

Crisis of the memory – two monuments from the socialist era today

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Abstract

The essay studies the sorrowful present of two landmark monuments of the socialist era: the memorial "1300 Years Bulgaria" and the "Buzludzha Monument." Built to commemorate important events of Bulgarian history, today these significant historical masterpieces of architecture and art from the second half of the 20th century are abandoned and doomed to destruction. The need to rethink their historical role and to start a discourse on the threat of destruction of the cultural heritage of our country is brought to the front. I argue that it is necessary to inform and educate the community on the problems of protection and preservation of the national cultural values. By applying a semiotic analysis the essay aims to reveal the complex layers of meaning coded in the two monuments in order to establish criteria for aesthetic evaluation of the artistic qualities which are not subject to political bias and reflect the intransient values in architecture and art. The presented projects exemplifying the resurrection of the monuments for a new interactive life in the context of current conditions reveal how the contradictory symbolism of the past regime can be dealt with and how the knowledge of the historic and cultural past can be constructed.

Keywords: monuments, monuments' semantics, cultural values, remembering the past

Bio

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“Atop a 1441m peak in the raw, mountainous scenery of central Bulgaria, a saucer-shaped building stands like a watchtower...a vast ellipse of grey concrete that bulges from the summit“ (Isalska, 2016)

Introduction

This quote is not taken from a science-fiction book or a screenplay for a futuristic film. With these words, Anita Isalska (2016) describes her first impressions of the “Buzludzha Monument” for the largest travel guides publisher “Lonely Planet.” This is only one of the hundreds of monuments built during the totalitarian regime doomed to oblivion by the Bulgarian country and at the same time exciting great interest in foreigners. In this essay the fate of two landmark monuments of the socialist era, which share a common destiny today, is considered: the monument “1300 Years Bulgaria” – dedicated to the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state, and the “Buzludzha Monument” – built to celebrate the 90-year anniversary of the local formation of the socialist movement. Both monuments are significant historical masterpieces of architecture and art from the second half of the 20th century; they not only commemorate significant events from Bulgarian history but also represent the aesthetic values of the time period when they were erected. However, when in the 1990^s the political situation in the country changed, breaking with the past was frantically sought and branded as “socialist art” they were abandoned and doomed to destruction.

Being emblems of the power of the former regime, as Voukov (2007) noted, monuments of the socialist epoch were either destroyed or reshaped in order to ‘cleanse’ the public space from the traces of the former ideology and to embrace a new identity in the changed social and political context. This treatment and reinterpretation of the monuments inevitably poses the question of collective memory, how national identity is shaped and how knowledge about the past is constructed. Contextualized within the broader framework of memory studies which has proliferated in the social and humanitarian sciences in the past decades (Nora, 1989; Assman, 2010; Connerton, 1989; Gillis, 1996) monuments as material representations of cultural memory have also received growing attention in scientific circles (Young, 1993; Huyssen, 2003; Reynolds, 1996; Voukov, 2007). This essay is an attempt for a critical study of the way we remember and treasure our past. I argue that art and

architecture can give us knowledge about a past period which is inseparable part of our history and cannot be erased. The aim is to reveal the complex layers of meaning coded in the two monuments, to highlight their artistic values and interactive features and to clear their image of the ideological load. As visual images are best comprehended by applying the study of signs (Eco, 1976; Sebeok, 2001; Chandler, 2002), a semiotic analysis is made in order to examine the conceptual contents and the semantic organization of the structural elements of the monuments. In this perspective, I strive to look objectively at the problem and to assess impartially the style paradigm with its specific aesthetic qualities.

Monuments between past and present

Soon after the establishment of the socialist system in Bulgaria commenced, the implementation of Lenin's plan for "Monumental propaganda" became a fundamental prerequisite for the flourishing state of monumental art in the country. The plan highlighted the role of monumental art and its impact on "mobilizing the moral, spiritual and physical strength of the people" (Trufeshev, 1978, p. 38) so it was aimed to actively participate in everyday life. Art was considered to have an important social function as a propaganda tool for political education of the masses, praise, and adherence to the ideas of the Communist Party leading to its subordination to the service of the ideology. Monuments became the most important component of the propaganda scheme for demonstrating the power of the ruling party. They were built in every town and village all over the country in order to immortalize and commemorate important historical figures and events through which the new social order was imposed.

The essay discusses two of the most emblematic monuments built according to the norms of socialist realism, a style dictating the creation of truthful, realistic, and easily understandable art by the masses. These are works of art that are socialist in content and nationalistic in form. The “Buzludzha monument” is the largest and most imposing monument ever built in Bulgaria. As Noev (1984) points out “[h]ere is accomplished synthesis of architecture, monumental and fine arts on the largest scale in the country” (p. 7). The strong emotional impact is achieved through stimulus on all sensory channels generating spontaneous feelings, associations, and images leaving a deep mark in the memory.



Figure 1. Present-day state of “Buzludzha” Monument. Photographs by Evgeni Dinev, 2011 www.evgenidinev.com.

The second monument was unveiled as part of one of the greatest cultural events in the new Bulgarian history – the extravagant celebrations of the 1300th anniversary of the creation of the state. Construction of impressive monuments played an important part in organizing the celebrations, which included a rich program of events, the goal being not only to note the anniversary, but also to glorify communist government as the most successful in history and to propagate the prosperity Bulgaria was undergoing at that time.



Figure 2. Present-day state of "1300 Years Bulgaria", Photographs by Miroslava Petrova, 2017.

Erected with great pathos as visual implementations of the ideological and emotional intensity of the period, after the change of the political paradigm in 1989 both monuments drifted too far from their main role "to remind future generations of the epic struggles of our people and the party for national liberation and social justice" (Noev, 1984, p. 8). In the context of a new political, social and economic organization monuments built during the socialist government were converted from symbols glorifying the socialist revolution into objects of hatred, reminiscent of the oppression, and the violations of freedom during the regime. A period of nihilistic negation of everything created during socialism commenced leading to widespread removal and destruction of the symbols of the unwanted past. The monuments that were preserved ceased to function as such and were turned into ruins because of lack of understanding of their historic significance and inability to allocate funds for maintenance and safeguarding.

But whereas one of the monuments is situated far in the mountain region and remains somewhat away from public polemics, the other, situated in the centre of the capital city, began to live a new life in bustling discussions about its future. It was contemplated whether it should be restored, reconstructed or moved. Currently, public opinion is divided into two confronting extremes, driven mostly by the political bias of both groups. One of them brands the hated monument as “totalitarian” and finds its presence unacceptable in the urban environment. The other regards the monument as a national cultural heritage and stands behind the position that it should be saved as a document of the epoch in which it was created. In both cases, however, the monument and its destiny has evoked strong emotional responses and social unrest.

It is evident that today’s society treats these monuments as reminders of the communist past. Indeed, it is impossible to forget by whom these monuments were created. As Young (1999) states, monuments are an intersection between public art and political memory and they reflect both the socio-historical and aesthetic context within which they were created. However, though the monuments are an ideological projection of the regime, if we try to erase the memory of their creators, knowledge of the past could be irretrievably lost when we demolish its tangible carriers. To differentiate from the clichéd perception of the monuments as “ideological” and “totalitarian,” I believe it is necessary to focus the analysis towards their aesthetic qualities and compositional elements which function as signs communicating meaning, and their conceptual organization achieving certain emotional effects. Establishment of criteria for aesthetic evaluation and formation of values which are not subject to political bias and reflect the eternal and intransient artistic merits is imperative.

Monuments’ semantics

The “Buzludza monument” tells the story of the communist party using a wide range of signs-symbols, addressed to all visitors’ senses. The composition of the building is designed in two contrasting volumes: domed ritual hall symbolizing an altar, and a 70-meter high double vertical pillar symbolizing a communist flag. If the semantic message of the building is decoded, in its altar-shaped form is found the idea of a sacred edifice, untouchable territory of the ubiquitous presence of the party in people’s lives. The building can be interpreted as a sanctuary or a catalyst of the “sacred” party ideas in which the symbols of the Christian church have been replaced with symbols of the party.

It is not accidental that the full name of the monument is “Memorial-House of the Party,” likewise the temple is a house of God. The way that party members walk to the peak can also be compared to a religious pilgrimage to a sacred place for the purpose of learning, enrichment, and veneration. Like a religious temple the main celebration hall is crowned with a dome, an iconic sign on the vault of heaven, conveying holiness and light. On a subconscious level, the perfect symmetrical shape of the circle suggests the spiritual energy and beckons the visitor to be immersed in the experience. The building itself has functioned as a cathedral of communism where “the First Holy Communion” of pupils from across the country took place.

All compositional means used in the interior decoration are chosen purposefully to transmit ideas and advocate the power of the party. The impact has been achieved on all levels: physically, emotionally and intellectually. It is manifested in each concept of the monument: from the first visual contact with the impressive size of the building memorializing the top like a crown of glory to the overall experience and artistically conveyed historical events, the luxurious materials used in the interior decoration, colour symbolism, inclusion of sound and light complementing the ambience of the complex, and the contrast between the concrete architecture and the natural landscape.

The other monument discussed, interprets the thirteen century of Bulgarian history with the theme “Past, Present and Future.” The dynamic composition of three intersecting vertical structures is complemented with three sculptural groups each of them conceived as a beacon designating significant historical moments: ‘Tsar Simeon the Great and the Scholars,’ symbol of the period of progress and cultural prosperity; ‘Pieta,’ an allegorical image of the grieving mother, as an epitome of the many victims Bulgaria gave in wars, slavery and rebellions as to survive over the centuries; and ‘The Creator,’ depicting the ordinary worker who revives the country and fights for its cultural and economic upsurge. The structure is a spatial spiral, ending with a bird wing, a symbol of victory and the infinite human desire for perfection. The spiral, an ancient symbol of eternal evolution and motion in life (life, death and rebirth) successfully represents the development of the Bulgarian state and its progress. The feeling of this upward growth is further emphasized by the rhythmic alternation of triangular shapes (symbol of the power of unification) deriving from the triangular base of the monument and developing in all the other elements that compose it in height (Gerbov, 2012).

Such understanding of the symbolism woven into the architecture and artistic works of both monuments makes clear that these are universal symbols although they were used to impose communist ideas. Each of them not only keeps the memory of the era in which it was created but also possesses high artistic value. It is quite wrong to ignore these values and lobby for demolition incited by the negative memories of the period. Instead, it is necessary to consider the monument in a politically neutral way. Such is the attitude of the new generation which has no ideological prejudices as it grew up after the fall of the communist regime. It judges objectively the merits of the monuments and feels excited about their architectural and artistic qualities. It is my belief that society should be provoked to rediscover history, to be intuitively engaged and thus to be enabled to interpret the cultural message of the monuments under the new circumstances. Taking into account the radically conflicting assessments, dictated primarily by opposing and overwhelming political bias, combined with the lack of any architectural and artistic culture, the need for a campaign for interactive education is obvious. This will become a prerequisite for the formation of a value system regarding the cultural memory and national identity.

Memory preservation through interactivity

Mediators of the idea that both monuments could become subject of new value interpretation – original visual guides and transmitters of history for present and future generations, are the young people. They strive to break the boundaries of the ideological burden and search for new forms of expression of the role and function of the monuments. In the next section several positive projects proposing new concepts for the preservation of the monuments will be presented.

24-year-old architect, Dora Ivanova developed the project “*Buzludza – the Memory of Time*” as her graduation project (Ivanova, 2017). In her opinion the monument has a huge potential and with a minimal architectural intervention the architectural masterpiece could emotionally narrate the long and crucial Bulgarian history in a synthesized and integral review. Her concept consists of a tour of the monument differentiated into two timelines – horizontal and vertical each chronologically tracing Bulgarian history.

And while Buzludza is awaiting its renewal, according Ivanova’s vision, this is already happening in the virtual reality. The idea comes from the Bulgarian

Todor Rusanov and the Pole Rafal Czarnowski (Buzludzhavr.com, 2017). Their project is a virtual reality experience using ground-breaking VR technology. The artists transform the monument in a multifunctional recreation complex with a concert hall, a museum and a panoramic corridor.

Experiments to revive “1300 years Bulgaria” monument in Sofia using modern technological tools have also been made. In 2013, “Transformatori” association organized the “Revision” competition for audio-visual transformation of the monument with 3d mapping (www.transformatory.net/en/revision/). The aim was to provoke young artists to re-evaluate the monument in its urban and historical context and to translate it in present days. Besides creative exploration of this new media, young artists provoked reflection on the future fate of the monument, and although for a single night they breathed new life in it with their projects.

“Transformatori” initiated one more competition for a novel use of the monument and ideas how it could remain part of Sofia urban environment (www.transformatori.net, 2017). The competition was looking for concepts, aiming to draw the attention towards the problems around the monument and the possibilities for unfolding its true potential. The proposals envisioned the monument as a skate-park, a music space for DJ parties, a stage for various cultural events, a Gallery of Modern Art, a youth centre, a climbing wall, an outdoor cinema, even a giant beaver.

Conclusion

Since ancient times, monuments’ main function has been to foster a particular identity and historical narrative for the society. However, in the complexity of today’s world the traditional role of the monument has been substantially challenged. This is particularly observed in the post-communist countries which had to deal with the contradictory symbolism of the inherited monuments from the former regime. Thus, instead of building an identity through the collective memory, monuments, as Young (1999) has remarked, have increasingly become the site of cultural conflict rather than a site of shared national values and ideals. In an attempt to differentiate from our communist past we have neglected, reinstalled, and destroyed our monuments thinking that “the literal *fall* of the monument” symbolizes “the metaphorical fall of the regime that had ordered its erection” (Gamboni, 1997, p. 51). At the same time we deny the objective qualities of works of art which not only reveal the

artistic style of the times they were built in but also communicate the message of our ancestors to the future generations. The loss of these reminders of our historical and cultural past and our uncertain relation with the bygone pre-determines construction of a national identity based on oblivion and erasure of the past. And such improperly formed identity gives contradictory signals to the future generations which will judge who we are, where we stand and whether we have yielded to the memory crisis.

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