

Yugoslavian Partisan Memorials: Hybrid Memorial Architecture and Objects of Revolutionary Aesthetics

Robert Burghardt, Gal Kirn

Introduction

The production of memorial sites in the former Yugoslavia is perhaps more than any other art form invested with an ideology relating to the national past, grand events, and historical victories, or, to what after World War II commonly related to the massive suffering of the people and remembrance of terror and war. In the territory of the former Yugoslavia, now shattered into seven new nation-states, one finds an impressive and scattered collection of Socialist Modernist memorials employing peculiar aesthetic strategies that testify to a certain shared past. Nowadays, following the bloody destruction of Yugoslavia, and after the partisan victory turned to defeat, this new historical constellation renders the monumental sculptures ambiguous objects: beautiful, sad, powerful, strange, weak, bold, and almost invisible. Many were destroyed in the early 1990s by nationalist forces; others were vandalized, or at best abandoned and then almost forgotten. Nevertheless, for those who encounter these monuments today they are seen as highly imaginative: like ambassadors from far-away galaxies; witnesses to an unrealized future or specters that keep haunting the present.

In the Yugoslav context the categories and oppositions that were shaped by the Cold War have been blurred. In its hybrid position between East and West, Yugoslavia produced a specific genuine memorial typology linking the memory of World War II to the promise of the future that was opened up by the socialist revolution. Instead of formally addressing suffering, modernist memorial sites incite in audiences universal gestures of reconciliation and resistance and encourage focus on moving forward.

The political dimension of memory is evident: whose story is being told and by whom is crucial to determining the present and future. It seems that the intervention of Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history is being repeated in its purest form here. If the dominant narratives of history are necessarily those of the victors, and if emancipatory politics should always address the history of the oppressed, don't the particular lines of Yugoslav memorial development show clearly how the dispute, a radical disagreement about this legacy is being played out?

The typology of Yugoslav partisan memorial sites: the beginnings of Socialist Modernism

Between 1945 and 1990 several thousand monuments to the revolution were erected in former Yugoslavia. Many were built in the 1940s and 50s, often as simple memorial plaques that listed the deaths of local villagers. In the first phase, the sculptures mixed popular forms with the realist genre. It is noteworthy that not many Yugoslav monuments to the partisan struggle fit into the genre of the massive Socialist Realist monuments that were typical in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. In the second phase, from the 1960s to 80s, a massive memorial movement emerged known as Socialist Modernism. These monuments are not only modernist but also have a very particular monumental and symbolic typology comprising fists, stars, hands, wings, flowers, and rocks; they are bold (sometimes structurally daring), otherworldly, and fantastic.

As the majority of the Yugoslav monuments to the revolution were erected on historic sites of the partisan struggle they were nearly always located outside towns and villages in the open landscape. Today they form an invisible network of symbolic locations that still have the power to generate a Yugoslav space. However, they do not visibly occupy the classical representational sites of monumental public artworks such as the streets and squares of big cities. Many of these memorials were situated within memorial parks; thus leisure-time destinations were created that often were accompanied by picnic facilities, cafés, restaurants or even hotels. In other memorial parks, a museum or amphitheater may be found which at one time had served as an open-air classroom. Adding to their double function of mourning and celebration, memorial parks were conceived as hybrid complexes that merged leisure with an educational objective; architecture with sculpture; object with landscape. Sometimes a museum and a sculpture merge into one, and there are instances where an amphitheater and monument are merged, so that the monument itself is turned almost into a stage-set.

In the debates on the artistic heritage of socialist Yugoslavia, in retrospect, the role of the modernist

artist has been interpreted in many different ways. Either the artists have been considered as heroes who fought for artistic autonomy or freedom under the dominance of the socialist system, or they have been seen as mere vassals of the authoritarian state, employed to serve up a nice, proscribed, modern image. However, the relationship between state and artist in Yugoslavia cannot be grasped by assuming the figures of the "state artist" or the "dissident artist," because with the exception of the early postwar period, the Yugoslav state never proscribed a certain style of art. It would be more accurate to say that the state adopted and appropriated the artists' positioning within the artistic and social arena, and then promoted it through its cultural policies. Nonetheless the state preferred art which didn't cause too much of a stir, formal and decorative was better than critical and cutting-edge. This formalist tendency within Yugoslav modernism has earned it the epithet "modernist aestheticism" but then it could also be argued that formalism was no less of a phenomenon in Western modernist art.

Artists like the sculptor Vojin Bakić or the architect Bogdan Bogdanović worked most of their lives for state institutions and insisted on never giving up their own positions. Bakić entered into a dialogue with the avant-garde art group *Nove Tendencije* (New Tendencies) and consequently followed a path to abstraction which was aimed at questioning traditional patterns of reception and expression. Bogdanović, who considered himself an agnostic, took a critical stance towards the Yugoslav socialist system while fully supporting the partisan struggle. He developed an abstract-surrealist language which strived towards being universal and was simultaneously grotesque and fantastic.

Between abstract form and revolutionary politics

The immanent motifs of the monuments are various universalisms at a formal and artistic level as well as in the politics referred to by them. There is a certain fascination in the universal character of these monuments, having a formal strength that has outlived the era of their construction, and which simultaneously resulted from very specific historical circumstances. "Untimely timeliness" is what generates a multi-layered space opening up a dialogue between the history of art and specific historical experiences. The idea of the communist revolution contains many universal claims, such as the equality of men and women, but even more so, it wants to integrate the perspective of a cosmic planetary community. In the specific case of Yugoslavia, the communist revolution materialized not only in the abolition of private property and a more just distribution of surplus value, but also in the project of infrastructural and social modernization, education, anti-fascism and a common multi-ethnic space. The major task of

these monuments for the revolution was to consider how these universal claims could be addressed and formalized into an aesthetic language.

From the start it seems that the viewer is faced with a logical contradiction in the very idea of constructing a monument to the revolution. Revolutions are generally associated with the overthrow of government and destruction of a certain (oppressive) heritage: with the destruction of institutions, but certainly not with memories and its institutionalization in the form of a monument. Simultaneously, if history is considered as an open and revolutionary practice, as a means by which transformation is kept open to further change, then a monument could block the way, throwing the subject into a passive position (faced with a prescribed idea of history). Then, at best, the monument is the silent observer of an event, or, as is often the case, simply led by the avant garde. The idea of "making history," however, indicates that social change generates new stories and memories that need to be stored and experiences that want to be preserved.

The Yugoslav monuments operate along the lines of institutionalizing the collective memory of the events of World War II and combining it with the formal gesture of opening it up towards the future. The most obvious strategy to represent universalism is abstraction. The abstract like the universal does evade the concrete be it in a situation or in an image. In the abstract formal language of the Yugoslav revolutionary memorials there lies a certain openness that allows space for self-reflection and room for personal associations. It facilitates multiple interpretative approaches and awakens fantasies. The abstract vocabulary allows for an appropriation of meaning that bypasses the official narrative, making the monuments accessible to even those who disagree with the official political line.

Many of the monuments allegorize a universal notion of time in that they address the future as an abstract possibility of redemption. As such, they tend towards escapism, where history is seen as a predetermined stream towards a better future. This motif can be found in the recurring symbolism of wings, or in the large forms that rise up to the sky, almost like rocket-launching pads. The monumental form and vertical expression of some of the monuments amplifies the possibly passive position of the spectator, although none of them aim at a total subordination of the subject, as is so typical of Stalinist or fascist monumentalism. In their display of a linear and progressive time-structure their idea of revolution is rather idealistic, masking the often painful, difficult, and complicated processes of social transformation. How can a monument to the revolution, which celebrates the power of society to bring about change, relate to the realities of social practices? How can the trap of a prescribed and formalized program of memory be avoided to create a space for people to develop their own memorial practice so that it can be related back to social change?

**Current ideological investments:
national reconciliation and re-appropriation
of memorial sites**

The matter of abstraction accounts for the fact that the monuments stand on symbolic sites where many people died and experienced the horrors of World War II. The memorial sites represent the universalism of the partisans, the only social force that rejected the logic of nationalism, and consequently, the logic of ethnic-cleansing imposed by fascist forces. The abstraction seen in the monuments has provoked the opposition of mainly nationalist ideologues who have criticized them for not showing what actually happened on the site. The abstract and universal gestures of the monuments have been perceived as the suppression of particular national interests. Furthermore, abstraction can be seen to deny the logic of a "national" form as well as defying a certain kind of "victim politics"; a form of politicizing history where the focus is on one's own role as historical victim.

This particular logic became problematic in the Yugoslav context preceding and following the civil war of the 1990s. The memory politics of the Yugoslav communist party was aimed at a conciliatory universalism resting on a positive and inclusive idea of a socialist "Yugoslavism." During the 1980s—a period of rising socio-economic insecurity—extreme nationalism surfaced in various places and the Yugoslav politics of memory with the centrality of the anti-fascist ideology was undermined. In the 1980s, a bitter dispute over the number of victims in the extermination and concentration camp, Jasenovac, was unleashed, in which the number of victims were either drastically pumped-up or toned down by the different sides. Parallel to this, the post-World War II killings (some vengeful and some politically motivated) by communists and partisans were for the first time broadly addressed, opening many of the partially healing wounds from the civil war that took place during World War II. New memorial sites were re-imagined and re-appropriated for the national cause, aimed at rehabilitation of local fascists and the demonization of the communists or partisans. The motivation behind this was not so much about bringing historical truth to the surface but, rather, was concerned with exploiting history to justify the battles that were soon to rage in the civil war of the 1990s.

**The fate of modernist monuments:
destruction, decay, and decontextualization**

If one can agree at least in part with the statement that the new historical context has re-appropriated monuments for the nationalist cause, one must also disagree with the thesis that their abstract form allowed for easy re-adjustment. Opposed to this view we would argue that it was precisely because of both their anti-fascist communist legacy and abstract form—symbolizing the space of a different

Yugoslavia—that many modernist partisan monuments have been destroyed, or left to decay.

Nowadays, the partisan memory is increasingly assigned to oblivion. Many monuments have been forgotten, and people no longer visit them. Wherever the narrative embodied by the monuments stood directly in opposition to nationalist interests, memorial sites were removed, as in Croatia, where a large number of anti-fascist sites were destroyed or damaged. In other states like Slovenia, Serbia, or Macedonia, the narrative of self-liberation and the partisan struggle was more suited to integration into the new nationalistic narratives. This led to reconciliation with other fascist collaborationist groups, such as the Serbian Chetniks or Selovian Home Guards, who established their own memorial sites. Within Macedonia, the historical revisionism is drastically visible. If in ethnic Albanian areas the monuments are in neglect (as in Struga), in the ethnic Macedonian region the monuments are well kept (such as in Prilep).

It is true to say that the formal aspect of universalism embodied by these memorials has been more stable than the political universal claims of the revolution which was defeated. But with most of the museums attached to memorial sites now closed, and very few school trips or other excursions to them organized these days, the monuments have been completely decontextualized. With the recent fashionable academic attention to the "archaeology of modernism" a renewed interest in these monuments is slowly growing. Today the monuments arouse popular interest too. Seen as strangely designed objects they appear posted on many design blogs, and often trigger enthusiastic discussions.

This phenomenon is nevertheless simultaneously, politically at least, problematic, as it follows an understanding of art as an autonomous space which has been attended by a lot of formalism. It is this very formalism that denies the social function of objects and ignores the complex role that the monuments play in the political discourse. This is what can be described as the process of abandonment. It may seem at first to be contradictory to suggest that this attention has resulted in the monuments' abandonment which at best can be described by the term "musealization."

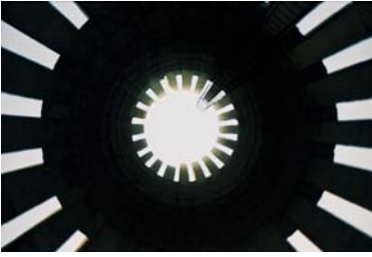
Things found in museums tend to have fallen out of use. They form the sediment of one's knowledge of the past, without playing any role in one's present. It is only when objects are connected to social practice beyond the museum space that they take on real meaning. Therefore, to return to the monuments, it is not simply a case of saving them but also about the possibility of retrieving their emancipatory and anti-fascist stance. It is not only about accumulating "resources of hope," but also about their re-enactment and mobilization in the present struggle.



Petrova Gora

On the highest elevation of the Petrova Gora Mountain range, a towering silver structure of irregularly unfolding organic shapes rises into the air. The monument on Petrova Gora pays homage to the killing of partisans by Ustasha forces, and in the forest nearby, an underground partisan hospital remained undiscovered until recently. The sculpture was designed in 1981 by the sculptor Vojin Bakić in one of the last large memorial parks realized in Yugoslavia. It represents a mature example of the memorial-park typology with a museum, restaurant and educational facilities fully integrated into the monumental structure. The central monument consists of a massive 37-meter-high steel and concrete structure set on a solid platform. The four-storey construction is composed of oval structures embellished with rounded shapes that “grow” asymmetrically out of one another. The sculpture—it is in fact a monumental building—reminds one of a space shuttle, and apart from the solid platform, the monument does not have any specific hierarchy to imply a top-down pyramidal structure.

Inside the monument, the organic multi-storey open spaces wind their way up to the top by way of a topographic plan that is reminiscent of the organic forms of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. The top of the monument is now adorned by a cell-phone mast, making use of the monument’s favorable geographic position. Today the monument is deteriorating and the adjoining museum was plundered and devastated by vandals during the civil war in the 1990s. The aluminum-plate façade is currently being sold on the black market.



Kozara

The monument at Kozara, located in northern Bosnia, is positioned at the highest point of the forested mountain range. Built by Dušan Džamonja in 1972 it has a cylinder form made out of twenty trapezoid concrete pillars with conical gaps in between them. Visitors are able to enter the monument through these gaps whose conical form is designed precisely so that a human body can just about squeeze through them to get inside the monument but which makes getting out again a wholly unpleasant physical act.

Inside the cylindrical form of the monument, visitors stand in a dark, chimney-like space from which it is possible to glimpse the outside world through the vertical gaps by which one entered, and through which the light trickles in. The form of interiority produces an uneasy feeling of entrapment, which clearly refers to the horrific experiences that took place during World War II in the Kozara Mountain range when German troops surrounded the neighboring forests with the help of Ustasha collaborators and closed in on the partisans and villagers, the peasant population which had fled the fascist terror. Those that survived the offensive were sent to concentration camps, while others joined partisans. Kozara paid a high price for its anti-fascist resistance.

Outside the monument there is a wide-open clearing that before the 1990s was used for Kolo (Circle) dancing, a traditional dance that is practiced by people of many different nationalities around the Kozara Mountains. The circular form of the monument relates to two aspects: first, it brings to the core the integrative idea of Kolo, and second, it pays homage to the claustrophobic experience of being encircled and besieged by occupation forces. The central reference to two circles brings to the fore two exclusive logics of World War II: one based on the anti-fascist solidarity and struggle that moves beyond ethnic principles and embraces a different world, and the other, which lies in siege of the former and attempts to destroy it, namely the logic of fascist hatred and ethnic exclusivity. The external siege, the encirclement, can be broken only through the internal circle of solidarity and struggle.





Kosmaj

In Kosmaj, another small mountain region located in the middle of Serbia, a monument by Vojin Stojić and Gradimir Vedaković of 1971 marks a historical event of partisan retreat from the fascist offensive. Similar to many other memorial sites, the sculpture is situated at the highest position within the mountain range, its five finger-like projections pointing up into the sky. The monument is distributed on a ground-plan based on the geometry of a five-point star to create a spiky object that from a distance is perceived as a single form. Close to, however, the viewer realizes that the monument's "fingers" are not connected, and that looking up, the geometry of the star becomes vaguely readable in the in-between spaces that the fingers leave against the sky. At the moment when the viewer perceives the fingers as detached from one another, the monument reveals its structural boldness; an exercise of sorts against the forces of gravity, standing up to, or, rather, standing between the land and the air.

Sutjeska

The battle of Sutjeska was a most tenuous moment in the history of the region; a turning point in the whole Yugoslav partisan movement during World War II. Trapped in the high mountains on the edge of Montenegro and Herzegovina, the partisan General Command with wounded fighters only just managed to escape the German and other collaborationist troops that outnumbered them by almost ten to one, while thousands were killed in the forests close to the village of Tjentište. It was a deciding episode in the Yugoslav resistance.

The sculpture at Sutjeska, after a design by Miodrag Živković, was constructed in 1971. It consists of two monumental rocks, which although similar are not copies of one another, and which mark the site of the breakthrough while simultaneously forming an artificial gorge. The form of the sculpture changes according to the visitor's movements and position: from below, the visitor perceives the rocks as massive and monolithic, but once the passage through the rocks has begun, the visitor realizes that the monument opens up to become a more sophisticated form and that it reproduces the experience of marching through the mountains and of being exposed from both sides. Climbing further up the path to look down towards the monument, the rocks turn into wings. And if from there one continues walking along the path leading to the small museum (which houses a large mural on the event by Krsto Hegedušić), the rocks then seem to dissolve into fingers. The shift of perspective the sculpture encourages produces a very subtle effect, from the immediate perception of the symmetry of the rocks when looking at the front, to re-orientation after moving through the monument, which evokes a fundamental asymmetry.





Jasenovac

The Jasenovac monument stands on a vast open plain just behind the flood-protection dams along the River Sava bordering northern Bosnia. Jasenovac was the site of the largest and most barbarous concentration camp in Yugoslavia during World War II. Thousands of Serbs, Jews, homosexuals, Romani, Partisans, political opponents, and people from all ethnic backgrounds were murdered at Jasenovac concentration camp by the fascist Ustaša regime in collaboration with German occupying forces.

At the time of planning the memorial not much was left of the concentration camp except for some traces of the rail connection that had been used to deliver inmates to the camp from all over the Balkans. The history of the camp had left an open wound in the newly founded socialist Yugoslav state, yet it wasn't until 1967 that the site was turned into a memorial site. Due to the delicate nature of the Jasenovac site, the architect Bogdan Bogdanović decided on the reconciling gesture of a formalized concrete flower. The sophisticated, elegant, filigree form of the sculpture makes full use of the possibility to create free and organic forms with reinforced concrete. The flower rises out of a small mound underneath which is a crypt. The sculpture is reached via a path made from the wooden railway sleepers of the one-time rail connection to the camp, which meanders past a small lake upon whose surface the flower sculpture is mirrored. Parts of the former camp have been marked by small mounds and craters whose relevance is deciphered on a small bronze relief placed along the path. The monument is complemented by a small, modernist study-center located in pavilions on the edge of the site. The memorial site suffered some damage during the civil war and has since been renovated and restored.