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**The construction of the enigma.**  
**Dušan Džamonja and the Barletta's Ossuary**  
**of the Fallen Slavs**

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Abstract

The proposed essay investigates the architecture of the Ossuary of the Slavs in Barletta (1968-70), focusing on the work of the Croatian sculptor Dušan Džamonja and setting it in the Yugoslavian *spomenik* tradition. Structured according to peremptory principles and shaped into dynamic and rhythmically articulated masses, this commemorative architecture is able to offer the necessary quiet for contemplation without renouncing the pathos that is typical of commemoration.

The essay describes, on the one hand, the founding value assumed by the relationship with the landscape, and on the other, the intense dialogue between architecture and sculpture that animates the plastic composition of this work. The aim is to get closer to understanding the sense of a monument conceived in the form of an enigma.

Keywords

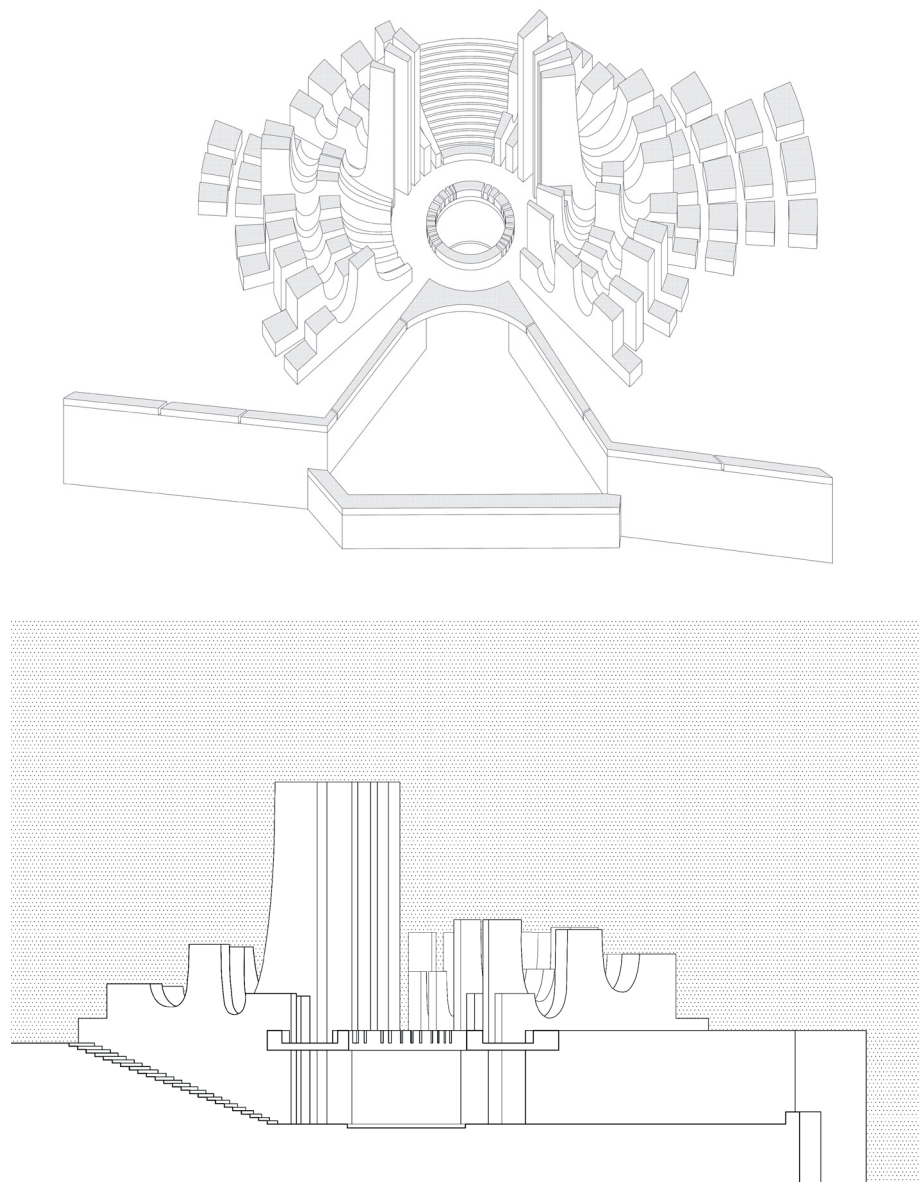
Dušan Džamonja — *Spomenik* — Architecture and Sculpture

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Arriving from the western coast, the Ossuary of the Fallen Slavs<sup>1</sup> of Barletta appears in the distance, resting on the edge of a slight slope facing the Adriatic Sea; it barely emerges, with its turreted shapes, from the lush cemetery vegetation. From the first glance, the monument impresses with the mysterious eloquence of its forms, which appear assertive, magniloquent, and also ambiguous and hermetic. But it is by approaching the memorial and crossing its interior spaces – full of symbolic-plastic figures never seen before and in which primordial and archetypal contents echo – that we open ourselves to the experience of the enigma.

Keeping together, within a single and coherent architectural narrative, the peremptory nature of signs and the hermeticism of meanings, this work (designed by the Croatian sculptor Dušan Džamonja) translates the tragic memory linked to the war events of the last century into the body of a sphinx. This is its peculiar and innovative characteristic; in fact, it is significant to note that the originality of the morphological-spatial contents of the Barletta memorial – which underlies its mysterious charm – is the result of a calibrated design, of a compositional strategy, which has been specifically designed to respond to certain conceptual and aesthetic needs, and therefore which is related to very specific political and cultural ideals, as well as to a specific trajectory of authorial research on the theme of the plastic composition of volumes in the space.

On the one hand, for Džamonja, the theme of memorials constitutes the culmination of a sculptural experimentation which, with these experiences, reaches its maximum monumental expression (Marchiori 1975) and its highest degree of artistic maturity<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, this theme embodies a great semantic complexity, as «it combines the commemoration of

**Fig. 1-2**

Ossuary of the Fallen Slavs of Barletta. Overall axonometric and section of the monument. Drawings by Massimiliano Cafagna, Aleksa Korolija and Giuseppe Tupputi.

death [understood as an individual experience] with a very specific ideological conception [understood as a collective experience]» (Argan 1981, p.8) linked to Yugoslav context of the second post-war period.

In the ex-Yugoslavia, the Resistance to Nazi-Fascism merged into a Socialist Revolution which led the southern Slavic peoples (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) to unify in the Yugoslav Federation, which immediately proposed itself as a modern country but independent from European capitals and Americans, socialist but independent from the Soviet Union (Argan 1981, p. 7). Soon, as a result of these developments, the feelings linked to self-foundation, unity and national autonomy spilled over into all areas of civil life in the country, especially the artistic ones, leading to the need to explore distant aesthetic horizons. from both European Modernism and Socialist Realism, and paving the way for what was later called the *Third Space*<sup>3</sup> of Yugoslav art.

In that particular historical context, the theme of commemorative architecture assumed an important role within the strategies of Tito's government, aimed at building the epic narrative of the newly formed Yugoslav Federation.

**Fig. 3**

Ossuary of the Fallen Slavs of Barletta. View from the west coast of Barletta. Photo by © Massimiliano Cafagna.

But, as Niebyl (2016) writes, in a newly unified country, «composed of both the victims of the recent war and some of their oppressor», the commemorative instance was also confronted with other ambiguities and contradictions. In fact, conceived as possible «sanctuaries for national reconciliation», the Yugoslav memorials required the experimentation of expressive methods capable of not transmitting hostility and enmity, but of opening up to a new phase of confrontation and cohesion between the different peoples and/or ethnic groups of the Federation. Furthermore, within an ideology which presupposed the self-management development of the state and which meant the socialist revolution not as a finished event, but as a process in continuous evolution – «which is social progress and class battle» (Mikuž 1980) – a more open relationship was sought with the interpretation of history and, therefore, of memory.

Contrary to traditional memorials, these sculptures give preference to a type of perception and understanding that is opposed to the presence of a single rational and always intelligible point of view; as in a poetic narrative, didacticism and even, or even warning, are replaced by pure spatial and formal values (Mikuž 1980).

The Yugoslavian *spomeniks* were conceived in order to shape spaces capable of triggering an unprecedented experiential relationship with the users, renouncing the model of a passive relationship towards the artwork and instead pushing the visitor to elaborate questions about memory, but without ever crystallizing it into completed forms.

These complex conceptual and poetic needs found expression in the audacious challenge of researching and experimenting with new compositional strategies and artistic languages between realism and abstraction, between reference to tradition and openness to modernity, between the symbolism of figures and the plasticity of forms, and, moreover, in the intersection between the knowledge of sculpture, architecture, engineering and land art. Džamonja faced this challenge by collecting and treasuring every dichotomy, every contradiction, every ambiguity and, aware that the contradictory formulation is the characteristic of the enigma (Colli 1975, p. 23), he placed them at the cornerstone of the formative processes of his works. But this is not enough. To give depth and substance to the enigma, Džamonja's





**Fig. 4**

Ossuary of the Fallen Slavs of Barletta. Entrance to the monument. Photo by © Massimiliano Cafagna.

intuition consists in drawing from a poetic imagination that has its roots directly in the interpretation of the «primordial formative processes», of the very ancient «memorials and cosmogonic signs», of *dolmens* and *menhirs*<sup>4</sup>, however enriched, as Mikuz (1980) writes, «by millennia of experience in the practice of architecture, urban planning, urban and landscape design».

It is thanks to the recovery of this «distant imaginary (the Freud's 'dark world')» (Semerani 2007, p. 28) that, pushing himself to the brink of the unconscious abyss of tradition, Džamonja manages to dominate the impetus of the representative tensions of his time, governing the passage from the poetic and ideological dimension to the sculptural and architectural one, from the pure 'will of representation' to the compositional techniques necessary for the development of each artistic practice.

In fact, it is by questioning the origin of these primordial forms that he rediscovers their founding reasons. As Giulio Carlo Argan writes (1981, p. 8), they consist in «marking the spatial centrality of a site that some past events have made sacred for a community that gathers there to celebrate its rites». This is the reason for which, the memorial, before being a form, is above all a place. There is no possibility of the rite outside of a space that is full of references to myth, and for this reason, in the monuments by Džamonja (as well as in all his sculptural work), the expression of ideological values linked to the «permanent revolution», to the unification of the Slavic peoples and the socialist proletarian masses find their mythological metaphor in the symbolism of the globality and movement of the sphere (Argan 1981, p. 8).

Both in Barletta, for the *Ossuary of the Fallen Slavs*, and in Kozara, for the *Memorial of the Peasant Revolution*, and in Podgarić, for the project (not realized) of the *Monument to the Revolution*, the theme of the circle divided into parts with different morphology is transposed from a symbolic principle – a metaphor of a multiple body in harmonic and dynamic unity – to a compositional method, an organizational model of form and control of space. On the other hand, the theme of the relationship between the basic module and the unity of the sphere is widely investigated by Džamonja as a metaphor for the relationship between individual and the masses, between the single and the multiple; but if initially this occurs through the assembly of elements such as nails, chains or small bricks, from the end of the 1950s, the investigation no longer appears linked to the ready-made but more

**Fig. 5**

Ossuary of the Fallen Slavs of Barletta. Interior of the crypt atrium. Photo by © Massimiliano Cafagna.

focused, instead, on the experimentation of more abstract plastic values.

In Barletta, the figure of the circle (in this case slightly deformed into an ellipse), adopted in the plan, becomes a device capable of assembling a plurality of sculptural parts, each of which has a different spatial meaning (Džamonja 1981, p. 78) but at the same time is integrated within the complete design of the syntactic and figurative unity of the whole. This ensures a harmonious dialectic between the *logical* form of the architectural-spatial structure and the *poetic* structure of the plastic forms of the monument. The visible part of the memorial – the one built above ground – is composed of the repetition of different sculptural profiles made of shaped concrete blocks in a radial series. Arranged on an elliptical plan, they constitute an articulated and compact mass as a whole.

From the outside, the principles underlying the syntactic composition of the work emerge in their limpid elementarity but, approaching the monument, the concrete shapes emerge from the whole they are part of, enriching and articulating, complexifying and deepening the semantic contents of the memorial. Within this compact mass punctuated by a radial and monotonous rhythm, the pre-compressed concrete volumes draw sinuous plastic tensions that press towards the center of the work.

Again, the attention to the dialectic between the repeated element and the overall form also and above all affects the definition of the internal spaces of Barletta's Ossuary, as the radial composition allows to stage a «convergence of perspective spaces» (Argan 1981, p. 12): each designed by different plastic rhythms, the interstitial spaces between the different concrete profiles are simultaneously directed towards the center of the work, as a metaphor for different individual experiences that merge into a community. On the other hand, as noted by Argan (1981, p.10), it is evident that another of Džamonja's main intention consists in the attempt to define «dynamic relationships between the core [...] of the work and its *periechon*», animating the internal space of the memorial through the grafting of calculated plastic pulsations, which alternate the suggestion of centripetal with centrifugal motions. In this sense, the introduction of slight deformations in the basic elliptical structure (obtained through the slightly asymmetrical arrangement of the concrete volumes) and the scanning of their increasing and diagonal rhythm (composed of forces directed at the same time to-

**Fig. 6**

Ossuary of the Fallen Slavs of Barletta. Perspective between the sculptural concrete blocks.  
Photo by © Giuseppe Tupputi.

wards the center and the sky) constitute two artifices that give «the whole an ascending rotational movement».

In any case, the fulcrum of the memorial coincides with the place of the crypt atrium, excavated at an altitude of about 3 meters below the ground level and accessible via an imposing granite staircase which is the space intended for collective ceremonies. Through two large bronze portals, from this place it's possible to arrive into the actual crypt, carved into the thickness of the same circular wall which delimits the atrium by containing the ground.

Here, flooding the space with a direct light that accentuates the contrast between light and dark, and sharpens the concave profiles of the shadows, the central oculus connects the chthonic world of burial and commemoration – the cave of memory – with the light and the luminosity of the air, of the abstract world of thought, in which the silhouettes of the concrete volumes stand out. From below, moving back into the perceptive field of the visitor, they transform into evident allegorical elements: seven obelisks stretched towards the sky.

Furthermore, in addition to the centrality and verticality of the atrium space – evident in the planimetric scheme – there is a further compositional direction – better identifiable in the section – which disrupt the balance of the project, orienting the space, as well as vertically (towards the sky), even horizontally (towards the sea). As Džamonja himself writes (1969), this «visual penetration» introduces a further spatial tension and accompanies the visitor into the external space of the terrace which, closed on two sides by the walls that embank the ground, appears strongly orientated, «looking towards the open Adriatic Sea and towards the homeland».

It is unexpected that, after having worked on a calibrated deformation of the planimetric asymmetry of the base plant, the symmetry returns in all its assertiveness – as a method of project control – within the modalities of structuring the system of paths and in particular of the visual and kinesthetic fruition of the memorial. In fact, almost borrowing from cinematographic techniques, the views that mark the main directions of the memorial's crossing are constructed through sequences of symmetrical central perspectives, since, as Kržišnik (1980) writes, this is «the simplest way to identify the movements of the visitor's psychophysical interiority and trig-



gering his kinesthetic experience».

Finally, by looking more closely at the concrete profiles, it can be observed that, if the unity of the architectural organism is built in the dynamic relationship between the overall spatial form and the repeated element, the plastic language of the sculpture works in the balance between abstraction and figurativism. The allusive dimension of the forms is immediately perceived, but the relationship between the parts is devoid of any decorative superstructure and hides the semantic contents and symbolic references within an abstract sculptural composition of volumes in space.

Everything happens under the concertation of light. After all, referring to the memorials of Džamonja, Argan (1981, pp. 12-13) writes:

The dynamism of the whole is not so much expressed by the diagonals and the gradual movement of the elements that form the monument, but by the infinite appearance it assumes in accordance with the intensity and effects of light at different times of the day: regardless of the symbolic meaning, it is like some immense tools for the live study of the change of light. Then, if in its immediate appearance, the monument recalls the tension of expressionist architecture and scenography, its deeper meaning refers to the 'solar' systems of the Mayan and Aztec monuments.

The Ossuary of the Fallen Slavs of Barletta is therefore a complex architectural narrative that is based on the rituality of movements in space, the relationship with the site and with the place, the symbolism of forms, the plasticity of volumes and the relationship with light.

The memory of the past tragedies, in this case linked to the pain of mourning and war but also to the ideology underlying the socio-political project of the former Yugoslav Federation, are deliberately transcribed in statuary forms which, on the one hand, aspire to be monumental, stable and lasting and, on the other hand, they reject any assertiveness and dogmatism, opening up to different possible ways of interpretation.

Structured according to calibrated compositional principles, but at the same time capable of «preserving some areas of insubordination» (Boulez 2004, p. 94); assembled through the complex articulation of a plurality of plastic rhythms channeled into a unitary body, this work appears powerful and at the same time harmless, «magnificent in its outer peace full of inner movement» (Kržišnik 1969). It gives us the opportunity of reflecting on a particular possibility of forms which, by interpreting the «illusory fabric of opposites» (Colli 1975, p. 29) that is the world around us, dissolves them into its own unity, disclosing the tragic and seductive fascination of the enigma.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The monument commemorates and collects the remains of Slavic soldiers who died during the First and Second World War in southern Italy and Islands.

<sup>2</sup> The Ossuary located in Barletta it's classified within of what art critics defined as the "third period" of Džamonja's work, which is the most mature and fertile moment of his artistic production (Protić 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Among the various texts dealing with the subject, please refer to Kirn G. (2016-2019)

<sup>4</sup> As Argan writes (1981, p.10), two of Džamonja's first memorial works (the December Martyrs memorial in Dubrava and the Memorial Tomb in Dachau) are inspired to dolmen and menhir, "of the reclining figure and the standing figure".

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