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THE UNCERTAIN PAST ON PRESERVATION OF ARCHITECTURE IN THE BALKANS

By Luka Skansi (Politecnico di Milano)

The aim of this text is to try to make visible—more through direct testimony than through scientific or academic analysis—what it means today to “preserve and restore the architectural heritage of the twentieth century” in those Balkan countries that were formed after 1991 following the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia. To be precise, Slovenia will be excluded from the account, as it is a country that, unlike the other republics, has in recent times developed an interesting and, in many respects, enviable approach to the problem.

As an introduction to the challenges faced by Slavic historians and restorers, it is useful to frame the origins of the issue, namely the role and status that history assumes in general within these countries. Not so much the history of architecture, but rather political and social history—which, it is needless to repeat, is predominantly focused on the events of the bloody twentieth century in these lands—that, in the cyclical re-examination of its assumptions, today takes on a central role in political debate. This uncertainty inevitably affects the history of architecture as well: a discipline that may be ancillary to *historia magistra*, yet nonetheless acts as its vanguard when wars erupt against processes of historiographical revanchism.

A few years ago, on the walls of Belgrade’s large residential blocks, in the days surrounding the crowded and widely attended student demonstrations—so scarcely reported and commented on by the Western press—a piece of graffiti appeared that is worth considering: “Prošlost dolazi. Samo dan je od nas” (“The past is coming. It is only a day away.”). As often happens with popular intelligence, this graffiti subtly conceptualized certain contemporary tendencies of Balkan societies. On the one hand, and in positive terms, the graffiti reiterates the relevance of history—an immediacy that we historians record and embrace with undisguised self-interest: history is, after all, one of the few disciplines, together with geopolitics, that helps to dissect and explain the international crises we are experiencing, which are erupting—following the decline of Western political and cultural hegemony—with an unprecedented intensity.

However, for those who observe reality in its depth, the graffiti is also upsetting. And it is difficult to explain this to a West that is convinced, precisely, of the “end of history”: convinced that a state of equilibrium has been reached after a path of democratic and Enlightenment progress, and that time has come to a halt, grounded in the certainties of the past. But “the past is coming” means, in non-Western countries—or rather, in countries that have followed an alternative modernity—that there is a continuous operation being carried out on the past, one that prepares for its constant reawakening.

The past is manipulated, re-discussed, rewritten, and in the Balkan countries it becomes, as a Serbian journalist has argued, “far more uncertain than the future”¹.

But how does all this relate to the interesting and, for various reasons, compelling student protests? And above all, who is truly active in these demonstrations? Alongside the protests sparked by a large group of university activists, all those inhabitants of Serbia who no longer identify with their despotic leader and in the corrupt, clientelistic administrative and economic system he has built over recent decades. Yet the demonstrators, beyond the usual grievances against “democratures”—calls for more justice, legality, democracy—introduce additional themes and symbols into their rhetoric, making participation in the streets far more widespread. The enormous number of people who took part in the mass uprisings was certainly drawn by criticism of the regime, but also by the clarity of a student message steeped in nationalism. Student symbolism alludes—albeit not exclusively, though this is a secondary issue—to the historical symbols of Serbian nation-building and its mythopoesis. In other words, criticism of corruption in the political system should not be misunderstood as criticism of national reason, as a critical revision of its myths, or as an importation of Western, universalist, bourgeois, metropolitan, modern values.

Turning to another example, and drawing a wholly unjust comparison with the Serbian demonstrations, one may cite an event that occurred a few months ago in Croatia (also largely ignored in the West), which nevertheless reflects the same status of history. Approximately five hundred thousand people attended a concert by a nationalist, neo-Ustaša singer who glorifies collaborationism and genocide during the Second World War². By a simple mathematical comparison (Croatia has just under four million inhabitants), this would be equivalent to 7.5 million Italians attending a neo-fascist concert, or 10.5 million Germans attending a neo-Nazi one.

Supported by a futuristic drone performance, the singer displayed on stage the iconography of contemporary Croatian nationalism: swords evoking mythological medieval purities, crosses and profiles of the Madonna of Medjugorje reaffirming the identikit of the good nationalist—church, homeland, and family—all steeped in profound anti-Serbian and anti-Yugoslav sentiment. Among the participants, the majority consisted of younger generations—those who did not experience the civil war, who grew up with its recurring memory, and who are above all products of the national education system. A system that is a result of an operation of historical rewriting which, as in all Balkan countries, has been institutional and political, and which has seen textbooks entirely transformed through the reversal of narratives³.

So, what kind of narrative are we talking about? First of all, the re-evaluation of the role of collaborators during the Second World War, who were numerous across Yugoslav territory: from the Slovenian *belogardists*, to the Croatian Ustaša, to the Serbian Chetniks. Then comes the rewriting of the communist resistance, which—from being the most widespread and numerous resistance movement in all of Europe—has been relegated to the dimension of a criminal faction. Consequently, a terrifyingly problematic process has been initiated: the celebration of the victims of resistance and of the communist victory—those figures now glorified in public squares, tattooed onto the skin of new generations, and responsible for the atrocities committed by collaborators together with the Nazi-fascists during the Second World War.

It is obvious that this now-dominant process did not originate in recent years. Its roots can certainly be traced back to the 1980s, with the economic and moral crisis experienced by Yugoslav society following Tito's death. But as historians well know, the masking and appropriation of history has been a leitmotif of all twentieth-century political regimes in this part of the Balkans—from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia formed after the Great War on the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian collapse, to Tito's socialism after 1945⁴. However, the violence with which this process is carried out today is undoubtedly unprecedented and has its origins in what the great architect Bogdan Bogdanović defined as the second great tragedy of the Yugoslav wars: urbicide⁵. Alongside the indescribable human losses, we witnessed the tragedies of cities—symbols of the systematic elimination of national and religious identities: Bosnian-Muslim in Mostar, Serbian-Orthodox in Lika and Krajina, Croatian-Catholic in Vukovar and Dubrovnik, just to name very few examples.

Many other cases could be cited, but what should be emphasized here is that urbicide in the Balkan wars affected also—and sometimes above all—contemporary architecture. From the Sarajevo 1984 Olympic complex, to the destruction of partisan memorials in nearly all the republics, to the bombing of Nikola Dobrović's *Generalštab* in Belgrade⁶ (the latter carried out by NATO aircraft), the list is extremely long. It is crucial to understand how war represented not only moments of civil conflict and ethnic cleansing, but also a process of eliminating history—especially when observing contemporary architecture, the one that has been built during socialism: its destruction talks about the elimination of a history that could no longer and should no longer serve as a source of identification. First and foremost, the history that recalled the resistance: a moment in which Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Montenegrins and Macedonians together, united in the liberation movement across all social classes—from peasants and workers to doctors and teachers—rebelled against nationalisms, clericalism, and Nazi-fascist oppressors and occupiers. And consequently, also socialist history, which embodied the brotherhood and unity of peoples above all individualism and specific national or religious identities.

In this sense, it is not difficult to understand why the largest abstract sculpture in Europe, created by Vojin Bakić in Kamensko in eastern Slavonia to symbolize resistance on a territorial scale, was blown up by Croatian soldiers as early as 1991. Or why many other monuments were razed, demolished, or simply desecrated and thus stripped of their original meaning—most famously the Petrova Gora monument, also by Vojin Bakić, whose stainless-steel cladding was stripped and resold. It should be specified that this process of eliminating the masterpieces of Yugoslav architecture did not occur only during the war, but is still dramatically ongoing. The beautiful Partisan Cemetery designed by Bogdan Bogdanović in Mostar (fig. 1) is periodically vandalized by neo-Ustaša groups, who hammer away at and destroy what remains of the site⁷.

This is a widespread process with many different nuances, comprehensible only through geographical contextualization of the monuments. The memorial complex at Kozara, located in the Serbian enclave of western Bosnia, has not been destroyed.

However, at the entrance to this work by Dušan Džamonja, Miro Rak, Mirjana Hanžeković (fig. 2)—one of the most extraordinary landscape architecture projects of socialist Yugoslavia—a process of resemanticization has taken place. A large Orthodox cross has recently appeared to identify and mark the (Serbian) identity of the resistance, thereby eliminating its original message: a symbol of the brotherhood of all Yugoslav peoples. Here too, history is

rewritten, and by individualizing the resistance, the contemporary spatial experience and perception of the complex are highly conditioned.



Figure 1. Bogdan Bogdanović, Memorial and partisan cemetery, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1960-1965 (photograph by the author)



Figure 2. Dušan Džamonja, Miro Rak, Mirjana Hanžeković, Monument to the Revolution at Mrakovica, Kozara, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1972 (photograph by the author)

A striking case must also be highlighted—one that should be observed in its radicality not as a norm, but as a unicum. Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, as is well known, was entirely rebuilt after the 1960 earthquake according to Kenzo Tange's plan (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Skopje – architectural cladding, 2015 (photograph by the author)

Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the young Macedonian democracy, together with its political leaders, decided no longer to identify with this reconstruction, carried out by both Yugoslav professionals and international architects⁸. Although it did not experience armed conflict (despite severe social tensions with the Albanian component), Macedonia lived out its hostility toward socialism by imposing a redesign of its capital. Most of the buildings along the Vardar River were recently entirely clad in eclectic, neoclassical, and postmodern styles, constructing a fake historical landscape bordering on a contemporary amusement park. This was accompanied by a sculptural mythopoiesis permeating the entire public space and culminating in an equestrian statue of Alexander the Great: the great leader of the Argead dynasty, the ancient Greek royal house, becomes in contemporary interpretation the origin of the Slavic population that settled here ten centuries after his death. The audacity of historical rewriting reaches in Skopje its most surreal levels.

Further processes of widespread destruction can be observed in other geographical contexts. For example, the tourist architecture built along the Adriatic coast, which reached sophisticated heights during the 1970s. The “socialist Arcadia,” aptly defined by Maroje Mrduljaš⁹, highlights the country’s economic boom, which planned and built summer holiday facilities for the working classes. The Haludovo Hotel, designed by Boris Magaš on the island of Krk, is one of the most famous complexes of this type (fig. 4): a modern, strongly contextual architecture resting on steep terrain sloping toward the sea and integrating various design and spatial themes.



Figure 4. Boris Magaš, Hotel Haludovo, Malinska, Island of Krk, Croatia, 1972 (photograph by the author)

The hotel perfectly narrates the transition from the socialist system to the market economy following Croatian independence. The state-owned company that possessed the complex was privatized by entrepreneurs close to the new political current, and rather than continuing what was a fairly profitable activity, put the property on the market. The complex was fragmented; some bungalows were resold, while the central building was sold to an Armenian entrepreneur in a money-laundering operation and left to decay. What we see today is an architecture reduced to ruins, lost forever.

Rather than continuing to enumerate forms of devastation and erasure, the discussion should turn to what are, for us, the crucial questions: how can history be practiced in these places today—or, more specifically in our case, the history of architecture? What margins remain for speaking about architecture under these political and cultural conditions? And within what limits can one truly attempt to raise public awareness on the quality of these modern architectures?

Much work has recently been done by scholars from universities as well as by architects and activists across the various republics. Exhibitions, conferences, and publications over the past fifteen years have increased knowledge and awareness of this extraordinary heritage. Its international recognition came in 2018 with the opening of the exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated by Vladimir Kulić and Martino Stierli, who involved a large group of local researchers¹⁰. Work has also been carried out—and is still ongoing—on the cataloguing, explanation, and conceptualization of the phenomena that led to the emergence, flourishing, and, alas, destruction of this heritage.

Yet very little has actually been achieved. Only to a limited extent, through isolated initiatives and far from simple processes, has there been valorization or restoration of some masterpieces of Yugoslav architecture. Opposition—sometimes concealed, sometimes explicit—continues to heavily condition the debate and obstruct any initiative.

When Rijeka was designated “European Capital of Culture” in 2020, exhibitions and artistic installations were organized, working to raise awareness of the places and symbols of this city’s extraordinary history¹¹. Reactions were swift. Fans of the local football team, supported by far-right activists—the core group invested in by politicians to undermine democracy and civic and cultural engagement—organized a protest against one of the artistic interventions, unable to tolerate the evocation of history itself. The object of the protest was the supposedly unacceptable display of a red star on the roof of a building by Umberto Nordio, an important Triestine architect who, on the eve of the Second World War, created an icon of fascist domination over the city. With this installation, artist Nemanja Cvijanović celebrates the moment when Fiume was liberated by communist partisans (and certainly not by Ustaša collaborators)¹². Specifically recalling the resemanticization carried out in 1945 by the new political order, when a series of red flags were displayed in the bays of the façade of that architectural rationalism—a symbol of the Italianization of the city. It is worth reiterating the paradox: the recent protest was directed against the liberators, who had the merit of drawing the borders of today’s Croatia—and thus “returning” Rijeka to its homeland—by expelling foreign oppressors and their collaborators (the Ustaša), with whom the nationalist protesters identify.

In conclusion, the reflection begins with a historical photograph. In an early twentieth-century image, one sees a restaurant in Rijeka bearing inscriptions in all the languages spoken in the city at that time (fig. 5), reflecting the four great civilizations that have always lived in the northern Adriatic: Austro-German, Italian, Magyar, and Slavic (Croatian) culture.



Figure 5. Rijeka, "Trattoria / Vendéglő Al Paolo", beginning of XX century

The recurring crises, wars, fascisms, and civil conflicts that followed throughout the twentieth century progressively erased these inscriptions one by one. After 1991, the city became almost exclusively Croatian, losing a

significant portion of the other Yugoslav ethnic groups as well. The process, however, is far from complete.

With recent developments, historic centers along the coast are beginning to lose even their last remaining inhabitants. Something impossible to contain has arrived: large-scale, tourism-driven capital has definitively penetrated Croatian cities, bringing masses of tourists who have emptied symbolic urban spaces of everyday life—spaces historically fiercely fought over. As always, the city pays the price, as does architecture, both historical and more contemporary, which is transformed in function and image, completely losing its original meaning. The cruel course of history has now taken on the guise of urban speculation, whose ethno-religious affiliation entirely eludes definition—a foe against which even the most radical nationalism seems to have neither weapons, motivation or, worst of all, conscience.

NOTES

- [1] The sentence is attributed to journalist Stojan Cerović, one of the founders of the weekly "Vreme". [2] The Ustaše was a Croatian fascist and ultranationalist organization active between 1929 and 1945. After the invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, the Ustaše came to power when they were appointed to rule a part of Axis-occupied Yugoslavia as the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), a puppet state established by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. During World War II, the Ustaše went on to perpetrate the genocide killing hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma, as well as Muslim and Croat political dissidents. The ideology of the movement was a blend of fascism, Roman Catholicism and Croatian ultranationalism. Source: English Wikipedia page; the Croatian one has a "slightly" different historical interpretation of the facts. [3] Stojanović, Dubravka. 2023. *Prošlost dolazi. Promene u tumačenju prošlosti u srpskim udžbenicima istorije 1913-2021*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek. [4] Pirjevec, Jože. 1993. *Il Giorno di san Vito. Jugoslavia 1918-1992: storia di una tragedia*. Torino: Nuova Eri. [5] Bogdanović, Bogdan. 1994. *Grad i smrt*. Beograd: Beogradski krug. [6] Kulić, Vladimir. 2009. *Architettura e politica dell'interpretazione: il caso del Generalštab a Belgrado*. Roma: Fondazione Bruno Zevi; Davenport, Ben. 2015. "A Heritage of Resistance' - The Changing Meanings of Belgrade's Generalštab". In *War and Cultural Heritage*, edited by Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, Dacia Viejo-Rose. New York: Cambridge University Press. [7] On these topics see Sanja Horvatinčić research, the leading expert in the field of memorial art and architecture in former Yugoslavia, and her analyses of their status in modern Croatia. Her recent publication: Žerovc, Beti; Horvatinčić, Sanja (eds). 2023. *Shaping revolutionary memory: the production of monuments in socialist Yugoslavia*. Ljubljana/Berlin: Archive Books.

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