expressions of personality worship; instead, it was tied to their sculptural and architectural nature, projected toward abstraction and plastici-



Fig. 4

Rajko Radović, Podgora, *Ala di gabbiano*, Croazia, 1962. Photo by Alberto Campi, +38, 2017.

ty, conceived as the union of form and matter.

The reference was not Soviet postwar art but a more Western culture that was more open to innovation. Maybe it was more oriented toward the German revolutionary tradition of the '20s, with Walter Gropius's *Monument to the March Dead* (Weimar, 1921) as its highest and most authentic expression: no reference to figurative art, no commemorative inscriptions, but only a sense of form and matter. Its description by Giulio Carlo Argan could undoubtedly be applied to many of the *spomeniks* made in Yugoslavia:

In the 'Monument to the March Dead,' pure plasticity is already conceived as coagulation and precipitation of space through movement: such movement is not intended as an action or route in a given space. It can only be the disruption of a balance, a deviation from given constants, the landslide of oblique planes, and slipping slopes. Matter is the product of that condensation of space, traversed by a current of motion. It is no longer a primal matter awakened by the artist's will from natural stasis but an artificial matter born with the form. Outside the form, it is nothing but fluid and muddy mass, in perpetual motion and tension: concrete.» (Argan, 1988)

The Monument to Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg (Berlin, 1926), designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, *retains the same spirit yet different expressive values*. The major authors chosen to design the *spomeniks* are architects, too, and have proven willingness to work on more general spatial and landscape aspects. This is "encyclopedic" experimentation with a possible marriage between architecture and sculpture. Despite being bound by their own compositional and functional statutes, both arts operate on these installations – spatial designs, objects, or hybridized elements in their relationship of scale and function. Whatever their nature, these constructions are aimed at a new aesthetic, figurative, and symbolic achievement with great emotional relevance regarding the identity of territories and landscapes.

**Fig. 5**

Jóhann Jóhannsson, *Last and first men*, 2017, frame.

The weight of memory

One of the aspects discussed in this paper is the relationship between the monument, the physical substance of a testimony meant to last over time, and what revolves around it: the ritual performed by its visitors' movements, who fulfill the function it was erected for.

The question dissolves into a rhetorical stance. Does someone have to go to the monument for it to have a reason? Instead, is it possible to assume that just their physical presence is sufficient? The two are not separable. Users' ritual comings and goings are an integral part of its essence, fulfilling its function and giving it meaning. That action incorporates the meaning of its presence. The colossal and imposing *spomenik* sculptures, works of melancholic *land art*, are perfected through the visitor's ritual of approaching, gazing at, and renewing memory. Thus, they become architecture. Artists and architects have designed them almost entirely stripped of figurative or stylistic elements, echoing archaic and ancestral structures from other spatiality and temporality. The *spomeniks* are almost always set in wide landscapes where nature predominates over anthropization as if to indemnify the history of those places for the grave and mournful events they hosted. In this process, therefore, rituality moves from the scale of the sculptural object to the architectural one, which inhabits a place and is inhabited, up to the large scale of the landscape it connects to.

At the beginning of his best-known work on the character of the image in the Western world, *Life and Death of the Image* (Debray, 1992), Régis Debray is primarily concerned with defining its origin as a representation of death. «The birth of the image is closely related to death. But if the archaic image springs from the graves, it is out of a rejection of nothingness and to prolong life» (Debray, 1992). From the initial lines, it defines the intimate correlation between tomb and monument, which appears innate among ancient populations, almost as if it were the outcome of a spontaneous ritual.

Architectural modernity then led to Adolf Loos's celebrated definition of architecture as recognizing a burial place. For the Austrian master, only by



Fig. 6
Jóhann Jóhannsson, *Last and first men*, 2017, frame.

transcending functional purpose, stripped of all practical reason, can architectural space rise to the status of a work of art. Such honor belongs only to the tomb and the monument: «If we find a mound six feet long and three feet wide in the forests, formed into a pyramid, shaped by a shovel, we become serious and something says: someone lies buried here. *That is architecture.*» (Loos, 1910).

It means recognizing altogether a *form* - the earthly body emptied of gaze, light, and breath - and a *ritual* - the burial of mortal remains - which transcends culture, religion, and place, which is universally identified only because it aligns with our emotional chords, our human feeling. The presence of the *spomeniks* spread across the landscape of the former Yugoslavia portrays the continuous fulfillment of this recognition. They perform a secular ritual, far from any form of religion, but dense with deep spirituality. The currently visitable monuments impose a precise mode of approach on those who observe them, an exact time to travel the distances between one element and the next. Even the sequence in which the various parts appear has been somewhat pre-determined. Their ingenious creators range from the well-known and oft-mentioned Bogdan Bogdanović to Dušan Džamonija, who took the monumental spatiality of a *spomenik* to the Italian shores of the Adriatic Sea in the Ossuary of the Slavic Fallen in Barletta (Tupputi, 2021), from Montenegrin architect Svetlana Kana Radević to Miodrag Živković with his audacious structures. Maybe they hoped this would happen despite time and the brutal and irrespective *damnatio memoriae*. Significantly, the weight of this timeless ritual can be seen in the film *Last and first men*, Icelandic musician Jóhann Jóhannsson's first and only cinematic work, first shown in its embryonic form in 2017 at the Manchester International Festival, with live accompaniment performed by the BBC Philharmonic. Then, it was presented in its final version at the 2020 Berlin Film Festival, posthumously, almost two years after the untimely death of its director. The film is a cinematic transposition of Olaf Stapledon's 1930 first science fiction novel and tells of a civilization of immortal humans capable of telepathic communication. While awaiting the end of Earth and the entire system due to the

**FigG. 7-8**

Theo Angelopoulos, *Lo sguardo di Ulisse*, 1995, frame.

disintegration of the Sun, they rediscover their survival instincts and try to oppose their earthly end. The 16-mm film fixes, in a blurry, dusty black and white, interrupted only by a few green lights and the red image of the Sun, are combined with the scenes of a world difficult to place in time and space. Director Jóhannsson chooses to film them in the locations of the *spomeniks*. Often framed at an angle or from an unusual point of view, sometimes from the ground upward or in a partial close-up manner, they are not just film sets but become the protagonists of the action. Tilda Swinton's narrative voice completes the work and gives it an otherworldly aura, betrayed only by the emotion of mankind's disappearance. The camera slowly glides over the surfaces of the monuments, which vibrate in their textural chiaroscuro and are succeeded by images of forests, clouds, and skies, as if to relocate them in a new state of memory.

Conclusions

The fate of the *spomeniks* matches the crisis caused by the Balkan wars in the '90s. Along with economic, geographical, anthropological, and historical factors, the crisis takes on the guise of a cultural crisis, often capable of quickly losing and forgetting a historical and architectural heritage of great

identity value. The end of the regime brought along the plan of destroying symbols and testimonies representing the memory of a time that employed considerable human and intellectual resources. Yet, its urban, territorial, and artistic outcomes must be brought back and valued within the more general heritage of humanity. In this sense, the experimental laboratory pursued by Tito's cultural and territorial policies, aimed at creating a 'socialist modernism' away from the rhetorical emphasis of the Soviet Union and with an eye toward Western innovation, is still a model to be studied and valorized through the testimonies and examples still present. The *spomeniks* are among the most significant and representative permanences of Balkan and Brutalist artistic and architectural culture: their fate cannot be to end up like the fragments of Lenin's statue that director Theo Angelopoulos set to sail on the Danube in *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), as a metaphor for the drift of a population's memory.

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