

Contentious Spaces

Uncovering the Hidden Narratives of State-Socialist Built Heritage

Maja Babić, Tino Mager (eds)



LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Edited by
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The World Without

On Shards and Lost Languages

Carmen Popescu

Notoriously, Charles Jencks situated with minute precision the death of modernism: “Modern Architecture died in St-Louis, Missouri on July 15 at 3:32 (or thereabouts), when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks were given the final *coup de grâce* by dynamite.”¹

What about the architecture of the former communist bloc? Was there a moment when it was declared dead?

And if it was, was this the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9 November 1989, when the East Berliners saw with their own eyes, through the growing fissures, the architecture of the capitalist world? (Such an affirmation would entail that the Iron Curtain was totally opaque, which we know it was not.) Or was its death announced by the vivid outburst of mediocre Western pastiches – seen in the flood of glass façades inundating big cities and small towns alike – competing with the amazingly elaborate turbo-architectures of the new-rich villas?² Otherwise said, was this death completed when capitalist realism became a desirable image for the architects in the post-socialist world?³

Or was the death of the former communist bloc architecture announced when the Romanian Union of Architects launched an international competition in 1995 to entirely rethink the area occupied by the shameful House of the People and its axes? A competition that clearly held a political implication for its initiators:

In addition to being a necessary answer to a problem that has been more or less clearly established, namely the one of the civic center that was left unfinished by Ceausescu, organizing the international competition for urbanism was a signal addressed to the officials [the political leaders], the administration and, last but not least, to the Romanian society.⁴

Or, perhaps, the architecture of the former Communist bloc died when the Palast der Republik in Berlin was condemned to die in 2003 when the

Bundestag voted for its demolition. The building was kept in an induced coma since 1990, when it was closed due to asbestos contamination, its demolition being officialised by decree in January 2006. Hundreds of militants from the civil society fought to keep it alive until the last minute.⁵

There are several possible answers, or there is no answer at all, since, pragmatically speaking, the collapse of the communist regimes put an end to the institutional and normative apparatus regulating architectural design and urban planning in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and what used to be called “the satellite” countries. Because whatever the answer or the positioning, what is at stake when asking such a question is not defining a precise moment but reflecting on what was left behind. Writing her *Requiem for Communism*, Charity Scribner started her book with a happening that invaded the streets of Berlin in 1996, in “an obituary for the ideals of socialism [...] invit[ing] the public to join a funeral procession that led from the Memorial Church in the western half of the city to the ‘Cemetery of the Welfare State’ that had been temporarily marked out in the East.”⁶

Each death is about disappearance. But beyond this erasure, it questions the legacy of what/who disappeared. This is the question that the collection of essays gathered here addresses so timely.

This is a question that I have been asking myself for many years, in many ways – as a lambda individual who had lived the (literally) unbelievable fall of the Wall; as a scholar confronted with the professional world behind the Iron Curtain; as a person pushed by the waves of life in the other geographical part of Europe; as a scholar working on the Communist bloc; and, more generally, on architecture and (geo)politics and so forth. Allow me to share some of these reflections with you as a foreword to this book.

ON HERITAGE AND LEGACY

In 2009, when the Generali Foundation organised the exhibition “Modernism as a ruin. An archaeology of the present,”⁷ a wind of ruino-philia was blowing in the art world, touching the realm of architecture directly in terms of both material decay and (more particularly) symbolising the end of an era. Several exhibitions and publications embraced at that time this anxious passion for ruins, pinning modernist architecture as an object of longing and a vehicle for critical reflection.⁸ In a certain

manner, all these contributed to a certain idea of heritagisation of the very recent past, despite its decried flaws. The very title of the exhibition in Vienna, alluding to archaeology as a compelling metaphor for the wrecked state of modernity, implied a possible understanding of modernist architectural objects as monuments. The time was ripe to think about them in terms of heritage, whether conflicted or not. Svetlana Boym remarked that modernity, from its beginnings, went hand in hand with ruins and nostalgia, quoting in this sense Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, with his wings caught in the storm that "we call progress."⁹ However pertinent her observation was – after all, it was modernity that laid the foundations of history as a discipline – I think that Hannah Arendt's understanding of modernity as a major rupture in relation to what preceded it is more relevant for talking about nostalgia and heritage. It was in the wound engendered by this rupture that nostalgia dug its den. Built upon the ideals of modernity and nurtured by its misdemeanours and disasters, the regimes put in place behind the Iron Curtain were among the most paradigmatic embodiments of the radical changes engendered by the era of modernity.

But when it came to mourning and/or reflecting on the remains of modernity, the books and shows introspecting ruinophilia rarely, if ever, meditate on whatever traces were left behind by communist regimes. No word about such architectural witnesses in the presentation of the Generali Foundation show, despite its including Cyprien Gaillard's works, particularly from his series "Geographical Analogies" (2006–9), which mingled photos of housing compounds from both sides of the Iron Curtain. (But even if Gaillard also included ruins from the former communist world, there was hardly a politicised bias in this inclusion, his take being motivated by the pervasiveness of the modernist project's actual disappearance.)¹⁰ A rather Romantic take, as noted by Brian Dillon when discussing in 2010 the ruinophilia of the art world – "the discovery time and again of our melancholy distance from the formal ambition or political charge of the modern."¹¹ Whatever Gaillard's interpretation, his polaroid compositions juxtaposing post-1945 social housing and ascertained monuments from old ages opened a question as if a void was opened: could daily life and its recent residential estates enter the debate on monuments too?

Considering recent buildings in terms of heritage is a slippery matter, at least for doctrinal reasons, if not for more complex issues. This is even more true for the architectures of former communist countries. Moreover,

the word “heritage” is slippery, as it gained, aside its original meaning (“something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor: legacy, inheritance”),¹² an institutional signification, ideologically loaded, referring to the artefacts, buildings, and sites considered of value (historical, cultural) for a nation or for the entire humanity. On the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) website page on World Heritage, one can read: “heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today and what we pass on to future generations.”¹³

Heritage or legacy? What term is more appropriate for framing the architectures of the former communist bloc? If the two terms seem interchangeable – Matthew Rampley, in his introduction to *Heritage, Ideology and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe*, alternates heritage and legacy to avoid repetitions¹⁴ – their deep moral meanings differ, as well as the way they are considered. Certainly, several of those architectures built under the communist regimes deserve to be preserved. The question is, on what basis? How do we argue for their preservation, given their problematic context of origin? In the wake of post-socialism (and of postmodernity), what lacks is a paraphrase of Alois Riegl’s brilliant theorisation of the concept of the monument, which, in its time, anticipated the craze of modernity for the new discipline of heritagisation.¹⁵

I propose four lenses for reflecting on the architectures of the former communist bloc: ordinariness, extraordinariness, lost languages, and narratives. Obviously, these don’t replace Riegl’s criteria of value – art, history, and ancientness – though some far-fetched similarities could be imagined.

ON ORDINARINESS

Ordinariness is an issue of modernity. In general. It has to do with the emergence of the masses, propelled by the industrial revolutions, and with the expansion of everyday life into a sphere of different attention. In architecture, ordinariness is a collateral result of the new role assumed by architects, many of whom enrol in the service of the masses. Before, architecture was only a matter of capital “A.” Modernity led architecture to enter a world of ordinariness. In the midst of modernism’s crisis, after the end of World War II, the notion of the “ordinary” or “average man” appeared as one of the key elements in understanding the major changes in society and its new expectations. Interestingly enough, the notion was

evoked in relation to monumentality, seen as a means for modernism to achieve a certain meaning, as was discussed in the 1948 symposium launched by *Architectural Review*, “In Search of a New Monumentality.”¹⁶

However, if ordinariness had been associated with functionalist architecture – bleak, cold, and devoid of sense – in the polarised world after World War II, it came to be associated with the architecture of the former communist bloc: endless grey urban landscapes of concrete, mournful, repetitive façades, and so forth. When I first visited Paris in September 1991 – at the time planes from Bucharest landed at Orly Airport – I was amazed to discover kilometres of mass housing and, from this overcrowded suburban landscape reminding me of socialist Romania, the Eiffel Tower emerging on the horizon. There was no clue for somebody who had lived behind the Iron Curtain that mass housing was a shared environment of the polarised world. Ordinariness seemed to be the politicised consequence of the communist regimes’ ideology. No wonder that Brest, massively reconstructed according to modernist principles after the World War II bombings, was scornfully compared with a “French East-Berlin.”¹⁷

When the Albanian painter Edi Rama, turned mayor of Tirana in 2000, launched a vast artistic operation meant to rehabilitate the image of the capital by repainting the façades of the prefab mass housing, he had the same ideologically biased belief: the dreariness of the façades was the very mark of the former communist regime, which, therefore, was to be erased. Covering the façades in colourful patterns by artists from all around the globe was a political gesture, which was recognised as such: colours were meant as more than aesthetic props; they were intended to become “a signal or a cry.”¹⁸ They were meant to “*become* politics.”¹⁹

The twist of ruinophilia, which haunted the coming of age of our era, succeeded in equating the ordinary buildings of late modernity to monuments. This was one of the most striking features of the works of art following this path: this value reversal made them look surreal, while their subject seemed to be subreal (if I may borrow from Georges Bataille).²⁰ If ordinariness is an obstacle against heritagisation, how could the thousands and thousands of mass-housing developments built in the former communist bloc aspire to the institutional status of heritage? Their preservation would not be the only problem, but even more so, their deprecated association with the ideology of the regime that had commissioned them. But the predicament of such a question would disappear if these “ordinary” architectures were perceived as a legacy. A legacy

implies a more affective understanding, and it has to do with the (ordinary) process of inhabiting, such as living, sharing, and appropriating. Those architectures permeated by innumerable histories were definitely places of life, partaking and appropriation.

Artists, once again, help us to reflect upon the intricate meanings of this form of legacy constituted by ordinary architectures. The stake of works depicting ordinariness is not nostalgia, like those embracing ruinophilia, but rather a kind of longing, as in be-longing. Like Cyprien Gaillard, Katariina Fortuna looks at buildings of (late) modernity from different places on the globe – her series “World Without” is composed of almost portraits of what she calls “architectural landmarks.”²¹ But her buildings are not monuments; they embody objects of meaning, speaking about feelings, perceptions, and matters of daily life: “first cityscape you’ll see arriving in St. Petersburg by train. It has a personal meaning and symbolizes the courage and mental straight that decision making requires.” The “World Without” is not a world without monuments; it is a world that might lose the meaning of things. This is why the ordinary architectures of the former communist bloc are important.

ON EXTRA-ORDINARINESS

The architecture behind the Iron Curtain was also about grand gestures, with a clear intention – a *Kunstwollen* would have said Riegl – to produce monuments. Starting with the Seven Sisters in Moscow and the other edifices that had to copy them in several of the satellite countries, iconic buildings from all the different periods and movements – socialist realist, modernist, metabolist, brutalist, regionalist, postmodernist, and so forth – were meant to embody the architectural heritage of the communist regimes. Their monumentality could fit into Riegl’s framework of values – whether it be a matter of size or other exceptional attributes related to shape, materiality, or technology – and, in several cases, it could have responded to some of the solutions debated in the 1948 *Architectural Review* symposium. But unlike the scepticism pronounced in that symposium against the ambiguity of the ideological charge associated with monumentality, in the communist bloc, this charge was often a scope to attain. Those grand gestures embraced (most often explicitly) a rhetorical approach and were definitely perceived as meaningful, for the best or for the worst.

From all the iconic buildings that made in their time an architectural buzz in their countries of origin as well as abroad, I would like to consider the notion of extraordinariness through two examples that I have briefly evoked before – the Palast der Republik in East Berlin and the House of the People in Bucharest – both endorsing a highly symbolic role, both seen as the utmost embodiment of the regime that produced them. However, their original message and their subsequent fate after the fall of the Wall could not be more different. Both were built on sites emotionally charged by layers of memory: the site of the first of them (the Palast der Republik, 1972–6) was already emptied by the demolition of the Royal Palace (severely damaged by the war), ordered more than two decades before by the communist authorities; to make place for the second one (the House of the People, the construction of which started in 1984) and its adjoining urban axes, 486 hectares of residential neighbourhoods and ten historical churches were bulldozed.²² The first was planned as an emblem of modernity, with its display of technology and design, as well as openness, by mixing governmental and popular culture functions. The second was conceived as an epitome of architectural grandeur, mirrored in its gigantic dimensions, expensive materials, and excess of historicist ornamentations, all meant to defy the existing records of magnificence.²³ The first was popularly appreciated, though sometimes gently mocked for its provincial modernity (“Erich’s lamp shop”);²⁴ the second was purely hated, seen by the architectural profession and the population alike as the ultimate aberration of totalitarian abuses. After the fall of the Wall and the political changes, the first was demolished while the second was turned into a (re)new(ed) symbol of the nation; the first moved from a modern idea of architecture to a pastiche of history, while the second was successfully reconverted, hosting (among others) the Chamber of Deputies, several ministries, and the National Museum of Contemporary Art.

How did this happen? Both buildings erased History, and both represented, in different ways, a much-conflicted heritage; nevertheless, they were not equal in front of the changing times. In Berlin, with the demolition of the palace, History has resurfaced, not without multiple contestations inside and outside Germany. Before the new cultural forum was built (2013–20), a counterproposal imagined its façades covered by electronic devices able to simulate a mix of architectures, from the Prussian castle to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) modern palace.²⁵ The problematic outburst of History (and of its flaws) of the newly erected building remains an object of contempt: in June 2024, an international ideas contest was

launched to “appropriate” its architecture.²⁶ Meanwhile, in Bucharest, it seems that History is about to be invented, even if this renewal dissimulates an unsettling continuation. Impossible to be demolished, given its gigantism, the House of the People progressively moved into a canonical element of the neo-liberal Romania and was rebaptised the Palace of the Parliament. Its image is flamboyantly exposed in tourist guides and on postcards, and it ranks among the most visited places in Romania, being considered a national pride.

The becoming of these two iconic buildings invites one to meditate upon the circumvolved, deep significations of heritage and of heritage reclaiming, reminding one at the same time that memory is a spatial phenomenon and that the manipulation of public space is a manipulation of collective memory.²⁷

ON NARRATIVITY AND LOST LANGUAGES

Perceiving architecture as ordinary or extra-ordinary could be seen as the result of complex histories, behind which are a multitude of stories, individual or collective. This can be complicated further when projected on the larger canvas of History with a capital H.

Listening to these stories and taking them into account is part of our endeavour as historians. But we, as historians, can also have stories. This is the reason I chose to include here personal intrusions – I have stories about the architectures of socialist Romania (sometimes out of its borders), and these architectures are part of my personal story. I cannot but take it personally, both their ordinariness and their extraordinariness. As an explanation, I could say that I was born in a district built between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, which could have appeared as an ordinary place, but that was truly extra-ordinary due to a concurrence of both architectural and political circumstances.²⁸ Being a historian, I can't allow myself to take it personally – these architectures are my object of study – so I continuously run to and fro: I take the distance to get the bigger picture and also to be able to analyse it objectively, and then I dive again into narrativity. Like Svetlana Boym, I saw the Palast der Republik as a teenager and thought that it was the most amazing new building I had ever seen. She saw it in 1976, the year of its completion (me one year later), and it was her first trip out of the USSR: “[I] have never seen such a triumph of modern architecture that for me represented the West. It

had windows of shaded glass that spoke of exotic places and bristled with opportunities.”²⁹

Looking at the architecture of the former communist bloc through personal lenses creates “affective histories,” as Ana Miljacki designated them.³⁰ Affective history doesn’t take into account only the discourses but is ready to build up its reflexivity also on narratives, creating thus entanglements of (ideological) rhetorics and of (personal and collective) narrativity. Hayden White claimed (and shocked his peers at the time) that there was no discipline of history “as historians emplot the events into histories instead of ‘finding’ them.”³¹ One might agree or not with White, but for the historians of the architectures behind the Iron Curtain, narratives are essential, one of the reasons being that they severely lack evidence for their objects of study. Storytelling and orality are as important as archives in these cases. However, storytelling is relevant for yet another reason: it reminds us of the pivotal importance of language in communist regimes. As noted by Boris Groys, the communist revolution was a “linguistic turn at the level of social practice,” which triggered a “linguistification” of the society.³² In a certain manner, Edi Rama’s painted façades in Tirana fit into this ideological device – they materialised an encoded language contesting the former encoded language. But if language was the principal channel of the state ideology during the communist regimes, it was also a tool of disguise and subtlety for the citizens under their rule. Surviving communist regimes meant speaking through allusions, saying one thing to signify another. Semantics had tremendous importance, especially in the realm of the arts. Language – spoken, written, visual – had layers of meaning that were meant both to deceive and to add new content. (Hence my repeated reference to art in this foreword, taking advantage of its capacity to conceal and reveal at the same time.)

This raises a double challenge: how to decode the meanings of the *architecture parlante* of the communist regimes? How to be able to read between the lines of both the architectural language and the different period testimonies related to it? How to decipher these architectures from before, but also their primary sources and stories if there is no key to open their encoding? This is a state of “collective amnesia,” as implied by David Maljkovic in his series of videos “Scenes for a new heritage.”³³ One of the videos stages the memorial commemorating the fascist resistance of the people in Petrova Gora, a monument designed in 1982 by the sculptor Vojin Bakić. If the memorial was the perfect example of the former Yugoslav ideology, the memorial is empty of meaning today. Victim of

spolia, its aluminium plates being stolen in the years after the change of regime, and victim of a loss of meaning, the memorial is but a photogenic ruin. Maljkovic's video pictures it in a distant future, examined by people speaking a language that we cannot understand (subtitles are there to help us), themselves unable to understand what they see. One says: "What is this except that it's big and build [*sic*] in a strange place?" Another replies: "I think it carries a strong message." A third one intervenes: "If it were strong, we would see it!"

COLLECTING SHARDS: INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

Contentious Spaces is a book of fragments. This makes me think of a work by Olivia Viitakangas entitled "Fragment Collector," scrupulously depicting a mock profession entailing collecting, documenting, and archiving glass shards found in the environment.³⁴ Collecting shards might seem of little interest, if not meaningless. But just imagine that one puts together a kaleidoscope with those collected shards: how meaningful could the different moving patterns generated by such a device become? As a fragment collector, this book is a sense generator. *Contentious Spaces* is about ordinariness, grand gestures, beautiful ruins, strong messages, and language decodification all at once. Taken separately, the questions arising from these issues help to grasp the meanings of the architectures of the former communist bloc; taken as a whole, they become meaningful as they contribute to assessing the charge of these architectures as heritage and/or legacy of the past period. Examining these architectures from the perspective of their post-socialist fate, entailing their appropriation, rejection, or sheer oblivion, makes them otherwise relevant while questioning the limits of our own understanding of these material traces.

The texts collected here are a necessary reflection on the resilience of the architectures of the former communist bloc and on the capacity of the post-socialist society to deal with them. Meanwhile, from a historiographical point of view, aside from interrogating the scattered knowledge that we have about the communist regimes, they made us reflect on how we can contribute to making sense today of their architectural remains. We need to unblur the blurred images, be it by lack of documentation, forgetfulness, ideologisation, or de-ideologisation. We need to keep turning the kaleidoscope of collected shards.

NOTES

- ¹ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-modern Architecture*, 4th ed. (Academy editions, 1984), 9.
- ² See Kai Vöckler *Pristina is Everywhere. Turbo Urbanism: The Aftermath of a Crisis* (Stichting Archis, 2008).
- ³ See Bart Goldhorn and Philipp Meuser, *Capitalism Realism. New Architecture in Russia* (Dom Publishers, 2006).
- ⁴ Foreword by Alexandru Beldiman, president of the Union of Romanian Architects, in Uniunea Arhitecților din România, *București 2000: International Urban Planning Competition* (Simetria, 1997), 10.
- ⁵ Adrian von Buttlar, “Berlin’s Castle Versus Palace: A Proper Past for Germany’s Future?” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory and Criticism* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 12–27.
- ⁶ Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (MIT Press, 2003), 3.
- ⁷ “Modernism as a ruin. An archaeology of the present,” Generali Foundation, Vienna, 19 June–20 September 2009; curated by Sabine Folie, with works by Yona Friedman, Giuseppe Gabellone, Cyprien Gaillard, Isa Genzken, Dan Graham, Gordon Matta-Clark, Florian Pumhösl, Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij, Robert Smithson, Rob Voerman, and Stephen Willats. See <https://foundation.generali.at/en/exhibitions/die-moderne-als-ruine-eine-archaeologie-der-gegenwart/>, accessed 7 November 2024.
- ⁸ See in particular Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, eds., *Ruins of Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2010).
- ⁹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), 29. She quotes Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”
- ¹⁰ See Jonathan Griffin interviewing Cyprien Gaillard, “New Romantic,” *Frieze* 130 (April 2010): 84–7.
- ¹¹ Brian Dillon, “Decline and Fall. Tracing the History of Ruins in Art, from the 18th-century Painting to 21st-century Film,” *Frieze* 130 (April 2010): 78–83, 81.
- ¹² See the Merriam-Webster dictionary online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/herits> age, accessed 8 November 2024.
- ¹³ See <https://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=160>, accessed 8 November 2024.
- ¹⁴ Matthew Rampley, “Contested Histories: Heritage and/as the Construction of the Past: An Introduction,” in *Heritage, Ideology and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe: Contested Pasts, Contested Presents*, ed. Matthew Rampley (Boydell Press, 2012), 1–20.
- ¹⁵ Alois Riegl, *Der Moderne Denkmalkultus: sein Wesen und seine Entstehung* (Braumüller 1903).
- ¹⁶ “In Search of a New Monumentality,” *Architectural Review* 1948, no. 9 (September 1948): 117–28.
- ¹⁷ The comparison belongs to the French writer Daniel Pennac, quoted in Daniel Le Couëdic, Carmen Popescu, and Rachel Sattolo, *Art public et projet urbain. Brest, 1970-2000* (Press Universitaires de Rennes, 2008), 15.
- ¹⁸ Anri Sala, *Why is Colour Better than Gray* (Center for Contemporary Art, 2004).
- ¹⁹ Edi Muka, “La réinvention de la roue,” in *Les promesses du passé. Une histoire discontinue de l’art dans l’ex-Europe de l’Est*, eds. Christine Macel, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, and Micha Shishke (Centre Pompidou, 2010), 173, 178; my emphasis.
- ²⁰ See “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* [Superman] and *Surrealist*,” in *Georges Bataille, Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, edited and with an introduction by Allan Stoekl (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 32–44. See also Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (MIT Press, 1996).
- ²¹ “Looking at architectural landmarks through the prism of the modern-day, the World Without series raises the question of [their] meaning for modern and future generations.” See <https://www.fortunagraphics.com/series/>, accessed 10 November 2024.
- ²² See Ioana Iosa, “La transfiguration de la Roumanie,” in *L’urbanisme, des idées aux pratiques (XIXe-XXIe siècle)*, eds. Philippe Chassaing and Sylvain Schoonbaert (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008), 195–205, 196.

- ²³ Iosa, "La transfiguration de la Roumanie," 196. Iosa quotes the official newspaper of the communist regime, *Scinteia*. It is interesting to note that these numbers are quoted (in a list much more developed) on the website Romania tourism <https://romaniatourism.com/bucharest.html#landmarks>, accessed 11 November 2024.
- ²⁴ Von Buttlar, "Berlin's Castle Versus Palace: A Proper Past for Germany's Future?" 14.
- ²⁵ Meinard von Gerkan's proposal. See von Buttlar, "Berlin's Castle Versus Palace: A Proper Past for Germany's Future?" 22.
- ²⁶ For the opening of the international competition, see <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/615230/call-for-ideas-castle-appropriation/>. For the beginning of the jury reflection, started on 10 October 2024, see "Ergebnisse des Ideenaufrufs 'Schlossaneignung,'" ARCH+ NEWS, <https://archplus.net/en/ergebnisse-des-ideenaufrufs-schlossaneignung/>. Both sites were accessed on 11 November 2024.
- ²⁷ See Bruce O'Neill, "The Political Agency of Cityscapes. Spatializing Governance in Ceausescu's Bucharest," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 9, no. 1 (2009): 92–109, 103.
- ²⁸ Carmen Popescu, "Projected Happiness. Old Myths and New Ambitions in a Bucharest Neighborhood," in *The Post-socialist City. Continuity and Changes in Urban Space and Imagery*, eds. Alfrun Kliems and Marina Dmitrieva (Jovis, 2010), 170–96.
- ²⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 187. For a different fragment of "affective history" (see Miljacki below), see also Jenny Erpenbeck's brief text "Palast der Republik," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 58, no. 9 (Fall 2019): 548–9.
- ³⁰ See Ana Miljacki's paper "View of the Cracked Center from a Corrugated Blue Rooftop: Toward an Affective History of Hala Pionir in Belgrade," at the EAHN themed conference "States in Between: Architecture and Empire in East Europe and Northeast Eurasia" (7–9 June 2023, Helsinki, Finland).
- ³¹ See Barbara Czarniawska, "The 'Narrative Turn' in Social Studies," in *Narratives in Social Science Research* by B. Czarniawska (Sage Publications, 2004), 1–16. She quotes H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (John Hopkins University, 1973).
- ³² Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript* (Verso, 2009), XV, 1.
- ³³ See Nicola Bozzi, "Re-Imagining Utopian Futures," *Domus*, 9 January 2013, <https://www.domusweb.it/en/art/2013/01/09/re-imagining-utopian-futures.html>, accessed 15 November 2024.
- ³⁴ I am quoting the label presenting Viitakangas's "Fragment Collector" in the exhibition "Generation 23" (Amos Rex, Helsinki, 29 March–20 August 2023).

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Chapter 1

The Material Heritage of Socialist Modernism

International Perspectives

Maja Babić and Tino Mager

Following the end of state socialism and the demise of communist ideology in Europe in the final decade of the twentieth century, a new type of built heritage has emerged. This heritage has come to play a critical role in the formation of the built environment of contemporary cities and their urban and socio-cultural identities. Over the course of the past thirty years, scholars have engaged in the historicisation of the architecture of the era and the examination of the projects and processes that have come to define the formation of this new layer of heritage. The widespread and varied modernist architectural vocabulary, the extensiveness of typological examples, the lingering bureaucracy of the state-socialist apparatus, and the transformative links between ideology and the built environment have come to illustrate the discourse.

The multifaceted heritage of state-socialist Europe – its Central, Eastern, and Southeastern regions – exemplifies the entwined yet distinct iterations of the communist ideology, as negotiated and produced in urban and architectural socio-political and cultural identities that were established, later matured, and ultimately ceased to carry their original meanings. The state-socialist heritage is one of the historical and political entities that no longer exist – their contemporary successors are defined mainly by anti-socialist ideology and the accompanying neoliberal rhetoric. The state of this heritage in the public space is precarious on account of its contemporaneity: the state-socialist urban and architectural heritage stands as a signifier of a recent past, yet its actors are still among us. As such, its place in scholarly and public discourse is manifold, complicated, and complex.

The discourse and rhetoric on the heritage of Europe's communist past are largely contentious. Its meanings are often convoluted and obfuscated. The reasons for this are plenty. The communist past is ideologically

gone, yet viscerally present in its materiality. The former state-socialist countries have been on the path of late-stage capitalism since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – in the former Yugoslavia, since the mid-1990s – and the ailments that accompany it, including corruption, nepotism, malversations, and nationalist and right-wing politics, have been prevalent and far-reaching. The consequences of these processes have impacted all aspects of public life, including activism, policymaking, and scholarly discourse, as exemplified notably in heritage-making projects and policies, as well as the built environment considered broadly.

The post-communist era nation-building processes and projects, the actors of which sought to vehemently reject all vestiges of state-socialist ideology, apparatus, and its spatial signifiers, left the heritage of the past era either explicitly rejected or implicitly marginalised through a myriad of newly established heritage treatment policies. Architecturally, the new and ongoing development of commercial spaces, as well as the rapid construction of housing for fast-growing populations, has relegated the protection of communist-era material heritage to the margins of mainstream discourse and policymaking. Right-wing movements and the hyper-capitalist economy have unearthed an astonishing wave of nationalist discourse and accompanying political strategies, regularly utilising the rhetoric of the negation of communist-era heritage in their rejection of the “horrendous past” that is not to be repeated or invoked.

Climate change and globalisation have further influenced the contentious nature of the state-socialist-era heritage. The structures from the second half of the twentieth century have been largely deemed ecologically unsustainable and costly to adapt to the rapidly changing climate, particularly notable in the case of large housing estates scattered throughout former communist cities. Climate change has proven deeply impactful on the built environment: the alterations to the landscape caused by climate change have impacted heritage management worldwide. Globalisation has had a dual effect on communist-era heritage and its contentious nature, while the expedient flow of information (and disinformation) had facilitated the expansion of the discourse on the state-socialist ideology of the second half of the twentieth century and its problematic (mis)-contextualisation in the post-truth era of the recent years, the access to information, and its public forum has brought attention to the built heritage of communist Europe and primed it for discussion, both in academic and public space.

FRAMING STATE-SOCIALIST CONTENTIOUS HERITAGE

In the aftermath of World War II, the newly established state-socialist countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe sought not only to build up the economic and political systems in the post-war and the nascent Cold War realm but also to establish national identities materialised in the architectural and urban spaces, as well as in the immaterial domain. Nation-building and its fervent companion, nationalism, played vital roles in the formation of post-war states around the globe and also left their mark in the idiosyncratic political spaces behind the Iron Curtain.¹ The most notable examples of these ideology-laden spaces in Eastern and Southeastern Europe can be identified in World War II memorials, grandiose government buildings, and ever-expanding housing estates. The ideology of state socialism, centrally planned economies, and one-party political systems pervaded the built environment – architecture was an invaluable ideological tool in the execution of their designs.²

Ranging from the ideologically straightforward – like the still-standing Karel Pokorný's 1947 *Brotherhood* in Prague, the Czech Republic, depicting an embrace between Czechoslovak and Soviet soldiers, and Budapest's *Liberty Statue*, also from 1947, by Zsigmond Kisfaludi Strobl, to former Yugoslavia's abstract memorials of Vojin Bakić and Bogdan Bogdanović scattered throughout the mountains and valleys in the western Balkans – the memorials to the plight and suffering of the past war stand as vital elements in the ideological processes of the construction of newly communist states and their soon-to-be Cold War political iterations. The governmental palaces and structures serve as monuments to the communist party in the newly established cities. An example of this is New Belgrade's Palace of the Federal Executive Council in Serbia, in former Yugoslavia. Similar monumental structures were also built in remote areas, such as the Monument House of the Bulgarian Communist Party in the mountains outside the capital in Bulgaria. In addition, various governments constructed monumental palaces, exemplified by the House of the Republic in Bucharest, Romania. This oversized structure, which housed the communist governing bodies, became a dramatic marker in the landscape of state-socialist post-war Europe. Finally, architectural and urban elements that continue to serve their purpose to this day in an essentially unchanged manner – albeit stripped of their original ideological meaning – are the communist-era housing estates. The concrete housing estates are homes to large swaths of populations of the contemporary successor

states of former behemoths of state-socialist ideology. Scattered along the edges of cities throughout the former Eastern Bloc and Yugoslavia, the housing estates of Prague, Budapest, and Belgrade continue to capture the attention of not only the public and architectural and heritage scholars but also the demagogues of the new era.

The ideological meaning and value of monuments, government buildings, and housing estates in the construction of post-war communist countries cannot be exaggerated.³ The ability of any state to house its rapidly growing urban population in a short period of time was an invaluable argument for the unique success of the regime; the nationalisation of private property and one-party rule in the system of the planned economy perpetrated the problematic yet persevering notion that such large construction projects could only be executed within the confines of communist Eastern Bloc and state-socialist ideological spaces. Monuments to the past war and its immense suffering served as a grounding discourse for the formation of national identities and nation-building projects of new state-socialist political entities. The bloody foundations of the communist revolution in Yugoslavia and the newly found emphasis on previously modest communist party influence in Eastern Europe were reinforced in concrete, stone, glass, and marble – these monumental markers of suffering were infused with hopes for a brighter future. The ideological triumvirate, comprising housing and memorials, was finalised with the construction of government palaces and monuments for the Communist Party. Signifiers of political space in nations' capitals and larger regional cities, as well as the palaces of the communist party, these buildings symbolised the governing bodies and their place in the urban and political landscape, as well as in the socio-political and cultural imagery and discourse.

The foreword raises the central question of whether one can ever pinpoint the death of socialist architecture, or whether its legacies persist through traces, reinterpretations, and contested memories. The three conceptual lenses – ordinariness, extraordinariness, and narrativity, as well as lost languages – provide a productive way to make sense of these dynamics. Ordinariness speaks to the mass-housing estates, prefab blocks, and repetitive façades that came to symbolise the socialist city. These are often framed as grey, monotonous, and politically overdetermined, yet they also represent the lived environments of millions. Their ordinary character complicates their recognition as heritage, but, as the foreword suggests, ordinariness itself carries meaning: these architectures are legacies of inhabitation, appropriation, and memory. They embody a

continuity between everyday life and monumental political projects. Extraordinariness refers to the spectacular architecture, such as the *Spomeniks*, or the application of monumental artworks, like *Solidarity* in Minsk. These objects were deliberately charged with ideological weight, and their later fates – demolition, repurposing, or canonisation – reveal how extraordinariness magnifies conflict over heritage value. Unlike ordinary estates, these monuments remain highly visible sites of political contestation, shaping national narratives long after the regimes that produced them have disappeared. Lost languages and narratives capture the silences, amnesias, and ruptures that structure post-socialist memory. The foreword emphasises how socialist architecture was deeply encoded in ideological language – from state propaganda to personal stories of belonging. With regime change, these languages became unintelligible or suppressed, producing what David Maljković terms a “collective amnesia.”⁴ Here, architecture is not only a physical trace but also a vessel of forgotten or contested meanings, awaiting decoding through oral histories, artistic practices, and affective scholarship. Together, these lenses reframe the architectures of the former communist bloc not as dead relics but as layered legacies whose meanings oscillate between everyday inhabitation, monumental symbolism, and lost or fragmented narratives.

HERITAGISATION

In the decades following the ideological and socio-political dissolution of communism in Europe, along with the overall study of the architecture and urban planning of the former communist world in Europe, scholars and researchers sought to analyse the vast housing complexes, governmental palaces, and revolutionary monuments scattered throughout the Eastern and Southeastern European landscapes. The government buildings erected in reinforced concrete and adorned with vernacular motifs stand repurposed or abandoned. Social media accounts, newspapers, and journals have focused on former communist Europe’s built environment: the rhetoric of otherworldliness, abstraction, futurism, and monumentality pervades the public discourse.⁵ Within the academic context pertaining to heritage, the focus on the transformations or urban fabric of former communist cities, heritage, housing, and World War II memorials has proven to be potent.⁶ Heritagisation processes have been more favourable to some structures than to others. The reasons are predominantly ideological.

However, monuments and memorials, sprawling housing estates, and government buildings are decidedly not the sole bearers of the state-socialist heritage and its contentious legacy. As the contributions in this volume demonstrate, the notion of a monument – and heritage – is complex and manifold. The state-supported heritagisation processes are juxtaposed with those by grassroots activists, local actors, and inhabitants. As evident in this volume, the differing and distinct examples of state-socialist-era heritage have come to play a significant role in the overall formation of post-communist heritage. The afterlife of a communist-era relief in Minsk, Belarus, tells a story of transformation and art, and the many lives of the House of Fashion's *Solidarity* relief serve as a testimony and a tool of ideological transformation (chapter 1). The example of Café Guguță in Chișinău, Moldova, demonstrates the links between grassroots activism and preservation, and the meaning of the café is rendered as invaluable for the locals (chapter 9). Finally, the (in-)tangible heritage, such as that of Youth Labour Brigades in Yugoslavia, tells the story of the immense role of the people in the erstwhile reconstruction and later construction of the state-socialist former Yugoslavia (chapter 2).

Today, the heritagisation processes exist on the periphery of the architectural and urban production of former communist states.⁷ The built environment created during the second half of the twentieth century came under an intense critical lens of the political agents of the post-communist era as early as 1990, ultimately resulting in its severe fragmentation: while some architectural and urban elements had been altered and appropriated – in an ideological and architectural sense – others have been abandoned and neglected. None of the works of ideologically laden architecture had been left to carry their original meanings; this transformation was immediate and all-encompassing. The shift from state-socialist ideology has been swift: the resulting political, economic, and material space has been rendered free – or made to appear so – of all remnants of the burdensome dogmas of the past era. In an architectural and urban sense, this signified a large-scale transformation that was far-reaching and fundamentally consequential.

Stripping ideological meaning from governmental buildings had been a prescient task: the transformation of previous palaces of communism had been conducted swiftly following the end of state socialism in the early 1990s; the structures were stripped of their communist embellishments, and the new flags became signifiers of the new regimes.⁸ The fate of memorials to the war and its victors – as well as the housing estates

dotting the cities of the former Eastern Bloc and Yugoslavia – has been less benevolent.⁹ While the housing estates became signifiers of the totalitarian past set in concrete and immovable, the World War II memorials became neglected, defaced, or, on a rare occasion, ideologically stripped of their meaning and left unscathed on the basis of their attributed aesthetic value. The smaller monuments or structures, such as those seen in the examples above and in this volume, have experienced a myriad of heritagisation processes and outcomes: while some have experienced rebirth and retribution of meaning, others have played roles in small-scale political projects and grassroots activism; others have been left to die a quiet death.

The ideological significance of state-socialist era heritage is multi-fold, polarised, and polarising. It is equally contentious. The housing estates that once signified the success of the state in providing homes for its rapidly urbanising society now stand as memorials to new ideologies of the concrete urban past that is best left forgotten. They are poorly maintained by the state or municipal governments and entities, and imbued with the meaning of a past failure. However, the social structure of its inhabitants remains undisturbed,¹⁰ and the new millennium sees a rise in the interest of the younger generation seeking housing: the apartments in communist-era housing estates are once again sought after because of their easily modular layouts, but even more so because of the vast green areas that surround them and the relative proximity to the city with metro or bus lines.¹¹ The revolutionary monuments of the past era, as well as those dedicated to Soviet and communist leaders and the military, have become tools of public activism: the protracted removal of the statue of the Soviet marshal Ivan Konev in Prague¹² and the continuous artistic interventions in the sculptural composition of the *Monument to the Soviet Army* in Sofia, Bulgaria,¹³ exemplify the shifting attitudes of the inhabitants of former communist spaces and their appropriation of ideological spaces for protests engaging with contemporary issues.

PERSPECTIVES ON A CONTENTIOUS HERITAGE

In about 2010, it became clear that Socialist Realism was no longer a valid term to describe the architecture of the former socialist countries and that Socialist Modernism would be a more appropriate term for this complex phenomenon.¹⁴ Sometimes also referred to as Eastern Modernism, the reality of this architectural production is much more diverse than these

labels allow. None of these terms – socialist, Eastern, or modernist – frames this vast body of buildings and structures, which can be apolitical, built in the Western hemisphere, or postmodern. Similarly, the label Socialist Built Heritage, which is used in this publication, would not do justice to the objects it encompasses. These include buildings in the former socialist countries of Europe and Asia, as well as a wide range of architectural styles. While the writing of their architectural history has made enormous progress, the study of the heritage aspects of these buildings is still in need of contributions.

While more and more buildings and ensembles of this heritage are being accepted and listed, and the discussions of their heritage value have been initiated as early as the 1990s,¹⁵ a large part is still threatened by neglect and decay. Some of the more dissonant structures are also at risk of being dismantled and subject to iconoclasm, all the more so due to rising tensions between the West and the East. Moreover, the various forms of appropriation – from grassroots movements to state interests – continue to provide ample food for academic thought. They reflect different levels of understanding, from the unwanted remnants of a past era to the embraced expressions of a national chapter in this international story. In many cases, this stock of buildings is the only legacy of public buildings from the post-war period to roughly 1990 and, therefore, a very valid part of the diverse national histories.

On 14–15 April 2013, an International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) European Expert Meeting was held in Warsaw to explore the possibilities of an international serial nomination of twentieth-century monuments and sites in post-socialist countries for the UNESCO World Heritage List. The publication *Socialist Realism and Socialist Modernism. World Heritage Proposals from Central and Eastern Europe* provides an insight into the state of discussions at the time.¹⁶ In summary, the meeting highlighted the need to broaden the concept of Socialist Realism to Socialist Heritage and to promote a more comprehensive, depoliticised, and globally comparative approach to understanding and preserving the socialist architectural heritage. It also emphasised the need for clear protection, evaluation, and restoration strategies, particularly in the former Eastern Bloc countries. Participants also suggested that this architecture should be seen as part of a creative continuum, combining modernism, historicism, traditionalism, and neo-modernism, and encouraged a global comparative analysis that could help depoliticise the assessment process by focusing on objective qualities rather than political connotations.

Heritage from this period should be assessed on the basis of standard criteria for twentieth-century monuments, considering historical, cultural, social, economic, and aesthetic values. Politicising or devaluing this heritage undermines European and global culture. On the World Heritage issue, members called for a clear, historical, and transnational nomination process to ensure that sites receive adequate legal protection, are designated as protected areas, and have effective restoration strategies in place. Their absence threatens the integrity and authenticity of these sites, which may hinder efforts to inscribe them on the World Heritage List.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the associated Russian attacks on the Ukrainian architectural heritage, the latter has received particular attention and illustrates how acutely threatened even a relatively new stock (of monuments) can be. The 2022 *Triennial of Modernism* (Berlin, Dessau, Weimar), like several other symposia and events since 2022, placed a special focus on the roots and legacy of modernism in Ukraine and aimed at a trans-European consideration of historical references and protagonists as well as the question of the current situation in view of the war of aggression against Ukraine. In addition to the many losses of socialist buildings through neglect, profit-oriented investments, or superficial renovations, this war and its destruction show once again how fragile and threatened this young heritage really is.

ASSESSING CONTENTIOUS HERITAGE

The *Twentieth-Century Historic Thematic Framework: A Tool for Assessing Heritage Places*, published by ICOMOS and the Getty Conservation Institute in 2021, is a comprehensive tool designed to help heritage professionals assess and preserve twentieth-century places.¹⁷ The framework provides a structured approach to understanding and categorising heritage places based on historical themes, ensuring that the significance of these places is fully recognised and valued. While it does not focus on contentious heritage, it addresses the socialist built heritage primarily through its emphasis on understanding and categorising heritage within a global context that includes political, economic, and social systems. It approaches socialist built heritage in a variety of ways, incorporating political ideologies, taking a global perspective, considering economic and social infrastructure as well as architectural and urban design trends, and cultural and historical narratives.

The framework recognises the importance of political ideologies, including socialism, in shaping the built environment. This recognition facilitates the evaluation of heritage places influenced by socialist governments, highlighting how political and economic systems have shaped urban planning, architecture, and community development. While taking a global approach to heritage, it supports the consideration of sites from different political systems worldwide. This inclusiveness ensures that heritage from socialist states, such as the former Soviet Union, Eastern Bloc countries, Cuba, and others, is considered. The thematic framework also considers economic structures and social programmes as key themes. Socialist architecture often embodies these principles, particularly in public housing projects, communal facilities, and industrial complexes. By incorporating these themes, the framework allows for a comprehensive evaluation of places that exemplify socialist economic and social aspirations. The publication emphasises the need to study different architectural and urban design trends, including those driven by ideological goals. In socialist contexts, there were specific aesthetic and functional guidelines that influenced construction, such as standardised apartment blocks. The framework can help in the recognition and preservation of these distinctive styles as heritage. Overall, the tool encourages the assessment of heritage as a carrier of cultural and historical narratives. Socialist-era built heritage often represents broader narratives of modernisation, industrialisation, and collective living ideals promoted by socialist regimes. This enables the evaluation of such sites not only for their architectural merits, but also for their symbolic and cultural significance.

The broad and inclusive scope of the *Twentieth-Century Historic Thematic Framework* ensures that the unique aspects of socialist built heritage, from architectural styles to urban planning philosophies, can be recognised, valued, and preserved as part of the global heritage narrative of the twentieth century. However, there is still a great need to fill in the content part of this narrative. The particular building traditions of different countries need to be further explored and placed in context with one another and with the global production of architecture in the twentieth century. In many cases, architects and architectural collectives have not yet received sufficient attention, and local histories of public buildings, typification, and similar matters still hold considerable potential for investigation. Similarly, the question of how these properties are currently appropriated by locals to the international community, by residents to authorities, and by academia is a largely unwritten story.

This is the focus of this publication. The acceptance of the socialist built heritage is rapidly changing, and new geopolitical tensions between East and West are casting this heritage in a new light – between deterrence and glorification. This adds urgency to the question of how to assess this type of heritage and how to address the specific circumstances in different (national) contexts.

STATE OF THE FIELD

While the architecture of socialist modernism has received increasing attention, the perspectives on its heritage character have not yet been thoroughly examined. Moreover, these perspectives range widely, largely depending on the assessment of the socialist period in the respective countries and regions. However, in many cases, these objects are the most representative of the late twentieth-century histories and, therefore, are not only a valuable part of the respective architectural histories but also the political and societal realities. Among the key works that deal with this topic are: *Denkmal Ost-Moderne: Aneignung und Erhaltung des baulichen Erbes der Nachkriegsmoderne* [Eastern Modernism: Appropriation and Preservation of the Architectural Heritage of Post-war Modernism]¹⁸ and *Denkmal Ost-Moderne II: Denkmalpflegerische Praxis der Nachkriegsmoderne* [Eastern Modernism II: Conservation Practice in Post-war Modernism],¹⁹ which raise awareness of the cultural and historical value of Eastern European post-war modernist architecture, offering both theoretical perspectives and practical tools for its preservation. They argue for the recognition of these structures as an essential part of the modern architectural heritage, deserving of thoughtful and innovative approaches to conservation and reuse. The first volume examines the heritage of post-war modernist architecture in the former socialist states of Eastern Europe. It addresses the challenges and strategies involved in preserving and reinterpreting these structures, which were often influenced by socialist ideologies and unique regional aesthetics. The book emphasises the cultural and historical value of these buildings and argues for their recognition as a significant part of the twentieth-century architectural heritage. It discusses the specific challenges associated with the conservation of Eastern European modernist architecture, including public perception, technical difficulties, and the need to adapt ageing structures to contemporary use without compromising their original

design intent. It explores ways to reinterpret these buildings, advocating creative approaches to adaptive reuse that respect their original form while ensuring their continued functionality and viability.

The second volume continues the exploration of Eastern European post-war modernist architecture with a more practical focus on conservation practices. It delves deeper into the technical and methodological aspects of maintaining and restoring these buildings, including case studies that showcase successful preservation projects and provide detailed examples of how structures have been conserved, restored, or adapted. These case studies provide valuable insights into best practices and innovative solutions for common preservation challenges. The book emphasises the importance of collaboration among architects, urban planners, conservators, and policymakers in developing comprehensive strategies for preserving these buildings. It also discusses the role of policy frameworks in supporting the protection of this heritage.

Mathew Rampley's edited volume from 2012, *Heritage, Ideology, and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe: Contested Pasts, Contested Presents*, investigates the concept of a contested past and its links with contested and contentious presents and focuses on heritage in different contexts, albeit predominantly in relation to nationalism.²⁰ The contributors to the volume examine heritage and the concept of forgetting in post-communist states, the clashes between the conflicting heritage of past eras, and the links between public space and politics, among other themes. Rampley's edition – an outcome of a 2006 symposium held in Ljubljana, Slovenia – draws attention to the fact that the intersection of heritage and nation-building is a “familiar topic” in the general context, albeit one that had “enjoyed little critical analysis.”²¹ Rampley's 2012 assessment of the status of critical analysis of communist-era heritage in Eastern and Central Europe – and even more so in Southeastern Europe – has maintained its distinction in the context of the oft-forgotten and equally contested and contentious spaces in the former state-socialist world explored in this book.

Transforming Heritage in the Former Yugoslavia: Synchronous Pasts is a 2021 edited volume focusing on the heritage politics and policies of the region of the former Yugoslavia and its successor states.²² Edited by Gruița Bădescu, Britt Baillie, and Francesco Mazzucchelli, *Transforming Heritage in the Former Yugoslavia* examines the idiosyncrasies of post-Yugoslav heritage and heritagisation projects. The contributing authors explore the links between heritage and nation-building in extended periods of conflict. In the three book sections, focusing respectively on memory,

remembering, and rebuilding, the authors traverse the heritage landscapes of the former Yugoslavia as the successor states renegotiate and build the newfound spatial and ideological reality. The themes of nationalism, religion, and the making and remaking of heritage are abundant and allow for an insight into the nuanced analysis of a region where state socialism was mild(er) but its end brutally violent, shaping the post-Yugoslav region – and its material and immaterial heritage – to this day.

Finally, Kinga Anna Gajda's 2023 edited volume, entitled *The Heritage of Central and Eastern Europe*, examines the heritage of a particular historical region in the context of two foremost processes of the contemporary period: globalisation and nationalism.²³ The notion of "Europe" and "Europeanness" comes to the forefront of the scholarly project: how do we define the cultural concept of Europe, and where do former communist states fall in this equation? Gajda's volume and its contributors engage with the concepts of heritage and identity, acceptance and rejection of the contentious era's heritage – and legacy – and the concept of community and community values in the self-identification of Eastern and Central Europe and its heritage. Gajda's contributors examine the politics and politicisation of heritage, as well as the state's crucial role in these processes. Significantly, the final chapter focuses on the notion of "Easternisation" of history – and, significantly, memory – and furthers the enquiry into the bipolarity of division between the Eastern and Western worlds, the distinction a staunch remnant of the Cold War period, nowadays institutionally affirmed.²⁴

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Contentious Spaces is the result of a call for papers that resulted in a collection meticulously scrutinised for innovation and quality. What does the heritage landscape of the second half of the twentieth century look like in the former socialist countries? What range of challenges are being discussed in these countries? How similar/different is the approach to this heritage? Who is campaigning for this, and why? These were the main questions raised during a conference in October 2023 at the University of Groningen (the Netherlands). An international selection of experts and emerging scholars engaged in a lively and enriching discourse on socialist-built heritage, providing diverse perspectives on its appropriation. The contributions offer a broad interdisciplinary and international

perspective on the problem of dealing with state-socialist architecture today. This volume contains select and extended papers presented by their authors at the conference.

The categories employed by authors in this book address key dimensions for analysing socialist building culture, as they focus on the characteristic features of socialist architecture. Housing stands for mass housing construction as the centrepiece of socialist utopias, which was at the same time heavily ideologically charged and yet undermined by everyday adaptations. Adaptation and appropriation describe the “second lives” of these buildings in the post-socialist context – through repurposing, decay, or creative reinterpretations – and make it clear that every reinterpretation is politically charged. Finally, ideology was visibly inscribed in architecture under socialism, from monumental representative buildings to subtle messages in everyday typologies. These categories were also given preference over others, such as industrial heritage sites, urban planning, and building technologies, to facilitate a focused investigation. Yet, they stand as a grounding point and also allow for the broad expansion of the categories used in the field.

This edited volume is divided into two parts: “State-Socialist Urban Heritage and Ideology” and “Appropriating State-Socialist Urban Heritage.” Both segments follow the thread of examination of the links between heritage and ideology, heritagisation processes and projects, and focus on the contemporary state of the state-socialist built environment. The authors cover the regions of former Yugoslavia, the countries of the Eastern Bloc, and former Soviet republics. The submitted papers have influenced the division of the book into these two parts: the research conducted by the authors allowed for a differentiation between the two focal points.

In the first article of the “State-Socialist Urban Heritage and Ideology” part of the book, entitled “Artefact or Monument? Afterlives of Socialist Relief Sculpture between Impulses of Conservation and Repoliticisation,” Emma Louise Leahy examines the 1979 sculptural relief *Solidarity*, created by Anatoly Artimovich for the façade of Minsk Fashion House. Leahy argues that the relief embodies the contentious legacies of Soviet monumental propaganda in Belarus. The Fashion House was integral to Soviet plans to redesign post-war Minsk into an ideal socialist capital, while *Solidarity* physically translated narratives of tricontinental anti-colonial revolution prevalent in late socialist official discourse. The author argues that its proximity to urban infrastructure nodes makes

Solidarity a landmark of central Minsk, noted for its monumentality and expressiveness; yet, its status is ambiguous: is it a historical artefact or a political symbol? Leahy concludes that it is both at once. For scholars and interested citizens, *Solidarity* is a cultural heritage object divested of its former ideological significance and valuable only for its aesthetic qualities. The Lukashenko regime, however, has sought to reinvest it with political content as an expression of presidential authority over the public sphere. There is, moreover, a third subversive interpretation of *Solidarity* as a metaphor for the democratic protest movement. Following the 2020 mass demonstrations and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the urban social equilibrium in Minsk appears unstable and subject to change, making *Solidarity's* future uncertain.

Nikolina Bobic's "(In)tangible Socialist Heritage of Yugoslav Youth Labour Brigades: Can We Think the (Un)Imaginable?" problematises the associations of heritage. The article mobilises thinking about heritage in terms of more intangible and experimental aspects, such as bodily limits and socio-ethnic relations, and does so by examining the alternative socialist aesthetic of (in)voluntary and politicised work performed by the Youth Labour Brigades (Omladinske radne akcije/ORAs) in the post-World War II construction of New Belgrade. Bobic argues that the ORA was seen as a form of activity undertaken during free time to legitimise the socialist ideology, recruit future party members, foster friendship, and extend solidarity among the youth of different social and ethnic backgrounds in what was then a multi-ethnic country. From 1947 to 1950, about 100,000 ORA members participated in various labour-intensive activities in New Belgrade. This article argues that the reconfiguration of bodily limits and the participatory practices based on alternative ideals are a unique form of (in)tangible Yugoslav heritage and contrast with the concurrent bodily experience of life and labour at that time in the Western contexts where the interaction between people and Fordist ideology was taking place on a purely technological and economic level.

Ruxandra Balcanu's contribution, "Romania's Heritage of Socialist Sports Buildings: The Case of the Bacău Sports Hall" examines the influence of political thinking and ideological and economic policies on creating urban space for sports activities in socialist Romania. Balcanu contends that the communist party's propaganda was the reason for making a complex urban equipment system that spanned the whole country and was subjected to thorough centralised planning. The author further argues that, depending on their importance in this national system, the

architecture of the select sports halls was unique and experimental, defining some critical moments in the history of Romanian architecture. Today, these sports facilities evoke different attitudes, ranging from rejection stemming from the social memory of the regime they represented to appreciation from an architectural and economic perspective, which contributes to their complex, controversial character. Balcanu's contribution assesses the Bacău sports hall: because it is in use and partly maintained, the building is not exempt from public dismissal; it is a representative case fit to exemplify the key concepts and complexities of social perception.

The final article in this section, Nadezda Gobova's "Remaking Nature: Environmental and Urban Industrial Development during and after State Socialism, the Case of Industrial Navoi and Aktau (formerly Shevchenko) in the 1960s–2020s" investigates the links between state-socialist urban legacies and environmental planning. In 1975, the International Union of Architects recognised the work of two Soviet architects and planners, Iosif Orlov and Nikolai Simonov, for the humanisation of the adverse environment when creating two Central Asian mining and metallurgical cities: Navoi and Aktau. Gobova studies how the proposed projects exported the ideas of architectural modernity from the socialist centre to underdeveloped peripheries and set ambitious goals to subdue the forces of nature and create a new type of infrastructural order via experimental technologies. The text analyses the initial design ideas in the projects of Navoi and Aktau, tracing the legacy of socialist planning within their existing urban fabric. The author concludes that, during the subsequent period of the market-oriented economy, these objectives became obsolete, leading to changes in the originally set urban and environmental criteria in cities.

The initial article of the second part of the volume, focusing on strategies for adapting state-socialist urban heritage, is Tatjana Aleksić's "When Does a Space End? Yugoslav Socialist Memorials and the EU 'Anti-Totalitarian' Reckoning." Aleksić's article scrutinises how, since 2015, and following the controversial photo collection compiled by Jan Kempenaers, Yugoslav modernist anti-fascist monuments have gained notoriety susceptible to misuse, abuse, or exotic fascination. Known as *Spomeniks*, these structures were erected from the 1960s to the 1980s by prominent Yugoslav modernist architects. The surviving monuments lost their original meaning, becoming blank surfaces that seemed to invite improper activities or reactions. Recent misuse prompts questions about the cultural appropriation of historical legacies, particularly in societies like the Yugoslav state-socialist era, which are often deemed "failed" or

insignificant. Aleksić contends that this inappropriate use also signifies a quasi-colonial attitude towards the history and sacrifices of non-Western subjects, levelling the specificities of Yugoslav Socialist World War II resistance. Through a theoretical analysis of the architectural origins, significance, and destruction of Yugoslav monuments, this text explores the ethics of memory, oblivion, and initiatives for the restoration, repurposing, or reuse of these monumental structures.

Jovana Janinović's "Above Nostalgia, Beyond Stereotypes: Tourism, Feminism and Activism as Paradigms of Contemporary Revalorisation of Modernist Legacies in Post-Yugoslav Space" asserts that, despite years of marginalisation in both heritage research and practice, legacies of socialist modernism in former Yugoslavia emerged throughout the last decade as an important historical, aesthetic, and cultural benchmark. Depending on the local context and circumstances, the resurgence of socialist modernism was either prompted by an imminent threat of destruction or came in response to the Western "tourist gaze" and fascination with everything socialist. Whether seeking to commercialise, orientalise, preserve, or simply fill the gap in the history of architecture, the contemporary revalorisation of the modernist paradigm in urban development invites us to thoroughly rethink the role of different actors, global processes, socio-cultural phenomena, and movements in (contested) heritage revisionism. Mainly relying on case-study analysis and ethnographic observations, Janinović contributes to the field by shifting the focus from mere preservation to a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics at play, thereby analysing how the tourism industry, global cultural trends, and engaged architecture have reactivated modernist legacies.

In "Beyond the Narrative of the "Wild 1990s": Cultural and Architectural Legacy of Soviet Industry," Polina Gundarina and Marina Sapunova discuss how recent evidence challenges the pre-existing assumptions of the perceived rupture in how individuals interact with symbolic socialist architecture and monuments, particularly in the context of urban planning and in the case of commonplace socialist-built structures like housing and residential infrastructure. This article concentrates on the metamorphosis of former Soviet residential infrastructure, specifically focusing on the houses of culture (*doma kulture*) introduced to Soviet and socialist cityscapes during the post-World War II period as part of expansive housing estates – the case study focuses on the former Soviet city of Chelyabinsk and its industrial district, ChMZ. Examining the case of the ChMZ industrial microdistrict, constructed after the war as an extension

of the Machine Building Factory, Gundarina and Sapunova underscore the resilience of former Soviet infrastructure on both societal and spatial levels. The authors examine how the reappropriation and re-evaluation of the Soviet past may influence the future development and identity of similar post-war Soviet industrial districts, as well as broader societal attitudes towards the Soviet era.

Abigail Karas investigates Café Guguță, a socialist modernist building situated in Ștefan cel Mare City Park, the centre of Chișinău, Moldova. In her article, “Cafeneaua Guguță: Cultural Heritage and Civic Activism in Chișinău,” Karas analyses how a popular hangout of the city’s late- and post-Soviet children and young people fell into disrepair following its closure in 2007. Over the past fifteen years, the café has become the subject of civic activism and protest as residents, authorities, and private businesses have battled over its privatisation and proposals for its demolition. The author claims that Guguță has become a contested site within the city, with plans to demolish the café culminating in a broader pro-democracy movement, known as Occupy Guguță. This text traces Guguță’s transformation into a symbol of freedom and democracy in the post-Soviet era, illustrating how the planning legal framework has served to bolster democratic values, fostering accountability and public participation within the post-socialist city. Moreover, by examining the complex relationship between “Moldovan” and “Soviet” heritage and investigating how citizens respond to upheavals in their local environs through participatory action and engagement with heritagisation processes, this text delves into the nuanced issues of regional identity and national heritage in Moldova since its independence.

The final article in the volume, Elsa Turkusic Juric’s “Breka: Its Potential as an Affordable and Liveable Neighbourhood” studies how the urban and social development of Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was characterised by intense and continuous socially oriented construction of thoroughly planned residential neighbourhoods during the decades of the Yugoslav state socialism (1945–92). The author investigates Breka, a neighbourhood that is one of the last residential estates of this kind (built from 1980 to 1988), with a capacity of ca. 35,000 inhabitants and about 1,000 flats. Its urban concept and building design were entrusted to the Sarajevo Institute of Architecture and Urbanism at the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sarajevo, along with its three architects: Hamdija Salihović, Bogdan Božović, and Momir Hrisafović. The architects attempted to address specific social and spatial

problems by creating a quiet and walkable neighbourhood permeated with greenery and vistas of the city's landscape and the surrounding mountains. In this article, Turkusic Juric aims to demonstrate how the heritage of the Breka neighbourhood can address contemporary social challenges. Methodologically, the author bases her work on the examination of the networks of various open-space activities (ambiances and atmospheres), informally created through the synergy of housing blocks and greenery following the absence of public buildings.

The articles in this edited volume engage with overarching themes of heritage and ideology, the latter considered in the broadest sense. The expiration of totalitarian regimes and the contemporary politics of hypercapitalism, corruption, and the political rejection of the communist past have emerged as the overarching topics in our authors' contributions. These studies open new research avenues and allow for further exploration of state-socialist heritage in various categories, such as industrial heritage sites, abandoned or reappropriated, or the infrastructural advancements of the second half of the twentieth century in the state-socialist part of Europe. Our authors' examination of the nuances of heritagisation processes serves as a valuable foundation that can be further utilised not only by scholars but also by practitioners, policymakers, and citizens – the users of these spaces.

NOTES

- ¹ For example, see: John Gledhill, "The Power of Ethnic Nationalism: Foucault's Bio-Power and the Development of Ethnic Nationalism in Eastern Europe," *National Identities* 7, no. 4 (2005): 347–68. DOI: 10.1080/14608940500334432.
- ² For reference, see: Anders Åman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era: An Aspect of Cold War History* (Architectural History Foundation, Inc. and MIT Press, 1992).
- ³ For example, see the non-exhaustive list: Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, eds., *From Socialist to Post-Socialist Cities: Cultural Politics of Architecture, Urban Planning, and Identity in Eurasia* (Routledge, 2015); Arnold Bartetzky, "Changes in the Political Iconography of East Central European Capitals after 1989 (Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava)," *International Review of Sociology* 16, no. 2 (2006): 451–69. DOI: 10.1080/03906700600709434; Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, "From Socialist to Post-Socialist Cities: Narrating the Nation through Urban Space," *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 4 (2013): 487–514. DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2013.768217; Andrew Demshuk, "Architecture Beyond Ideology: The Politics of Forgotten Landmarks in Communist East Germany," *Journal of Urban History* 47, no. 2 (2020): 420–49. DOI: 10.1177/0096144220957664; Richard S. Esbenshade, "Remembering to Forget: Memory, History, National Identity in Postwar East-Central Europe," *Representations* 49 (1995): 72–96; Maja Gori, "Stories from a Changing City. Heritage Places and Identity Performances in Former-Yugoslavia," in *Stadt – Erinnerung –Denkmal. Positionen Zur Validierung Des Kulturellen Gedächtnisses, Archäologisches Gedächtnis Der Städte 2*, eds. H. von Hesberg, J. Kunow, and Th. Otten (Worms, 2017), 50–6.

- ⁴ See Nicola Bozzi, “Re-Imagining Utopian Futures,” *Domus*, 9 January 2013, <https://www.domusweb.it/en/art/2013/01/09/re-imagining-utopian-futures.html>, accessed 15 November 2024.
- ⁵ For non-academic examples, see Frédéric Chaubin, *CCCP. Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed* (Taschen, 2011) and Donald Niebyl, *Spomenik Monument Database* (Fuel, 2018).
- ⁶ The examples are too many to be comprehensively listed, but, for indications, see the following: Daniel Baldwin Hess, Tiit Tammaru, and Maarten van Ham, eds., *Housing Estates in Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Segregation and Policy Challenges* (Springer, 2018); F. E. Ian Hamilton, Kaliopa Dimitrovska Andrews, and Nataša Pichler-Milanović, eds., *Transformation of Cities in Central and Eastern Europe: Towards Globalization* (United Nations University Press, 2005); Sonia Hirt, *Iron Curtains: Gates, Suburbs and Privatization of Space in the Post-socialist City* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Kiril Stanilov and Luděk Sýkora, eds., *Confronting Suburbanization: Urban Decentralization in Postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014); Gregory D. Andrusz, Michael Harloe, and Iván Szelenyi, eds., *Cities after Socialism: Urban and Regional Change and Conflict in Post-Socialist Societies* (Blackwell, 1996); Kiril Stanilov, ed., *The Post-Socialist City: Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism* (Springer, 2007); Sanja Horvatinčić and Beti Žerovc, eds., *Shaping Revolutionary Memory: The Production of Monuments in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory (Ljubljana) and Archive Books (Berlin), 2023); Maria Couroucli and Tchavdar Marinov, eds., *Balkan Heritages: Negotiating History and Culture* (Ashgate, 2015); D. J. Timothy and G. P. Nyaupane, eds., *Cultural Heritage and Tourism in the Developing World: A Regional Perspective* (Routledge, 2009); John J. Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis, and Blair A. Ruble, eds., *Cities after the Fall of Communism: Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Marina Dmitreva and Alfrun Kliems, eds., *The Post-Socialist City: Continuity and Change in Urban Space and Imagery* (Jovis, 2010); Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Dacia Viejo-Rose, eds., *War and Cultural Heritage: Biographies of Place* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Agnieszka Mrozik and Stanislav Holubec, eds., *Historical Memory of Central and East European Communism* (Routledge, 2018).
- ⁷ For example, see: Milka Ivanova, “The Inclusion of the Communist/Socialist Heritage in the Emerging Representations of Eastern Europe: The Case of Bulgaria,” *Tourism Culture & Communication* 17, no. 1 (2017): 31–46, DOI: 10.3727/109830417X14837314056852.
- ⁸ For example, see: Augustin Ioan, “The Peculiar History of (Post)Communist Public Places and Spaces: Bucharest as a Case Study,” in *The Post-Socialist City Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism*, ed. Kiril Stanilov (Springer, 2007), 301–12.
- ⁹ For a recent overview, see: Sanja Horvatinčić and Beti Žerovc, eds., *Shaping Revolutionary Memory: The Production of Monuments in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory (Ljubljana) and Archive Books (Berlin), 2023).
- ¹⁰ For reference, see: Martin Ouředníček, Petra Špačková, and Lucie Pospíšilová, “Long-term Development and Current Socio-Spatial Differentiation of Housing Estates in Prague, Czechia,” in *Housing Estates in Europe Poverty, Ethnic Segregation and Policy Challenges*, eds. Daniel Baldwin Hess, Tiit Tammaru, and Maarten van Ham (Springer Open, 2018), 339–60.
- ¹¹ Michal Lehečka, “‘To Own or Not to Own.’ Post-socialist Housing Policy, Privatism and Regimes of Vulnerability in Prague, Czech Republic,” *Archivio antropologico mediterraneo* 21, no. 2 (2019): 1–16, <http://journals.openedition.org/aam/2228>.
- ¹² Aliaksei Kazharski and Andrey Makarychev, “From the Bronze Soldier to the ‘Boydie Marshal’: Monument Wars and Russia’s Aesthetic Vulnerability in Estonia and the Czech Republic,” *East European Politics and Societies* 36, no. 4 (2021): 1151–76, DOI: 10.1177/08883254211043856.
- ¹³ For example, see: Mina Ivanova, “The Bulgarian Monument to the Soviet Army: Visual Burlesque, Epic, and the Emergence of Comic Subjectivity,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100, no. 3 (2014): 273–302, DOI: 10.1080/00335630.2014.982159; and Neda Genova, “Temporal Politics of the Surface: Keeping Pace with the Monument to The Soviet Army in Sofia,” *New Formations* 18, no. 106 (2022): 25–42, DOI: 10.3898/NewF.106.02.2022.
- ¹⁴ See, e.g., ICOMOS Germany, *Socialist Realism and Socialist Modernism. World Heritage Proposals from Central and Eastern Europe* (Bäßler 2013), 10.

- ¹⁵ *Stalinistische Architektur unter Denkmalschutz? [Stalinist Architecture Listed?]* A conference of the German National Committee of ICOMOS and the Senate Department for Urban Development and Environmental Protection in Berlin, Germany, 6–9 September 1995 (*Hefte des Deutschen Nationalkomitees von ICOMOS*, no. XX, Munich, 1996).
- ¹⁶ ICOMOS Germany, *Socialist Realism and Socialist Modernism. World Heritage Proposals from Central and Eastern Europe* (Bäßler 2013).
- ¹⁷ Susan Marsden and Peter Spearritt, eds., *Twentieth-Century Historic Thematic Framework: A Tool for Assessing Heritage Places* (Getty Conservation Institute, 2021).
- ¹⁸ Mark Escherich, *Denkmal Ost-Moderne: Aneignung und Erhaltung des Baulichen Erbes der Nachkriegsmoderne* (Jovis, 2012).
- ¹⁹ Mark Escherich, *Denkmal Ost-Moderne II: Denkmalpflegerische Praxis der Nachkriegsmoderne* (Jovis, 2016).
- ²⁰ Matthew Rampley, ed., *Heritage, Ideology, and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe: Contested Pasts, Contested Presents* (Boydell & Brewer, 2012).
- ²¹ Matthew Rampley, “Contested Histories: Heritage and/as the Construction of the Past: An Introduction,” in *Heritage, Ideology, and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe: Contested Pasts, Contested Presents*, ed. Matthew Rampley (Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 1.
- ²² Gruia Bădescu, Britt Baillie, and Francesco Mazzucchelli, eds., *Transforming Heritage in the Former Yugoslavia: Synchronous Pasts* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).
- ²³ Kinga Anna Gajda, ed., *The Heritage of Central and Eastern Europe* (Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2023).
- ²⁴ Bożena Gierat-Bieroń and Kinga Anna Gajda, “The ‘Easternisation’ of History and Memory,” in *The Heritage of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Kinga Anna Gajda, (Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2023), 217–37.

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PART I

**STATE-SOCIALIST URBAN
HERITAGE AND IDEOLOGY**

Chapter 2

Artefact or Monument?

Afterlives of Socialist Relief Sculpture between Conservation and Repoliticisation

Emma Louise Leahy

Aluminium high relief *Solidarity* (1979), sculpted by Anatoly Artimovich for the front face of the 1960s-era Minsk Fashion House, belongs to the Soviet legacy of monumental plastic art in Belarus.¹ Proximate to urban transit nodes at the conjunction of two traffic arteries and a metro station, *Solidarity* is a central Minsk landmark noted for its monumentality and expressiveness. Its status, however, is ambiguous: is it a historical artefact or a political symbol? Currently, *Solidarity* is both at once. For scholars and interested citizens, the monumental relief is a cultural heritage object divested of ideological significance and valuable only for its aesthetic qualities. Belarusian authorities have sought to appropriate it as an expression of presidential authority over the public space. There is, moreover, a third subversive interpretation of *Solidarity* as an oppositional metaphor. How did these dissonant meanings develop, and how long can they coexist?

The “hardware” of cultural memory,² monuments are microcosms of social change. Over the course of four decades, *Solidarity* has evolved from an expression of Soviet power to an ambivalent urban feature. Specialised literature, news reports, and online commentary from the Soviet and independent eras tell a story of a relief and a city in transition.

SITE ANALYSIS

War, conquest, and occupation shaped the twentieth-century urban-architectural evolution of Minsk. Before 1941, Minsk was a multilingual, multiethnic city near the Soviet border, slow to develop demographically and economically as it was neither a historical capital nor a major industrial centre. That incarnation vanished in World War II, which obliterated

80 per cent of Minsk's population along with most of its buildings.³ Post-war Minsk was wholly reconstructed with labour from across the Soviet Union, causing its population to explode even as its demographics were profoundly altered. The wartime Jewish ghetto Nemiga was less directly combat-damaged than other districts, and its pre-revolutionary buildings stood intact until the 1960s, albeit in advancing decay.

Soviet planners took a blank-slate approach to Minsk's redevelopment. Their goal was to create an ideal socialist city, a total environment of interrelated functional subsystems managed through the general urban plan;⁴ this multi-year instrument required several revisions to account for population growth, which surpassed one million in the early 1970s. The smallest unit of urban design was the ensemble: spatial compositions of buildings arranged around vast expanses of plazas and boulevards, producing a distinctive visual image. Post-war Minsk was a medieval city with a predominantly twentieth-century built environment, a singular reality evoked by Mai Dantsig's painting *My City, Ancient and Young* of Nemiga Street during the 1960s, which shows new buildings of concrete, glass, and steel emerging around the former Baroque cathedral (Fig. 2.1). In the lower-left corner, the Fashion House is under construction.

Critic Artur Klinaŭ nicknamed Minsk the "Sun City," alluding to the seventeenth-century theocratic utopia imagined by Dominican monk Tommaso Campanella, which in turn inspired Lenin's 1918 Plan for Monumental Propaganda. Revived by the party state after Stalin's death, Lenin's Plan provided an ideological frame for the proliferation of mosaics, friezes, and sculptural reliefs depicting communist ideals – so-called monumental and decorative arts – in public spaces during the late twentieth century, a phenomenon inseparable from the transition to prefabricated industrial construction. The post-socialist condition of Minsk is, for Klinaŭ, a post-utopian one; the Soviet "land of happiness" has died, but the "sun city of dreams" lives on phantom-like in the architectural environment, resulting in an overwhelming sensation of emptiness.⁵ Similarly, novelist Al'herd Bacharévich declared Minsk "a name for emptiness," something faraway and uncanny.⁶

The rushed demolition of Old Nemiga in 1968 – before a plan for its redevelopment was in place – was inspired by both transnational modernising tendencies in post-war European urbanism and particular ideological considerations related to Soviet narratives of Belarusian identity, as expressed through architecture. The transformation of Minsk city centre was to complement official Belarusian historiography, which rested



Figure 2.1: Mai Dantsig, *My City, Ancient and Young*, 1972
 (Photo: Artem G., Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY 4.0)

upon two mythic identity pillars: the civilisational roots of Belarusians in an East Slavic brotherhood of peoples forged under medieval “ancient Rus” and Belarus as a “partisan republic” and Minsk as a “hero city” of Soviet resistance against fascist occupation. Nemiga’s urban fabric, with narrow winding streets and low buildings packed densely together, characteristic of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth,⁷ represented for elites an uncomfortable reminder of a pre-revolutionary, non-Russian past. Architects spoke of “cleaning” the city and “crossing out” the historical fabric with an intersection of wide modern roadways, Nemiga Street and Park Highway. In 1965, the sixteenth-century Cold Synagogue was demolished on the orders of Belarusian party boss Pyotr Masherov to make way for the Belpromproekt Tower, the first modern structure in the old town.

Only the seventeenth-century Church of SS. Peter and Paul, in use as an archive, survived from the pre-war cultural layer.

It was not until 1972 that authorities organised the competition to rebuild Nemiga. The winning entry, proposed by Sergei Musinsky, Dmitry Kudriavtsev, and Lisa Kadzhar, envisioned an iconic commercial district worthy of Minsk's capital status. The new Nemiga was meant to produce a single architectural image that could be viewed at multiple simultaneous scales: first, the boulevard itself, with a raised walkway system separating pedestrians from vehicular traffic; then, pedestrian walkways lined by two-storey spaces for shopping, leisure, and culture; finally, taller buildings with different and distinctive silhouettes set back some distance from the shopping strip, arranged in parallel rhythmic compositions with residential blocs on the western side and commercial towers on the eastern side of the roadway. Musinsky wrote in the trade journal *Construction and Architecture of Belarus (Stroitel'stvo i Arkhitektura Belorussii)* that the new Nemiga was deliberately resource-intensive, celebrating unity and equality among Soviet peoples through a reproduction in miniature of Moscow's capital infrastructure.⁸ A restaurant shaped like a Rus' longboat, supposedly referencing Belarusian civilisational origins, accentuated the project's symbolic character.⁹ The restaurant, like most of Musinsky's grandiose vision, remained unbuilt. The new Nemiga turned out to be exceptionally inefficient, even by the standards of plodding Soviet megaprojects. Two decades of work only resulted in partial fulfilment of the western side, leaving Nemiga's eastern side underdeveloped until the 2000s.

Contrary to the new Nemiga Street, which cuts through the existing urban fabric, the intersecting Park Highway was developed in the 1960s on new ground along the Svisloch River. Removed from central Minsk, Park Highway created space for public and industrial infrastructure.¹⁰ Construction progressed incrementally but was nonetheless characterised by a sense of rhythmic composition epitomised in the positioning of two modernist landmarks, the Palace of Sports (1966) and cinema "Moscow" (1980), with their sloped rooflines complementing each other across the roadway. During the 1970s and 1980s, several strategic projects were completed, including a high-rise administrative complex, a refrigerator plant, two grand hotels, and the Belarusian House of Unions. Park Highway's most monumental feature was the "Minsk Hero-City" memorial park, where, in 1985, the unveiling of a 45-metre obelisk marked four decades of victory.

At the aforementioned "cross" of Nemiga Street and Park Highway, the Fashion House marked the intersection of commerce and public



Figure 2.2: Minsk Fashion House as seen in 1981
 (Photo: Leonid Dzhepko, Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY 4.0)

administration, making it an integral feature of the modernised city centre (Fig. 2.2). Inaugurated in 1968, the Fashion House consisted of a five-storey industrial building and an adjacent two-storey showroom, separated from traffic by a paved plaza. Unlike most contemporaneous constructions, the Fashion House was individually designed by Vasily Gerashchenko, Stanislav Zamarev, and other architects, rather than assembled from prefabricated components. To further professionalise and specialise the Belarusian fashion industry, the building introduced electronic pattern-measuring tools and a runway for Minsk's first professional models, called "clothing demonstrators." Exterior surface treatments contrasted fair-faced concrete with polished glass, marble, and aluminium, capturing and reflecting natural light.¹¹ Prominent in mass-produced visuals – including films, postcards, tourist guides, and monument directories – the Fashion House was a prestige object and a state-sanctioned urban symbol.

Minsk Fashion House belonged to the sprawling universe of Soviet fashion – a complex network of clothing designers, textile manufacturers, garment factories, and retail distributors that operated in accordance with

party decrees and Gosplan economic models – within which its role was to propose patterns for factory manufacture. Specialist literature discussed clothing design as an applied art conceptually akin to monumental and decorative arts.¹² From this perspective, the Fashion House materially brought together three artistic disciplines: design, architecture, and sculpture. Unlike capitalist fashion, which promoted trends, socialist fashion was supposed to direct consumer taste towards timeless styles that were elegant, modest, and practical.¹³ Official ideology dictated that “style” should be inspired by French couture and folkloric references. Late 1970s collections by Inna Bulgakova, dispatched from Moscow to head the experimental laboratory, styled models in peasant-inspired, embroidered dresses, posed alongside Minsk’s architectural monuments. Such designs had little to do with the mass-produced clothing available through retail networks, which tended to be outmoded, poorly made, and in chronically short supply. Instead of adopting Fashion House prototypes, factory managers preferred to maximise output with familiar patterns, regardless of consumer preferences.¹⁴

The present aspect of the Fashion House is typical of what Alla Shamruk terms the “pastiche” of different and contradictory urban trends, design strategies, and taste preferences in the built environment of twenty-first-century Minsk.¹⁵ The plaza has a new vertical dominant, a glass-fronted high-rise in postmodern style; the Fashion House windows have been reglazed with matching reflective panes. Eastern Nemiga Street was completed in the 2010s with a row of pseudo-historical buildings. Ironically, this project, like Musinsky’s beforehand, was plagued by construction delays and disputes around the conformity of new construction with the existing urban fabric. The once-dominant monumental relief visually competes with illuminated advertising and commercial signage, while the showroom interior has been renovated into a “luxury loft” with a panoramic terrace and menu inspired by cuisine “in Europe [and] in Moscow.”¹⁶ The effect is the seemingly incongruous coexistence of different temporalities – medieval, nineteenth-century, Soviet, and neoliberal – all within one urban space.

OBJECT DESCRIPTION: *SOLIDARITY RELIEF*

Specialised literature of the late twentieth century paid considerable attention to problems of synthesis: how to achieve an ideal interrelationship of architecture and plastic arts to produce a harmonious visual whole beyond the sum of its parts. In practice, however, central planners – not

architects or artists – had control over the urban image. When Minsk chief architect Yuri Grigoriev ordered the implementation of *Solidarity* on the Fashion House in 1979, this necessitated the removal of an existing metal relief, a geometric composition by Aleksandr Kishchenko. Artimovich's *Solidarity* was thus not original to the architectural programme, and its addition transformed the mood of the ensemble, from 1960s experimental minimalism to 1970s monumental scale and massive ornament – nor was this alteration universally acclaimed. Although art historian Grigorii Sternin, writing from the distance of Moscow, reviewed *Solidarity* briefly but favourably as an “interesting experimental work,”¹⁷ for Minsk Palace of Sports architect Sergei Filimonov it was “something voluminous, huge, multifigured,” an “oversaturation” of the architectural object with unimaginative decoration.¹⁸

Solidarity covers the showroom's upper register, an aluminium relief approximately ten metres long and six metres tall, extending at points nearly two metres beyond the surface plane. In the foreground, a band of armed men and women march in unison. The hammer and sickle are suspended in the background together with the slogan *Solidarity* in English, suggesting the transnational applicability of the image. Three decades later, Artimovich described *Solidarity* as a statement that

was important for society in its time. The relief came into being amidst a surge of compassion for the Chilean people after Pinochet took power. I've felt touched whenever foreigners have walked by the Fashion House, looked up at the panel and smiled because they've recognised themselves in it. The composition depicts people of different nationalities and ethnicities. There's no propaganda for communism in it.¹⁹

Notwithstanding Artimovich's recollections, it is evident that *Solidarity* originally served to translate prevalent discourses of proletarian internationalism into the public space.

War and struggle are leitmotifs for Anatoly Artimovich (born 1940 in Kurenets),²⁰ whose six-decade career began in the early 1960s as Belarusian cultural politics were prioritising supershrines,²¹ sculpture parks commemorating Great Patriotic War anniversaries, while eternalising the “sacred friendship” among Soviet peoples.²² His pathos-infused oeuvre remains relevant in a contemporary Belarusian memoryscape that borrows liberally from Soviet Great Patriotic War mythology. Like many monumentalists of his generation, Artimovich taught at the university

throughout his career, helping to form the next generation of sculptors. In addition to civic themes, Artimovich produced a prolific number of sketches and models that explored human emotions and inner consciousness, which have only been celebrated in the last two decades.

Encouraged by his mother to become an architect, Artimovich instead studied sculpture as he felt a duty to compellingly represent history.²³ He trained at Minsk State Arts College under Andrei Bembel, whom young Artimovich assisted in creating two supershrines commemorating major battles: the Brest Hero-Fortress and the Mound of Glory. Sculptors of war memorials occupied a particular social position. Despite enjoying professional prestige and intelligentsia status, official literature stressed that sculptors' work was not their own but that of the people, supposedly keen on mythologising their ancestors as war heroes and victims of fascism.²⁴ Memorial parks, with their sober format and massive proportions, defined Artimovich's early career; *Solidarity* was his first urban architectural commission.

During the 1990s and 2000s, Artimovich aligned with tendencies among intellectuals towards rediscovering Belarusian heroes marginalised by Soviet historiography. Even as economic realities limited their scale, his works expanded into religious, medieval, and women's histories – notably statues of Saint Euphrosyne and Ragneda of Polotsk, for which Artimovich won the 1998 State Prize. That award brought recognition with travelling retrospectives and public television interviews, positioning him as a state-adjacent artist in both Soviet and independent eras. Before and after 1991, Artimovich maintained a stance of apolitical cultural patriotism, depicting historical subjects while avoiding debates on public memory and national identity. Artimovich has shown himself comfortable with mythologising the past while abstaining from polemics over how it should be remembered.

ORIGINAL CONTEXT

Developments in late 1970s Soviet public life provided essential context for the ideologically “correct” interpretation of *Solidarity*. Most immediately relevant was the “Solidarity with Chilean Democrats” campaign, launched in 1973 against the overthrow of Salvador Allende by Augusto Pinochet's junta. The solidarity campaign featured in mass propaganda, with graphic posters depicting Pinochet as a homoerotic Nazi butcher. Soviet antifascist

solidarity was not limited to Chile, extending to broader struggles in Asia, Africa, and Latin America against (specifically) Western imperialism.²⁵ Solidarity discourses positioned the Soviet Union as a moral authority and leader of a tricontinental revolutionary movement.

Another contextual layer was the 1980 Moscow Olympiad, a showcase of socialism to the world – or at least to those (mostly countries in the Global South) that abstained from the US-led boycott of the Games. The Games allowed authorities to present tourists with the rosier version of Soviet reality, making the best appear typical.²⁶ Minsk was a secondary host city, with an Olympic flame and a football stadium that accommodated up to 50,000 spectators. To prepare, authorities implemented extensive public works and urban beautification programmes, building or upgrading traffic highways, sports infrastructure, tourist facilities, landscape architecture, and monumental art interventions. *Solidarity* thus expressed the Soviet Union’s revolutionary geopolitics to the Olympic crowds.

Solidarity was the culmination of untempered modernisation in Minsk, when urban design was oriented around the principle of clearing the past. Early 1970s planning valorised internationalism and modernity, exemplified by Moscow’s New Arbat neighbourhood, whose broad central avenue lined by V-shaped skyscrapers inspired Musinsky’s New Nemiga.²⁷ At the decade’s end, the course changed with the Soviet “turn to history,” a reframing of modern socialist identity as no longer exclusively resting on tomorrow but also on (selective) references to national history and cultural heritage.²⁸ This cultural shift opened debate in Minsk over Nemiga’s blank-slate modernisation, which many elites considered to have been a mistake.²⁹ Even Masherov came to regret the old town’s demolition,³⁰ though Musinsky never did.³¹ By the late 1980s, planners were envisioning a historicising reconstruction of Nemiga’s old town. Rather than pre-revolutionary structures, highly modern architecture now appeared dissonant with the ideal Nemiga.

In urban legend, superstitions circulate about Nemiga as a historically cursed place. The curse supposedly originated when the Nemiga riverbank witnessed a bloody battle between Slavic principalities, immortalised in the twelfth-century *Tale of Igor’s Campaign*. Later, the Nemiga ghetto witnessed the genocide of Belarusian Jews. Soviet post-war redevelopment carried bad karma for its erasure of the historical fabric, specifically the purported foundations of Minsk’s medieval fortress, where Nemiga metro station was built: a stampede onto its platform after a sudden rainstorm

in 1999 killed fifty-three people, mostly young women.³² Nemiga figures in local lore as a reminder of tragedies that official discourse in Soviet and independent eras has sought to minimise.

SUBSEQUENT CONTEXT

Since 1991, *Solidarity* has existed between impulses of neoliberalisation and resovietisation. Its meaning, formerly state-dictated, has become subject to decentralised reinterpretation. This is not to imply that Soviet-era monuments are a topic of active discussion among Belarusians at large; the interested audience is a limited, cacophonous assortment of state officials, oppositional civil society, creative professionals (art historians, architects, curators, artists), and amateur urban historians. Within certain subsections of Belarusian society attuned to the symbolism of Soviet heritage, different modes have coalesced around the reading of *Solidarity*: first, a depoliticised urban identity feature; second, a visual accessory to presidential authority; third, a covert reference to oppositional causes. These three modes correspond to distinct engagement strategies with urban space.

Actors regarding *Solidarity* as a depoliticised artefact of urban culture are historical preservation advocates – professionals and amateurs – who gravitate towards digital engagement in the absence of representative municipal governance mechanisms. The Internet is a choice tool for citizens to document intergenerational memories or contest opaque and unaccountable marketised development. For state actors, *Solidarity* belongs to national symbolism. The regime aims to manipulate urban social reality by monopolising public space via an authoritarian “regime of concealment” enacted through *façadism* practices, scrupulously tending to the outward appearance of public buildings via facelifts, landscaping, and accent lighting to perpetuate impressions of cleanliness and orderliness.³³ For oppositional actors, *Solidarity* is a subversive reference. Opposition activists have adapted to their own privatisation and peripheralisation due to state monopolisation of the urban core with strategies of actionistic performance at landmark sites, combining collective visibility with individual anonymity. During 2020 protests against Lukashenko’s supposed re-election, unrecognised by the EU and US, the masked “Free Choir” (*Vol’ny khor*) assembled into flash mobs to sing patriotic songs before melting away into the crowd.

In the 1990s, Belarusian architects and historians began to discuss the potential value of Soviet-era monumental and decorative arts as cultural heritage objects,³⁴ though academic debates scarcely influenced urban development practices. The topic gradually gained popularity online, being discussed on blogs and message boards, and as technology progressed, on social media and messaging apps. For younger generations accustomed to chaotic neoliberal development, Soviet design practices hold certain appeal with their precise symmetry, low density, and propensity to project mass horizontally – all in conspicuous disregard of market considerations. Grassroots appreciation of socialist heritage in discussion forums has no overt political dimension, though some comments suggest generalised nostalgia, even among users with no memory of Soviet times.³⁵ Other commenters take an ironic view, mocking the dissonant temporalities of socialist monumentalism alongside Western-style fast food and advertising signage.

In the 2010s, when a developer proposed to vertically expand the Fashion House and replace *Solidarity* with a light emitting diode (LED) screen, online commentary was indignant. One Livejournal user wrote:

Who are you, “shareholder,” to change the face of the city? Who are you to destroy this highlight – no, masterpiece! – of monumental art? Nowhere in Minsk, nowhere in the world is there such an expressive bas-relief!³⁶

Unlike the proposed postmodern redesign, which already appeared outdated, the Fashion House, with its monumental relief, stood out to the blogger as timelessly valuable. Artimovich spoke in favour of preserving *Solidarity* intact in its original environment; the relief’s compositional pathos visually balanced the bustle of Nemiga traffic, such that it would appear deracinated if moved to another setting.³⁷ Ultimately, financial considerations, rather than heritage sensibilities, hindered the project from advancing.

For state actors, *Solidarity* is a repoliticised accessory to the projection of presidential power in public space. Since the 2000s, the former Park Highway has been refurbished, extended, and renamed “Avenue of Victors.” This new space, now nearer the centre thanks to Minsk’s continuous outward expansion, is entirely symbolically associated with presidential authority. The most important Belarusian public holidays are celebrated here, such as Independence Day and Victory Day military parades. These singular events bear notes of the carnivalesque, with theatrical references

to the heroic Soviet past. Uses of Soviet symbols should not be understood literally, according to Anna Shirokanova; instead, they are loaded by the regime with new meanings and then weaponised to silence criticism.³⁸ Trained in history, President Lukashenko is attuned to national-civilisational symbolism and has contributed forewords to school textbooks on the Great Patriotic War.³⁹

Complementing Soviet-style parades, current authorities have modified the built landscape to project historical gravitas, positioning the regime as the successor to the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. Symbolic interventions in the city centre are guided by “slight Belarusisation” policies, adding selective references to medieval history and the Belarusian language while generally preserving the Soviet system of toponyms, monuments, and memorials.⁴⁰ A slight Belarusisation of war memory is evident in the 2017 decision to affix a crimson-illuminated Belarusian-language slogan, “Glory to the Victors!” (*Slava peramozhtsam!*) onto the Fashion House roofline. Despite obviously borrowing from Soviet templates, the slogan unmistakably affirms the sovereignty of the present regime and, moreover, elevates the Fashion House (located at 1 Avenue of Victors) into a gateway to the presidential parade ground.

Oppositional actors assign *Solidarity* meaning as a coded reference to struggles for a democratised public sphere. Mass protests in late 2020 and early 2021 posed unprecedented challenges to presidential authority over the urban core. Wire photos showed crowds occupying Minsk’s ordinarily pristine avenues, plazas, and parks. Protest iconography drew on oppositional “alternative historiography” canons comprising particular repertoires of national heroes, cultural touchstones, and state symbols.⁴¹ Many alternative symbols originated with the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BDR), an entity governing Belarus from 1918 to 1919 and having thereafter persisted in exile. Official historiography delegitimises the BDR as ultranationalistic and describes its symbols as fascist for their utilisation by collaborators during Nazi occupation. The 2020 election protests, however, grew so large precisely because they were *not* mobilised on an ultranationalistic basis.⁴² Demonstrations were bilingual and avoided Western-oriented agendas, focusing on grievances related to the autocratic nature of domestic governance.

Protesters aimed to introduce novel symbols of Belarusian identity and give new meanings to existing ones. Demonstrators employed “democratic imagination” strategies, reinterpreting public monuments to contest presidential control.⁴³ *Solidarity* became alternatively read as a reference

to the BDR national anthem, “Warriors’ March” (*Vaiatski marsh*), also an unofficial anthem of the 2020 demonstrations, performed by the Free Choir. Instead of socialist revolutionaries, the armed masses of *Solidarity* become militants for self-determination, following the “Warriors’ March” call; “Come! Let us march in joint endeavour.”⁴⁴ A monument originally expressing Soviet power has been reappropriated as a manifesto against the establishment with its carnivalesque appeals to neo-Soviet authority.

CONCLUSIONS

There are three interpretive discourses within Belarusian society for *Solidarity*: an apolitical urban landmark, an ornament to the presidential parade ground, or a reference to the opposition’s democratic aspirations. Is this plurality sustainable? Belarusian society entered an impasse in 2020. Lukashenko’s political weakness was exposed; however, the opposition was unable to remove him. Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has pushed Belarus into the historically familiar role of a militarised borderland between East and West. The war moreover directly touches upon the viability of state-promoted national identity myths, of Slavic civilisational belonging and collective victory over Nazism. Given Russian narratives of “denazifying” Ukraine, it is no longer possible to speak of fascism as a purely historical menace. Attempts by the Belarusian authorities to delegitimise their opposition as fascists, meanwhile, increasingly ring hollow. Lukashenko’s government has aligned itself with Putin’s rhetoric of a new worldwide antifascist struggle, waged once again from Moscow – reminiscent of Soviet tricontinental revolutionary discourses that inspired *Solidarity*. The ideological confrontation depicted in the iconic monumental relief is thus no longer a relic of the past, but has become pertinent to current events. Its future status, much like that of Belarus after Lukashenko, remains uncertain.

NOTES

- ¹ Streets and buildings are identified by different names, depending on the date and language of the source material. The building referred to as “Fashion House” was named the “House of Models” in the Soviet period and the “Belarusian Fashion Centre” after 1991. The street to the south of the Fashion House is referred to as “Nemiga Street,” the transliteration of its Russian name; it is “Niamiha” in Belarusian. The street to the east of the Fashion House is referred to as “Park Highway,” a translation from the Russian “Parkovaya Magistral”, its name until 1980; it

- was “Masherov Prospect” from 1980 until 2005, and is currently “Avenue of Victors,” in Russian “Prospekt Pobediteley” or Belarusian “Praspekt Peramozhtsau.” Romanisations are from the Russian spelling, except for titles of sources written in Belarusian.
- ² Alexander Etkind, “Post-Soviet Hauntology: Cultural Memory of the Soviet Terror,” *Constellations* 16, no. 1 (2009), 193–4, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8675.2009.00527.x.
 - ³ Anna Shirokanova, “Making Sense of the Post-Soviet Capital: Politics of Identity in the City of Minsk,” *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 28, no. 1 (2010), 363.
 - ⁴ Alexei Gutnov et al., *The Ideal Communist City* (George Braziller, 1971), 28.
 - ⁵ Artur Klinaŭ, *Minsk: Sonnenstadt der Träume*, trans. Volker Weichsel, 4. Auflage (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2015), 15.
 - ⁶ Al’herd Bacharëvich, *Niikaŭ litas’ tsi Al’herdu B: tэксты пра сваë* (Minsk: Halijafy, 2014), 7.
 - ⁷ Minsk was within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and thereafter the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth.
 - ⁸ Sergey Musinskiy, “Nemiga, ee Proshloe i Budushchee,” *Stroitel’stvo i Arkhitektura Belorussii*, 1972, 22.
 - ⁹ “Vystavka, posviashchennaia 100-letnemu iubileiu so dnia rozhdeniia Zaslužhennogo Arkhitekora BSSR Musinskogo S.S.,” Belorusskiy Gosudarstvennyy Arkhiv Nauchno-Tekhnicheskoy Dokumentatsii, 2020, accessed 29 August 2023. <https://bdantd.by/musinski-100/>.
 - ¹⁰ Vital’ Kirychenka, *Minsk – dzesiatsihadovy shliach stalitsy: 1960 – 1969* (Minsk: Belarus’, 2007), 205–9.
 - ¹¹ Stanislau Martseleu, ed., *Zbor pomnikaŭ historyi i kul’tury Belarusi. Minsk*, Vydavetstva “Belaruskaja Savetskaja Entsyklapedyia” imia Petrusia Broŭki (Minsk: Akademiia Nauk BSSR, 1988), 158–9.
 - ¹² Sergey Rusakov, *O Trebovaniakh k Odezhdë: Lektsiia Dots. S.I. Rusakova* (Moskva: Moskovskoe Mezhrional’noe nauchno-technicheskoe obshchestvo legkoy promyshlennosti, Moskva, 1958), 12.
 - ¹³ Olha Korniienko, “Ukrainian Fashion Houses as Centers of Soviet Fashion Representation,” *Hungarian Historical Review* 10, no. 3 (2021), 499–500, DOI: 10.38145/2021.3.495.
 - ¹⁴ Larissa Zakharova, “Soviet Fashion in the 1950s-60s: Regimentation, Western Influences, and Consumption Strategies,” in *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s*, eds. D. A. Kozlov, Eleonory Gilburd, and Larissa Zakharova (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 405–6.
 - ¹⁵ Alla Shamruk, “Tendentsii v Arkhitekture Belarusi Kontsa XX – Nachala XXI v.,” *Academia. Architecture and Construction* 3 (2021), 5–6, DOI: 10.22337/2077-9038-2021-3-5-9.
 - ¹⁶ Nikolai Gradiushko, “Novoe Modnoe Mesto v Minske. Chto Otkroiut v Zdaniĭ Barelefom “Solidarnost” na Nemige.” *Onliner*, 13 May 2019, accessed 19 February 2023. <https://real.onliner.by/2019/05/13/fabrig>.
 - ¹⁷ Grigorii Sternin, “Po Strane. Belorusskaia SSR,” *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* no. 6 (1979), 45.
 - ¹⁸ Sergey Filimonov, *Arkhitektura Obshchestvennykh Zdanii Belorussii* (Minsk: Vysheyshaia Shkola, 1985), 16–18, 45.
 - ¹⁹ Aleksandr Stadub and Viktor Korbut, “Khudozhniku v ramkakh tesno,” *Belarus’ Sevodnya*, 30 April 2014, accessed 19 February 2023. <https://www.sb.by/articles/khudozhniku-v-ramkakh-tesno.html?ysclid=lebg1z0jfw397004268>.
 - ²⁰ Anatoly Artimovich in Russian and Anatol’ Artsimovich in Belarusian.
 - ²¹ Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 143.
 - ²² Viktor Mikhaylov, ed., *Kurgan Slavy* (Minsk: Belarus’, 1985), 14.
 - ²³ “Anatol’ i Ivan Artsimovichy,” *Maisternia* (Belarus’ 3, 30 November 2017).
 - ²⁴ Boris Veymarn, Leonid Zinger, and Oleg Sopotsinskiy, eds., *Iskusstvo Narodov SSSR 1960-1977 Godov*, vol. 1, 2 vols., *Istoriia Iskusstva Narodov SSSR*, 9 (9) (Moskva: Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo, 1982), 296.
 - ²⁵ Michelle Paranzino, “From Détente to Revolution: Soviet Solidarity with Chile after Allende, 1973–79,” *The International History Review* 44, no. 1 (2022), 171–2.
 - ²⁶ Igor Orlov and Aleksey Popov, “‘Show All the Advantages of Socialism’: Foreign Tourism in the USSR and Soviet Management of Visitors’ Impressions,” *Russian Studies in History* 59, no. 3 (2 July 2020), 184, DOI: 10.1080/10611983.2021.2014746.

- ²⁷ Sergey Musinskiy and Vladimir Korneychik, "Shestnadsat' Let na Tormozakh," *Stroitel'stvo i Arkhitektura Belorussii*, no. 3 (1987), 13.
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Chapter 3

(In)tangible Socialist Heritage of Yugoslav Youth Labour Brigades

Can We Think the (Un)Imaginable?

Nikolina Bobic

INTRODUCTION

The intent of this chapter is to generally explore the (in)tangible heritage of socialist practices and infrastructure during the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Specifically, by examining the alternative socialist aesthetic of (in)voluntary and politicised work that was performed by the Youth Labour Brigades (referred to subsequently as the ORA – Omladinska Radna Akcija) in the post-World War II construction of SFRY, this chapter will problematise the association of heritage by arguing that Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) needs to encompass experiential elements such as bodily limits and socio-ethnic relations.

The ORA was seen as a form of leisure activity used to legitimise socialist ideology, conscript future party members, strengthen friendship, and extend solidarity among youth of different social and ethnic backgrounds in a multiethnic country. However, the members were also provided with free support to prepare for further studies in an effort to eradicate illiteracy. The ORA model signified and was implicitly connected to a unique aesthetic, where the construction of a new SFRY was a theoretical and practical political project based on socialist and anticolonial ideals that had a reach beyond the country's borders. The first ORA activity occurred in 1942, the last in 1990, and, during that period, more than two million youths took part in these events.

This chapter will argue that the reconfiguration of bodily limits and the participatory practices based on alternative ideals is a unique form of (in)tangible socialist Yugoslav heritage and is in contrast with the concurrent bodily experience of life and labour at that time in Western

contexts, where the interaction between people and Fordist ideology was taking place on a purely technological and economic level. Moreover, the processes implicated in ORA activities were associated with active and productive transformation of a body, rather than a Fordist and subsequent neoliberal, corporate, and optimisation-focused body, which has been regulated and shaped as a mode of production and a labour-intensive instrument of docility. As such, the necessity to think of ICH as a live and dynamic process is not only because it offers a unique perspective on the interaction of body, political ideology, economy, and leisure, but also because it has the potential to use heritage as a dynamic tool to challenge the globalised standardisation of culture through consumption. In other words, the question is whether ICH can be deployed to think of the (un)imaginable: separation of life, consumption, and labour.

SFRY AND YOUTH LABOUR BRIGADES: "NO REST WHILE WE'RE BUILDING!"

To understand the significance of ORA as (in)tangible heritage, it is important first to contextualise its ideological and political project. In the late 1980s, the SFRY was one of the last European countries to resist neoliberalism, mainly due to its unique socioeconomic model, which was ignited by Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito. After splitting from Soviet Russia in 1948, Tito's Yugoslavia implemented a decentralised economy where districts, regions, and republics had autonomy. This system aimed to balance Western capitalism and Soviet communism, promoting self-management and workers' rights in state-run enterprises. Tito's Yugoslavia also emphasised ethnic diversity, granting cultural, social, and linguistic rights to its various ethnic groups and minorities. This approach was part of a broader socialist democracy that included profit-sharing, in theory at least. Moreover, Yugoslavia's foreign policy, characterised by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) established in 1961, sought to mediate global peace, reduce socioeconomic disparities, and end colonialism by positioning itself as an alternative to the Cold War politics of the USSR/Warsaw Pact and the United States/NATO.

Following World War II, the urban construction in Belgrade and Yugoslavia was representative of this larger political project, characterised by distinct ideological and experimental motivations. The project was emblematic of the interplay between Soviet communist social welfare and Western Fordist capitalism. Indeed, the process of reconstruction was seen to signify an alternative distinctness, with the work undertaken by

ORA being one integral characteristic of such a unique model. Vital to this model is that its roots were closely connected and extended from the work enacted by youth labour actions in Yugoslavia during World War II, with the first brigade formed in June 1942 in Sanica, Bosanska Krajina in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These brigades, rooted in the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia movement, initially focused on resistance activities, including sabotage, collecting weapons and clothes for partisans, courier duties, transporting food, gathering medicinal herbs and medical aid, and farming, which was largely undertaken by women.¹

The context associated with the aftermath of World War II Yugoslavia was one of immense devastation: more than one million people died, many in battles, concentration camps, or as victims of forced labour and violence. Nearly 3.5 million people lost their homes, and road and railway infrastructure suffered significant damage.² Thus, the rebuilding effort connected physical and societal reconstruction to a new aesthetic emerging from the ruins of the pre-World War II monarchical and bourgeois Yugoslavia. Despite the higher costs of maintaining youth camps and organising activities compared to hiring skilled workers, Tito valued these projects for indoctrinating young Yugoslavs by providing them with resources unavailable in their native areas.³ The government saw the younger generation as a blank slate for ideological propaganda.⁴ The work of each youth was closely monitored to identify future party cadres.⁵ The first wave of reconstruction and the work undertaken by ORA involved large groups of youth rallying around the motto, “No rest while we’re building!” (*Nema odmora dok traje obnova!*).

Despite the narrative of voluntary participation, labour actions initially enforced compulsory participation, later transitioning to voluntary involvement with additional criteria such as evaluations and health assessments. As time passed and ORA became less militant, participation became a source of pride and prestige. This first wave had the most militant style, with little regard for actual work conditions. Indeed, post-war conditions were dire, with reports indicating the exhaustion of young workers. Despite the harsh realities, the media rarely informed the public about the work conditions, and journalists were restricted to certain sections of the railway to control the portrayal of youth labour actions. Propaganda constructed an image of enthusiastic workers dedicated to building the new Yugoslavia, yet the reality was that the youth were not protected from exhaustion.⁶ Young men and women sometimes felt obligated to respond to the call for actions, often arrived unprepared, faced inadequate accommodation, and lacked materials and tools.

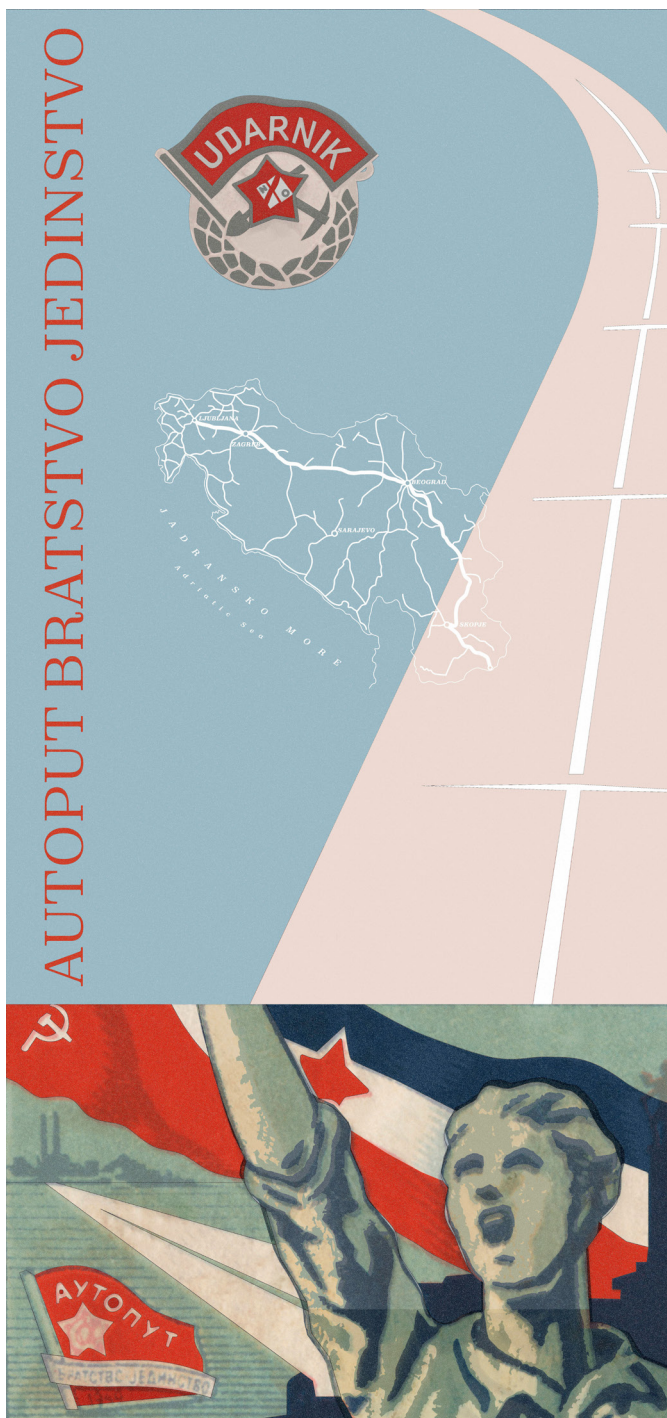


Figure 3.1: Composite illustration showing the Brotherhood and Unity Highway (Autoput Bratstva i Jedinstva) route from the Austrian border at Jesenice via Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, Skopje, to Gevgelije on the Greek border, along with a typical poster associated with this infrastructural project. (Illustration: Jackson Harper, © Nikolina Bobic)

Until 1952, approximately 1.3 million brigadiers, almost without any mechanisation, built 70 key new facilities. Some of these include: eleven railways (Brčko–Banovići, Šamac–Sarajevo, Banja Luka–Doboj, Nikšić–Titograd, Foča–Kopač, Preserje–Borovnica, Sežana–Dutovlje, Goleš–Belačevac, Kučevo–Brodice, Gradačac–Modriča, Puračić–Doboj); six road sections with the most famous being “The Brotherhood and Unity Highway” (Autoput Bratstvo–Jedinstvo) (Fig. 3.1) and five hydroelectric power stations. One of these infrastructural projects was the 243 km long Šamac–Sarajevo railway, which lasted from 1 April to 15 November 1947, where 167,037 young men and 44,334 young women from Yugoslavia participated.⁷ To boost morale and acknowledge the harsh working conditions, nearly every third worker on the Šamac–Sarajevo railway was recognised or awarded as a shock-brigade worker.⁸ This is significant given that the shock-brigade worker (*udarnik*) was intended to be a leader of each ORA brigade and selected for their ability to accomplish and exceed set daily tasks (Fig. 3.2).⁹

The construction of the railway and similar infrastructure also served as a platform to promote political ideology. Each brigade had daily obligations, including listening to a half-hour programme for receiving daily orders, featuring radio broadcasts with morning, noon, and evening programmes, reports from construction sites, and more. Additionally, one cinema screening and one theatre performance were scheduled weekly as part of their routine. After their seven-hour work shifts, brigadiers engaged in physical activities (gymnastics, military training, sports) and intellectual/political growth activities aimed at disseminating socialist ideology and eliminating social barriers.¹⁰ That ideological propaganda remained a tool is evident in the film screenings, with films carefully selected for ideological impact, with the 1947 *Slavica* (dir. Vjekoslav Afric) being the first long feature movie filmed after World War II and a favourite as it demonstrated how partisans rescued a group of operatives, one of whom was Slavica, from the occupation forces.¹¹ Indeed, (in)voluntary youth work served not only as a source of free labour for infrastructural projects but also as a social adhesive to unite youths from across the country, establish competitions, and worker awards to promote a work culture and motivate the working class, and promote the ideology of “brotherhood and unity” among different Yugoslav nationalities, and beyond national borders.¹² In that process, the ORA interacted with youth from different constituent nations and ethnic minorities, bridging social, economic, ethnic, and educational divides by fostering inclusivity and

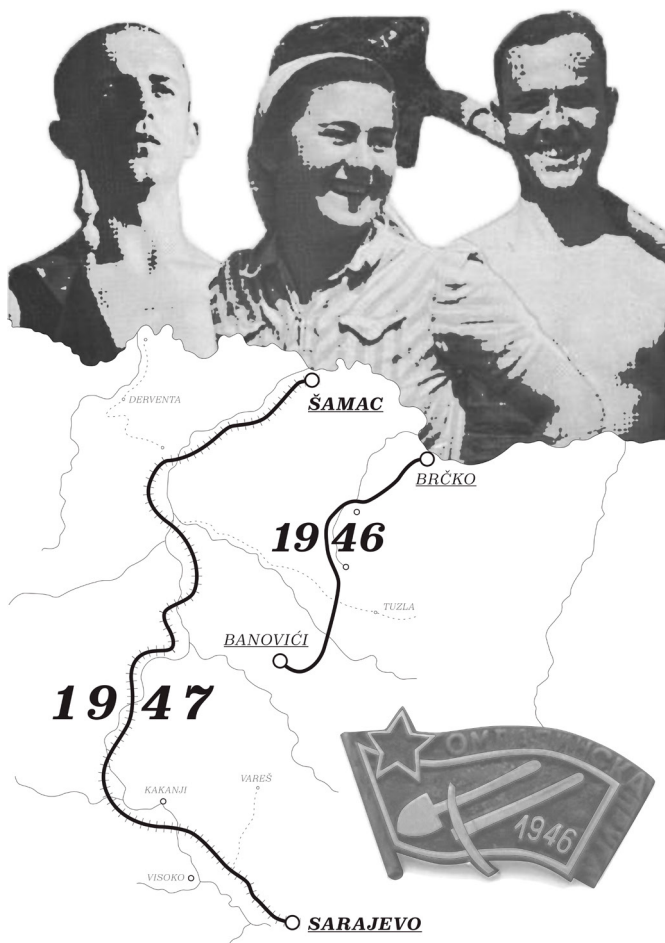


Figure 3.2: Composite image of Šamac–Sarajevo and Brčko–Banovići railways built by ORA in the immediate aftermath of World War II (re)construction with examples of shock-brigade worker badges from 1946 to 1947. (Illustration: Jackson Harper @Nikolina Bobic)



diversity, and building a unique model of citizenship. For many youths from monoethnic regions, these projects provided their first interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds, helping to mend post-war ethnic tensions. Involving youths from diverse contexts promoted Yugoslavia's unique societal model, especially crucial post-1948 Soviet split.¹³ Not only did Yugoslav brigades assist in reconstruction efforts in Poland and Czechoslovakia, but youth from Sweden, England, Bulgaria, and Poland were involved in ORA activities in Yugoslavia.¹⁴

BODY, LABOUR, AND LEISURE: "OUR AIM IS THE IMPOSSIBLE!"

Apart from the ideological motto of, "No rest while we're building!", the brigadiers were also guided by the conception of the motto, "Our aim is the impossible!" ("Nemoguće, to je naš cilj!").¹⁵ The ideological framework was "to show what the 'new man' would look like, behave, and act [like]."¹⁶ Indeed, the ORA used mental and physical strength to rebuild a country that was invested in an ideologically alternative model.¹⁷

Despite being viewed as leisure activities to legitimise the ideology and recruit future party members,¹⁸ youth brigades also provided free resources and support for further studies. Indeed, "one of the main emancipatory and educational efforts (and arguably the greatest success) of the People's Youth [ORA] was the eradication of illiteracy among young people."¹⁹ Young men and women also participated in these actions with the expectation to learn a trade or gaining other benefits, like easier access to student scholarships or jobs because of the brigade badge. According to one survey, 21.4 per cent of brigadiers wanted to qualify as drivers because of the ease of the job, better rewards, or social prestige, 7.9 per cent as mechanics, 4.9 per cent as tractor drivers, 4.5 per cent as clerks, 3.2 per cent as engineers, 3.1 per cent as educators, and the same percentage as technicians.²⁰ During the six-phase period – the war period (1941–5); post-war federal labour actions (1945–52); the phase of local labour actions (1953–7); reviving federal labour actions (1958–64); the phase of local labour actions (1965–7); and the final phase (1968–90) – more than two million young people took part.

By the 1960s, there was a gradual transformation from a semi-military organisational structure rooted in the partisan struggle ideal towards a less authoritarian leadership style based on socialist self-management principles.²¹ The model of self-management encouraged critical thinking,

a departure from the norm in other socialist and communist states. Also, there was a shift from labour actions addressing social needs to catering to individual interests. As early as the third phase, which began in 1953, brigadiers were most interested in entertainment and sports, followed by culture and courses, with the least interest in ideological-political work.²² With the shift in the nature of work within youth brigades towards a more recreational approach,²³ events like brigadiers' weddings became commonplace by the mid-1970s. Positive values were attributed to these actions by musicians such as Arsen Dedić, who wrote the anthem "Hey, Hey, Brigades" (*Hej, Haj Brigade*) in 1975 or the "Brigade Song" (*Brigadirska Pjesma*), which was made popular by the band Srebrna Krila (Silver Wings).²⁴

Although the bodily experience of (in)voluntary ORA labour in a socialist spirit of solidarity was regulated during specific periods of post-World War II Yugoslavia, particularly in the immediate reconstruction of Yugoslavia, leisure and cultural activities eventually became the backbone of the youth labour brigades over time. The way in which the ORA body of workers was regulated is in sharp contrast with the disciplining of the body informed by the practice of Fordism, including leisure activities. Indeed, to understand neoliberalism, historians of capitalism look to Fordism.²⁵ Named after Henry Ford, Fordism is associated with an ideology characterised by mass production, standardised products, and the mechanised assembly line, while placing "inhuman pressures" on the workers.²⁶ Moreover, "the tactics of Ford's supervisors did not create a system of surveillance, but rather 'a system of terror.'"²⁷ The interaction between people and the ideology of Fordism operated primarily on a technological and economic level, aimed at maximising efficiency and output. Here, body and mind became tools of optimisation and effectiveness to perpetuate the Fordist economic model, rather than critical thinking and challenging the status quo, as seen in the 1970s model of self-management in Yugoslavia.

The Fordist interaction significantly influenced the nature of work and labour dynamics, as well as the broader economic and social environment. One breadth of this was seen in the reduction of working hours to enable workers more free time to consume.²⁸ Indeed, the early twentieth-century integration of economics with leisure was driven by the realisation that mass production required corresponding mass consumption.²⁹ In other words, the fusion of consumption with lifestyle construction characterises consumer culture, wherein societal values revolve around purchasing goods.³⁰ In such a dynamic, leisure time increasingly revolves around consumption, bodily pleasure, and self-improvement.³¹ The scope of

leisure in the contemporary context is reduced to and associated with “commodification and homogenisation of experience,”³² with shopping being the climax of sociality. The onset of consumer culture has subverted social interactions due to a construct that leisure should be a form of escape, despite being absorbed into and by the system.³³

In a 24/7 world where the cycle of production, consumption, and exploitation is constant,³⁴ the possibility of envisaging alternatives is not only short-circuited but also depoliticised. Moreover, a body that is disciplined by being conceived as a mode of production and a labour-intensive instrument invested in various forms of consumerism limits the scope for critical thinking and hinders the production of creativity beyond the normalised. Unlike the body that is shaped and sculpted to fit a particular advertising “ideal” and tied to an urban spectacle and the consumption of leisure, the ORA body was regulated to subscribe to the ideology of SFRY. Its regulation was also contingent on renewing the common ground for tolerance, ethnic and linguistic rights, and eliminating illiteracy while fostering scope for critical thought. Moreover, the ORA body had more agency as it was associated with active and productive transformation rather than a neoliberal body. Yet, according to the critical geographer David Harvey, the creation of the late twentieth-century market society was premised on discrediting the potentialities of communism.³⁵ Herein, arguably, lies both the necessity to consider ORA practices as part of (in)tangible heritage and also to problematise that which is associated with (in)tangible heritage. For the heritage scholar David C. Harvey, the necessity for rigid definitions requires questioning in that heritage is to be understood as a process throughout history, not limited to specific dates, but as a complex human condition.³⁶

The way we conceptualise heritage is an outcome of late twentieth-century wider transitions at sociocultural and economic levels, which further challenge ideas of “correct” historical narratives. Heritage actively shapes identities through continuous engagement, contestation, and reinterpretation, influencing individual, group, and national identities rather than preserving an inherently “authentic” past. This necessitates rethinking the relationship between history and heritage.³⁷ From this perspective, the ORA is an example of cultural heritage, as it demonstrates a way of being and a political work programme associated with a particular way of shaping identity. Instating the narratives connected to the ORA is an opportunity to discuss what is implicated in heritage. Indeed, reducing discussions of heritage to technical management and conservation

restricts debates as it obscures the role of heritage in shaping identity, power, and authority.³⁸

One example of a restriction is that UNESCO's intangible heritage programme has an element of exclusivity and is not always "consistent with its stated goals."³⁹ The framework encompasses all non-material aspects of culture and serves as a crucial expression of humanity's living heritage and cultural diversity. For example, the scholar and museum professional Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that prestigious institutions like the Bolshoi Ballet and Metropolitan Opera are unlikely to be listed as practices of intangible heritage, while Noh theatre, a non-minority, non-indigenous Japanese art form, is included. By accepting non-European courtly and state-sponsored traditions, UNESCO's list perpetuates divisions between the West and the rest, creating a phantom list of overlooked intangible heritage.⁴⁰ Although the ORA is not an example from performance studies, it is an example that what is recognised as valuable and deserving of "living" recognition has a political dimension. In other words, the selection process for intangible heritage status can be politicised, privileging certain groups, practices, and histories over others, leading to issues of representation and equity. Moreover, what is given recognition and identified as a "living" heritage is connected to economics, which raises the questions of recognition and interpretation. Whether the non-material aspects may be illustrated by case studies, such as traditional dances in India or Japanese textile-dyeing, where local communities actively work to sustain their heritage,⁴¹ has readily been appropriated to support commodification. Inadvertently, ICH can be distorted for tourist appeal or to help align with prevailing stereotypes.⁴²

Arguably, practices such as those evident during socialist Yugoslavia, which actively promoted social equity, would not benefit the contemporary corporate-led, privatisation-focused, technocratic, and consumer-oriented society of today. If anything, enabling and valuing ORA practices would demonstrate that there are other ways of structuring a society. While the early stages of the ORA were forced labour, the history of ORA demonstrates that, over time, the practices not only became voluntary but were oriented to enhance and establish dialogue across socioeconomic and ethnic differences, which would help reproduce the individual as well as the overall society. The priority was inclusivity and social diversity rather than the current culture of privileging the individual. We live in a culture where we see ourselves as competitive individuals rather than part of the public, which also affects how social issues are addressed; they are treated as private concerns and are increasingly absorbed by the capitalist

market.⁴³ The social and public focus has degraded, as the overarching narrative in the contemporary sensationalist era prioritises corporate interests and capital as the ultimate and unquestionable value.⁴⁴ In such a model, the political relationship between body, leisure, and socioeconomics is interwoven to the point that leisure is an activity that is consumed. In other words, work–life–leisure is integrated, where growth is only permissible if it equates to increasing the profit margin and not questioning the normalised system. If heritage is treated as a passive commodity, shaped by media and marketing, its broader active potential roles and meanings get lost. Seemingly, such a relation not only influences how heritage is conserved but also prompts the question of origins and interpretations of (in) tangible heritage in contemporary contexts.⁴⁵ Indeed, the origins of heritage are intimately linked with nineteenth-century nationalism and liberal modernity (specifically in Europe, with countries such as Britain, France, and Germany), which inherently highlights the links between preserving the material past and pastoral care.⁴⁶ Invariably, nationalism emerged as a metanarrative to unify populations and legitimise state formation, while the rise of capitalism weakened the aristocracy. This era sought new ways to express social cohesion and identity, linking heritage with national and racial discourses to form a doctrine of “blood and land.”⁴⁷

Pluralising horizons of thought about (in)tangible heritage would not only assist with treating history as a contestable matter but also facilitate thinking of history as an ongoing process, encouraging collective practices of remembrance that open up meanings and implications for today rather than freezing history into fixed causes and effects.⁴⁸ Using this model when it comes to history no longer places the ORA in the SFRY as a no longer existing political work programme and, as such, removed from the definition of heritage, but as a “living” tool that can help challenge and negotiate how identity, culture, individual-social, and racial discourses are created, regulated, privileged, and reconstructed pending the political and national backdrop. From this perspective, history and culture would step beyond exclusivism and commodification.

PROBLEMATISING (IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE: CAN WE THINK THE (UN)IMAGINABLE?

Given that this chapter argues that we need to problematise the way in which we approach ICH, also to accommodate practices that extend beyond social issues treated as private concerns and where corporate interests and

capital are prioritised over public focus, it is both a real potential and a hindering element. The potential is that by nurturing the existence of different approaches to work–life–leisure that are possible and valid, the role of the body in the current consumer culture has the potential to be diversified and broadened beyond what is currently known. Moreover, ICH could be used as both a legacy-oriented anchor and as a tool to help question and challenge how the role of the body has been normalised. Indeed, by utilising the philosophical thinking of Walter Benjamin, for whom history is something that needs to be kept alive and active,⁴⁹ and by examining the past – or, in this instance, ICH – we can not only enable different narratives to emerge but also use them to offer alternative socioeconomic practices.

The hindrance is that such problematisation of ICH would not only challenge the merits and value of contemporary culture but also endanger the association of heritage with preservation. In the proposed problematised definition, ICH would need to encompass both preservations of practices, places, narratives, and objects and support the idea that some of these practices and dynamics need to be kept “alive” as they readily offer an alternative mode of living and production and, as such, challenge the consumer-led and techno-economic culture.

That economics is significant is evident in the congruent relation between economics and ICH. Heritage is a partner in a country’s development, with its economic impact measurable through gross added value.⁵⁰ With a Fordist and imminent neoliberal 24/7 culture, the body and mind are shaped to turn into docility. What the consumer market has manifested is a society that has stopped putting itself into question, let alone thinking critically.⁵¹ In the current economic system, the construct of “free time/choice” is ironic, as it is dependent on perpetuating consumption and expanding neoliberalism. Free time indeed comes with a price, as perpetuating a programme that stifles dissonance and alternative values. The increasingly growing range of products and activities marketed as leisure “choices” is part of the larger neoliberal hegemony of values. Leisure is “free time” in relation to, and when determined by, consumerism, spectacle, and emulation of a specific “ideal” image. Such culture has infiltrated into leisure through the “mobilisation of a narcissistic self-identity.”⁵² Consumption inscribes and codifies every aspect of life, where, in our quest for the perfect body, we are sold diets, exercise programmes, hair removal products, cosmetic surgery, and a range of cosmetic products (including moisturisers, wrinkle cream, nail varnish, facial scrubs, and so on), as well as makeovers and hairdressing services. Similarly, at school

and at work, we are prompted to become more competitive, independent, entrepreneurial, productive, agile, and flexible, while time away from school and work moves towards the sphere of consumption, bodily and psychic pleasure, improvement, and healing.⁵³

The blurring of work and life was also evident during the Fordist period, which was connected to standardisation and automation, where every aspect of human existence has been integrated into modern capitalism. Moreover, incorporating so-called leisure into consumption was instrumental in the production of a global consumer culture. Despite studies on heritage fostering “linkages between national identities and cultural patrimonies,”⁵⁴ the question remains how a third-way aesthetic associated with NAM and the alternative socialist SFRY model can be valued when it fosters political agency. While the ORA model was implicated in using the body and mind to strengthen socialist state ideology, such body and mind were also replenished mentally and physically, as ORA leisure activities were also opportunities to step away from work and any techno-economic model found during Fordism.

This contrasts sharply with the current context, where the country no longer exists due to the dissolution in the 1990s and the introduction of neoliberalism. History is now repackaged as commodified products, and their reproduction is the key cultural structure.⁵⁵ Such commodified packaging is seen in the way in which the official narratives in newly created countries of the disintegrated SFRY largely deny the relatedness of arts and culture produced in each of the former Yugoslav republics, or that socialism has become synonymous with tyranny. Indeed, such a packaged narrative suits the agenda of neoliberalism and its associated democratic values, especially when brought to a semi-colonial and socialist zone associated with the former Yugoslavia.

While there may have been numerous exhibitions in former Yugoslavia (such as the exposition in the Palace of Serbia in Belgrade in April 2011 or the display in Cultural Information Center (KIC) Gallery in Zagreb in Croatia in March–April 2017), which showcased the work of ORA and demonstrated the interrelatedness of how the ORA built the railway, and the railway built each individual ORA member (“*Mi gradimo prugu – pruga gradi nas*”), as a synonym and guide for a society of brotherhood and unity of all nations and ethnicities, these exhibitions are treated as a relic of a bygone era. The exhibitions are not promoted as a potential and possibility to ignite a new contemporary society that offers models and processes that can rewire the current socioeconomic structure.

Indeed, even with the expansive shift in heritage, from the 1972 World Heritage Convention, which emphasises tangible cultural heritage with objects such as monuments, to also including intangible aspects and narratives of local communities in 2003, the defining framework remains limited. This is not only because such a narrow focus limits a comprehensive understanding of heritage, particularly regarding attachment to places, living traditions, and landscape studies,⁵⁶ but also because it misses the possibility of thinking of ICH in terms of its opportunity to be used as a springboard – and a necessary one as such – to question the socioeconomic framework and privatisation focused model with practices and narratives that displace its exploitative nature, whether it be people, infrastructure, place, or other resources. In other words, the agency is removed from the parameters of ICH. Thus, the question remains whether ICH can be used as a more discursive relic of live heritage to think the (un)imaginable – a society where rest and leisure are not directly connected to consumption and a culture of narcissism and/or where our thinking is not directly invested in the optimisation of production and services?

CONCLUSION

The ORA was a unique theoretical and practical political project rooted in the anticolonial and socialist ideals of SFRY, where bodily limits were not only reconfigured daily but also the growing strength of a body, which was used to project and construct an alternative future. Such a future spanned ideological, political, social, and economic elements. At the ideological and political level, not only did SFRY resist neoliberalism until the late 1980s, primarily due to its unique socioeconomic model, which balanced Western capitalism and Soviet communism, but the decentralised economy promoted self-management and workers' rights in state-run enterprises. Moreover, Yugoslavia's foreign policy, characterised by NAM, sought to mediate global peace, reduce socioeconomic disparities, and end colonialism. At the nexus of political ideology, ORA, and their direct involvement in the reconstruction of the country in the aftermath of World War II, over time, these activities became associated with leisure. While labour was initially compulsory, physically demanding, and often enacted under harsh conditions, with time, these activities became more leisure-oriented and were used to promote physical and intellectual growth. This is in sharp contrast to the Fordist model, which prioritised

efficiency and output over critical thinking, or the neoliberal model, where leisure is commodified and integrated into consumer culture.

The significance of ORA as ICH is not only due to its fostering of cultural diversity and social equity but also because the youth labour brigades provided a platform for bridging social, economic, and ethnic divides. Moreover, ORA practices demonstrate that different approaches to work–life–leisure are possible, offering an alternative to the neoliberal economy. This includes fostering critical thinking, tolerance, and social cohesion. Precisely, by problematising the thinking around ICH and by valuing ORA practices as an example of ICH, we can challenge the merits of neoliberalism and question the current economic system. ICH needs to encompass both preservation and the promotion of alternative socio-economic practices, as heritage preservation can also contribute to economic development. The economic value of preserving ORA practices lies in their potential to offer alternatives to the exploitative nature of neoliberalism.

NOTES

- ¹ Gasper Mithans, “Youth Labour Brigades in Yugoslavia and Representations of Volunteerism: A Study of Participation in Restored Federal Labour Actions by the People’s Youth in the District of Koper,” *Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies – Series Historia et Sociologia* 32 (2022), 605.
- ² Nikola Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work! Social Integration, Mobilization and Cooperation in Yugoslav Youth Brigades. The Example of Cacak Region Brigades (1946–1952),” *The Hungarian Historical Review* 4, no. 1 (2015): 29–55.
- ³ Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 51.
- ⁴ Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 51.
- ⁵ Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 51.
- ⁶ Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 48.
- ⁷ Reana Senjkovic, “Uvod” [Introduction] in *Omladinske Radne Akcije – Dizajn ideologije [The Youth Labour Brigades – the Design of Ideology]* Intergrafika (2017), 8.
- ⁸ Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 40.
- ⁹ Dragan Popovic, “Youth Labor Action (Omladinska Radna Akcija, ORA) as Ideological Holiday-Making,” in *Yugoslavia’s Sunny Side: A History of Tourism in Socialism (1950s–1980s)*, eds. Hannnes Grandits and Karin Taylor (Central European University Press, 2010), 284.
- ¹⁰ Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 43.
- ¹¹ Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 48.
- ¹² Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 31.
- ¹³ Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 52.
- ¹⁴ Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 50.
- ¹⁵ Popovic, “Youth Labor Action (Omladinska Radna Akcija, ORA) as Ideological Holiday-Making,” 284.
- ¹⁶ Popovic, “Youth Labor Action (Omladinska Radna Akcija, ORA) as Ideological Holiday-Making,” 285.
- ¹⁷ The ORA activities started changing in the 1960s. A shift occurred from building projects such as railways and industrial complexes to less labour-intensive projects, such as building recreation centres and stabilising riverbanks.
- ¹⁸ Bakovic, “No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!,” 45.

- ¹⁹ Bakovic, “‘No One Here is Afraid of Blisters or Work!’,” 45.
- ²⁰ Senjkovic, “Uvod,” 10.
- ²¹ Mithans, “Youth Labour Brigades in Yugoslavia and Representations of Volunteerism,” 605.
- ²² Senjkovic, “Uvod,” 13.
- ²³ Popovic, “Youth Labor Action (Omladinska Radna Akcija, ORA) as Ideological Holiday-Making,” 280.
- ²⁴ Senjkovic, “Uvod,” 13.
- ²⁵ Daniel Watson, “Fordism: A Review Essay,” *Labor History* 60, no. 2 (2019), 145.
- ²⁶ Watson, “Fordism: A Review Essay,” 152.
- ²⁷ Watson, “Fordism: A Review Essay,” 152.
- ²⁸ Stephen Leslie Wearing, Matthew McDonald, and Michael Wearing, “Consumer Culture, the Mobilisation of the Narcissistic Self and Adolescent Deviant Leisure,” *Leisure Studies* 32, no. 4 (2012), 370.
- ²⁹ Wearing, McDonald and Wearing, “Consumer Culture, the Mobilisation of the Narcissistic Self and Adolescent Deviant Leisure,” 370.
- ³⁰ Wearing, McDonald and Wearing, “Consumer Culture, the Mobilisation of the Narcissistic Self and Adolescent Deviant Leisure,” 370.
- ³¹ Matthew McDonald, Stephen Wearing, and Jess Ponting, “Narcissism and Neo-Liberalism: Work, Leisure, and Alienation in an Era of Consumption,” *Loisir et Société/Society and Leisure* 30, no. 2 (2007), 491.
- ³² Chris Rojek, *Decentring Leisure: Rethinking Leisure Theory* (Sage, 1998), 4.
- ³³ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
- ³⁴ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso, 2014).
- ³⁵ David Harvey, “The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession,” *Socialist Register* 40 (2004): 63–87.
- ³⁶ David C. Harvey, “Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: Temporality, Meaning and the Scope of Heritage Studies,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7, no. 4 (2001), 320.
- ³⁷ Harvey, “Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents,” 336.
- ³⁸ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Routledge, 2006), 17.
- ³⁹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production,” *Museum International* 56, no. 1–2 (2004), 167.
- ⁴⁰ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production,” 167.
- ⁴¹ Michelle L. Stefano and Peter Davis, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Companion to Intangible Cultural Heritage*, eds. Michelle L. Stefano and Peter Davis (Routledge, 2017), 1.
- ⁴² Federico Lenzerini, “Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Living Culture of Peoples,” *The European Journal of International Law* 22, no. 1 (2011), 103.
- ⁴³ Max Haiven, *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power* (Zed Books, 2014), 77.
- ⁴⁴ Haiven, *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power*, 101.
- ⁴⁵ Harvey, “Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents,” 323.
- ⁴⁶ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 17.
- ⁴⁷ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 18.
- ⁴⁸ Haiven, *Crisis of Imagination, Crisis of Power*, 182–3.
- ⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of Philosophy,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 4: 1938–1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Belknap Press, 2003), 255–63.
- ⁵⁰ Tudorache Petronela, “The Importance of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Economy,” *Procedia Economics and Finance* 39 (2016): 731–6.
- ⁵¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Open University Press, 2004), 95. Note: in this text, Bauman references Cornelius Castoriadis.
- ⁵² Wearing, McDonald and Wearing, “Consumer Culture, the Mobilisation of the Narcissistic Self and Adolescent Deviant Leisure,” 368.
- ⁵³ McDonald, Wearing, and Ponting, “Narcissism and Neo-Liberalism: Work, Leisure, and Alienation in an Era of Consumption,” 491.

- ⁵⁴ Nelly Bakus and Kate Cowcher, "Socialism, Heritage and Internationalism after 1945. The Second World and Beyond," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26, no. 12 (2020), 1123.
- ⁵⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1989).
- ⁵⁶ Miza Alex and Elgidius B. Ichumbaki, "'Unless we Value the Intangible Heritage, the Tangible Will Never be Safe!' Linking the Tangible and Intangible Aspects of Heritage Sites in Africa," *Heritage & Society* 2 (2023).

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Chapter 4

Romania's Heritage of Socialist Sports Buildings

The Case of the Bacău Sports Hall

Ruxandra Balcanu

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to portray the environment in which sports architecture emerged and flourished in the context of socialist Romania, reflecting the influence of political thought and the ideological and economic policies of the time. After sketching the general picture, the focus will shift to the case study of Bacău Sports Hall, an example of unique architecture from the 1970s that can be considered a type of development of the period, encompassing the entire process of societal transformation from the socialist state to the capitalist economy of today.

Even though many studies researching the socialist period were conducted after 1989, sports architecture in Romania remains under investigation, with some case studies that have only scratched the surface of the topic. This chapter examines the relationship between political ideology and architecture in the world of sport, a crucial component of the socialist party's propaganda system. The first part will present the general context of the sports movement and the policies of the socialist party regarding sports for the masses. This context ultimately created the need for an extensive sports infrastructure that would eventually span the entire country, promoting the development of unique buildings that ingeniously combine architecture and special structures. The second part follows the above-mentioned example of this kind of architecture. The case study was chosen based on its unique characteristics, illustrative of the subject and its lack of interventions in recent years. Finally, the last part of the chapter considers the state of this kind of architecture today, analysing the causes of its demise and its lack of sympathy in the public eye. This chapter lays the groundwork for the debate on whether these buildings should be designated as recent architectural heritage and what the alternative would entail.

SPORTS AND ARCHITECTURE AT A NATIONAL LEVEL

Even if sport was part of national state policies from the interwar period, especially as a part of society's military training in the case of totalitarian states of Europe,¹ in Romania, this phenomenon began after World War II, at the very beginning of the socialist rule. Throughout the entire period, sports permeated all areas of society, from schools and universities to factories and workplaces.

"The story of the nine minutes"

The importance of sport for the socialist state had multiple facets, from creating a strong nation that could better withstand enemy invasions to occupying people's spare time. Over time, mass sport became a means of identifying new athletes who would later become professional athletes with impressive results in international competitions. Even so, in the post-war period, the sport was first developed based on the USSR's model, promoting mass sports to the detriment of performance sports. It would combine mass participation in sports competitions with the idea of defending the country, creating an ideal propaganda tool for the new soviet man.² In Romania, sports are introduced as an essential activity for the everyday life of the working man, the most crucial part of the socialist society.³ Through various methods, sports in the workplace would soon become a reality for every factory and institute. These activities were promoted in the sports newspapers of the period, such as *Stadium* (Stadion) and *Sport*.

In articles promoting sports in factories, there would usually be a story about how a "brave worker" would try to convince others to participate in sports competitions or engage in everyday physical activities. For example, an article entitled "The Story of the Nine Minutes" tells the story of a patriotic engineer from the Institute of Industrial Planning in Bucharest who organised nine minutes of physical exercises for the factory at 11:00 am daily. Everyone would stop whatever they were doing at that hour and do some sport in their working outfits in their working space.⁴ The press provided many articles, and sports were also introduced in schools and universities. Every day would begin with a short break for physical exercises before the courses. Everyone would have to be part of a sports competition and practise physical exercises. However, sport was

something more than this. It was also a way to compete with other nations and show the excellence of the socialist sportsman.⁵ Sports competitions were organised all over the country to find new talent. Later in the 1970s, the Daciada, a national sports competition, was created after the USSR's model of Spartakiads.⁶ Many professional athletes were discovered through this competition, as it had multiple degrees, from schools to the national level. It is evident that the communist party needed many sports facilities. The plan of the National Council for Physical Education and Sport, the leading investor and legal coordinator of sports activities at a national level, was that every important city in Romania should have at least a football arena, a sports hall, and a pool.⁷ To maintain the growth of sports interest, the demand for sports facilities will become increasingly stringent.

Policies for sport

The first document that clearly states the importance of sport and physical culture for the socialist party was published four years after the end of World War II and emphasises the connection between society and sport:

Thorough organising of the mass sport and physical movement culture, in the present developing conditions of our country, has a major political importance because physical culture and sport, guided by the party, constitute an important contribution to the creation of the new man, a determined and active fighter for the construction of socialism.⁸

This kind of control and structure would not have been possible without creating new sports spaces in the cities. The existing ones were underdeveloped for the grand plans of the party at that moment. During the socialist period, all investments were made exclusively through planned state investment, and public buildings were a purely political decision.⁹ Sports buildings were part of the sociocultural sector, which also included education, research, healthcare, and public administration domains. From a political point of view, the less important buildings were usually cases of typified planning (for example: schools, kindergartens, health centres, local police precincts, and so forth), while other important urban equipment benefited from a more special treatment. In the case of sports, this special treatment was meant for those who were built, for example,

for an international event.¹⁰ These unique projects had the opportunity to avoid the economic restrictions of the period and became experiments for both architects and engineers, especially for those considered of national importance.¹¹ They became a space of experimentation and of freedom of design for those involved. This is also the case with the sports hall, which will be discussed in the second part of the article.

Building for sport

In the 1950s, the idea of sport in the exterior environment was blended with the modernist ideas of creating parks inside the cities as places of culture and leisure.¹² This kind of park was seen as a key factor in the economy of the socialist city, especially for the big cities.¹³ The new layouts were seen as “ensembles that combine political education and the improvement of the mental health of millions of workers.”¹⁴ They would usually have stadiums, theatres, cinemas, and restaurants, all in green settings with geometric alleys. At the same time, the building of sports complexes also began, especially in the cities with a strong industrial character. They would usually be based on typified projects and dimensioned for the population of the city. The character of the sports complex was a little bit different from the parks for culture and recreation – even if both were set as parks, only the last one would have other leisure activities than sports, while the other had more specific places for physical activities.¹⁵

In the 1960s and 1970s, sports halls were extensively built with a polyvalent character, meaning they were also suitable for other public events, addressing a community need not only during the communist period but also today. At the national level, the institute responsible for the research and design of sports buildings was IPCT, or the Institute for the Design of Typified Buildings (*Institutul de Proiectare a Construcțiilor Tipizate*). It conducted thorough research and had a couple of brochures that would exemplify different types of structures for each kind of sports building for architects and engineers to use.¹⁶ Despite this uniform attitude towards buildings for sports, some sports halls were also considered important urban equipment, which offered local city authorities more freedom regarding their architecture and structure. This way, they also created some kind of competition between municipalities. The most exciting example is the one for a sports hall project made by the local design team from Ploiești, which was copied and built in another city, Galați, before

the original one was completed.¹⁷ Now, these two cities have almost the same sports hall, even if it was not a typified project. Besides trying to create efficient and economical spaces, during that period, they witnessed a significant number of architectural and structural experiments that resulted in a series of unique sports halls that still exist today.

BACĂU SPORTS HALL

The sports hall in Bacău, a city in eastern Romania, was completed in 1974, following a design by architect Gheorghe Chira in collaboration with structural engineer Gheorghe Jitaru and their team. The architect and the structural engineer worked at the local design institute, Bacău Design Institute.¹⁸ They managed to escape the constraints of those times and built various projects that differed from the typical, typified ones. Like other cities in the socialist period, Bacău also experienced rapid economic growth based on industrialisation. The face of the city began to change during that period, and collective housing, along with other urban infrastructure buildings, appeared throughout the city. Following the ideas presented in the first part of the paper, the city's old infrastructure would be drastically modified, and a new centre would be built, along with other public spaces. In this respect, the city needed a new sports complex, an idea also presented in a local propaganda newspaper, *The Red Flag (Steagul Roșu)*.¹⁹

The new sports complex, “23 August,”²⁰ was going to be built near the existing stadium, and it would have featured various sports buildings, such as a swimming pool, an athletics hall, a polyvalent hall, an ice rink, hotels, and multiple sports fields. All these spaces would be part of a bigger park designed by the architect Viorica Novac and her team from the same local design institute. In the end, only some of them were built, including the swimming pool (finalised in 1976) and the polyvalent hall (finalised in 1974), the subject of this chapter.

The whole complex was an experiment of unique structures and sports architecture. In an interview from 2018, the architect Viorica Novac remembers the initial concept of the complex, referring to the distinctive buildings that were made to impress: “I imagined the whole sports area like an exhibition of unique projects, each transmitting a message. In a park can also be butterflies, sea shells, centipedes, water and... playing fields.”²¹ In the same interview, the architect recalls the economic and



Figure 4.1: Bacău Sports Hall today (author's archive)

ideological constraints of the period that would eventually allow for some exceptions, which, in our case, were embodied in the polyvalent hall and the swimming pool.

The Polyvalent Hall was situated in the southwest part of the sports complex, with a double orientation: one facing the park, where the main public entrance is located, and the other facing the city, providing access to the athletes' lockers and the playing field. In this way, the spectators are first introduced to the game atmosphere by admiring the sculptural buildings with dynamic forms, and only after that can they enter the hall. At a functional level, besides the main volume, which contains the playing field and can accommodate almost 2,000 people, there are two additional smaller volumes with amenities on each side of the hall, marking the two entries and completing the final composition. The sports hall has a distinctive structure that evokes the experimental character of the entire movement in sport. The structure characterises the building's architectural image (Fig. 4.1).

To cover the large area of the field along with the stands without creating any secondary support that would inconvenience the use of the space, the engineer, along with the architect, devised a structure consisting of two supporting arcs that would sustain the pleated, thin concrete shell of the roof. The double arch has an opening of 72m and a height of 34m,

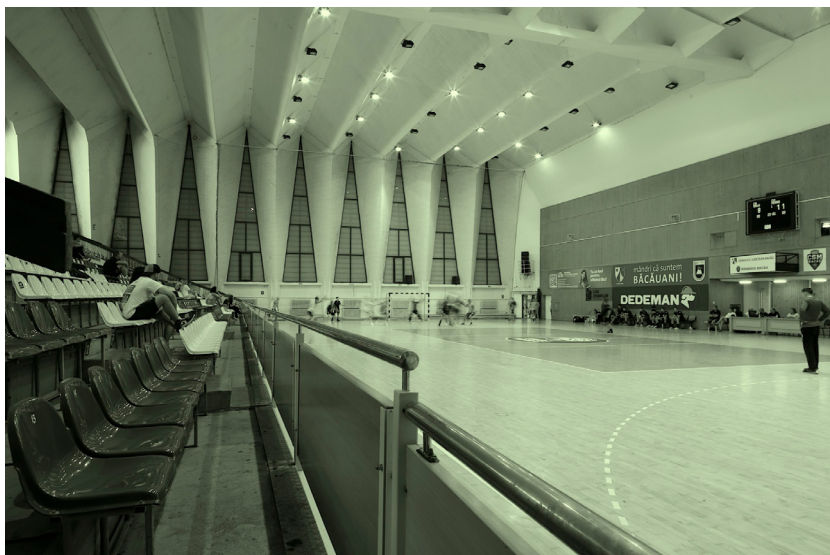


Figure 4.2: The interior of the Bacău Sports Hall. It shows the position of the stands and the structure of the exterior envelope, which extends the roof. (author's archive)

while it is almost a square, measuring 44m by 48m with an interior height of 12m.²² This exoskeleton was made on-site using prestressed concrete, employing technologies used for elements manufactured off-site. The arches were made from two distinct segments, which were later elevated into place. Prestressed concrete was popular at that time, but its use here was relatively new, as it required special materials that were hardly feasible given the national economic policies of the period.

This structure generates the two entrances of the hall. The general aesthetic of the hall can be interpreted as rough because of the exposed concrete used for the exterior. The pleated roof is continued on the side walls and partially glazed, allowing natural light to enter the hall. The sports hall building stands out due to its clarity of shape and detailed accuracy. The interior of the hall is relatively simple, with the stands positioned on one side of the playing field. For the ceiling, a three-dimensional structure was used to cover the large opening of the hall without the need for intermediate pillars (Fig. 4.2).

The construction works on site for the sports hall were mentioned several times in the local propaganda newspaper, *The Red Flag (Steagul Rosu)*. For example, the start of the construction works was made public, with details about the building and the team involved in the design

process. It also reported that the local communities would be part of the building process through voluntary patriotic work.²³ Later, the same newspaper stated that instead of one month, the structure of the hall was ready in twelve days.²⁴ At that time, the sports hall represented a significant asset for the ruling party, and, in time, it also proved crucial for the community, as local handball and volleyball teams began to gain success in the national rankings. The sports hall possesses architectural, artistic, and urban value due to its exceptional architectural and structural design qualities, which can be regarded as an outstanding achievement of post-war Romanian architecture.

SPORTS SPACES TODAY

In examining the architecture and urban development of this period, one cannot ignore the political aspects, mainly because they resulted from the state's command, even though the ultimate beneficiary would be the general public. The architectural language had to be ultimately approved by the state and suit its scope and propaganda.²⁵ Following the 1989 revolution and the collapse of the communist regime, the economy, property ownership, ideology, and public perception underwent significant changes. In the case of sports halls, they remained the state's property under the Ministry of Culture and Sport, but the funds to maintain such constructions were cut short, as the sport was no longer a public concern of the same proportion as it was during the socialist period. The investments in sports stopped, and these buildings, lacking proper funding, began to deteriorate slowly, even as the local sports teams continued to use them. Other sports halls had a worse fate, and they were demolished, with their sites reused.

The general perception is another problem that these sports halls are facing. Because they were built during the socialist era, a contentious period, especially in the first years after its demise, the buildings of the period were quickly deemed "communist buildings" by the public, and their political message became obsolete, and their architecture was regarded as dated, even though they are still in use to this date. Because these buildings were left unattended and, over time, their amenities became outdated by today's standards, the public began to consider this kind of architecture inappropriate and suggested that it should be demolished to make space for newer buildings that would better respond to

their needs. For example, a local newspaper reports that in 2022 the Bacău sports hall was cut off from the gas supply due to its substantial debts. Therefore, the heating and hot water system no longer worked, and the athletes had to shower with cold water.²⁶ The authorities blamed the lack of funds from the Ministry of Sports, the owner of the hall. Meanwhile, the ones who suffered were the local communities and their sports teams. This is a recurring example that would eventually lead users of the hall to desire something better and new, at the expense of the historic building.

In the case of Bacău Sports Hall and other examples, due to the lack of financial resources and adequate restoration projects based on the main architectural and structural values of the building, some other intermediate solutions were found to solve the building's problems over time. For the case presented in this chapter, its architecture and structure require maintenance work as the years pass to preserve optimum functioning conditions. Some interventions were made with disregard for the original project. The windows, for example, were covered with blue metal sheets so the light would not disturb the activities inside, an intervention that alters the general appearance of the hall but, fortunately, is not irreversible. Local authorities argue that they cannot take any action to preserve and maintain the hall, as it is not on their property but on the property of the Ministry of Sport. Besides solving the property issue, another solution would be to include buildings with unique characteristics that present significant architectural, artistic, and urban value in the list of historical monuments. By doing so, these buildings would be protected by law and receive special treatment.

In Romania and other European countries, historical monuments are protected by law, and any changes should be authorised by a special committee from the Ministry of Culture based on a project designed and signed by a specialised architect. The Romanian Law²⁷ states that in order to include any building in the list of historical monuments four criteria should be met translated from the intrinsic value of the buildings: the time criteria – a value that until recently could not be applied for post-war buildings such as architecture for sports from the 1960s and 1970s as they were considered “too recent”; the architecture, artistic, and urban value criteria; the uniqueness criteria; and the symbolic memorial value criteria, which refer to the importance of the building for the local community or at a national level. The Bacău Sports Hall, like most Romanian sports halls and other socialist architecture, would only meet a maximum of three criteria.

Over the last twenty years, despite numerous studies conducted in the academic field on socialist architecture, only a few buildings have been designated as historical monuments. A cultural project from the 2010s had the main scope to promote and later include ten architectural projects built in the post-war period that were slowly but surely affected by real-estate pressure and could suffer profound and irreversible transformation.²⁸ The candidates included the State Circus Hall, theatres, administrative buildings, and restaurants. Unfortunately, not all of them made it to the list for various reasons. The status of a historic monument typically means special protection for the building, which also extends to its surroundings. Any project within a 100m radius of the historical monument should also receive special treatment, and the final project must be approved by the Ministry of Culture. This creates tensions, especially in more prominent ensembles of buildings, as the owners do not have the same privileges.

CONCLUSION

A large part of Romanian buildings were built during the socialist era. Each city has buildings from that period that could be considered architectural heritage, which tell a story of how architects managed to escape uniformity and economic constraints. The main problem is probably the general public's lack of understanding of this kind of architecture, as it is still too early to analyse it from an objective point of view properly.

Buildings for sports that exist in today's Romania were primarily built during the socialist period, as the idea of mass sports and physical culture for everyone was part of the state ideology. Sports have permeated every corner of society, from workers to public education, and everyone was supposed to practise some kind of sport. This general movement required a built environment and spaces for sports, tailored to its specific dimensions. The infrastructure for sports was subject to the same rules and regulations as the rest of the built environment, in terms of both economic and architectural aspects. Typified projects were designed to properly create spaces for sports, based on scientific studies regarding the human body and the functional requirements of such spaces. Even so, some of these buildings had more special treatment, and architects, together with structural engineers, were able to escape the rules of the regime and create architecture that was in line with their own vision. This is the case for the Bacău Sports Hall, where the link between structure and

architecture creates the architectural image and the overall aesthetic of the building. Without proper and decisive actions from the local authorities and the architects, this building would no longer exist. Thus, a part of recent history would disappear.

Including this type of building in the monuments list with implied protection is prevented by failing to meet at least the time criteria, with the symbolic memorial value criteria being questionable, as there is no significant public initiative to demonstrate particular interest in preserving and integrating these buildings. As the time criteria are an active discussion among specialists, the academic field could influence public perception and implications. The rising public interest in the sports movement is another evolution that will bring some social traction to the subject.

NOTES

- ¹ Michael Hau, "Sports in the Human Economy: 'Leibesübungen,' Medicine, Psychology, and Performance Enhancement during the Weimar Republic," *Central European History* 41 (2008), 383.
- ² Pompiliu-Nicolae Constantin, "Sport and Physical Education in Communist Factories: From the Soviet Union to Romania," *Romanian Journal of History and International Studies* 2 (2015), 219.
- ³ Pompiliu-Nicolae Constantin, "Sportul în regimul comunist din România," in *Panorama Comunismului în România*, ed. Liliana Corobca (Polirom, 2020), 911–12.
- ⁴ Lucia Coles, "Povestea celor 9 minute," *Sportul Popular* 14 February 1961.
- ⁵ Constantin, "Sportul în regimul comunist," 920.
- ⁶ Constantin, "Sportul în regimul comunist," 913.
- ⁷ Ioan Popa, "Actualitate și tendințe în proiectarea construcțiilor destinate activității sportive," *Arhitectura RPR* 1–2 (January 1978), 12.
- ⁸ *Hotărârea Biroului Politic al CC al P.M.R. asupra problemei stimulării și dezvoltării continue a culturii fizice și a sportului* (Editura Partidului Muncitoresc Român, 1949), 3.
- ⁹ Ana Maria Zahariade, *Arhitectura în proiectul comunist. România 1944–1989* (Simetria, 2011), 63.
- ¹⁰ For example, the National Stadium with its Park for Culture and Sport from Bucharest, Romania was built for the 1953 International Youth Festival.
- ¹¹ Zahariade, *Arhitectura în proiectul*, 65.
- ¹² In the first chapter of his book, Worpole studies the problematic of public healthcare and spaces of the cities in the nineteenth century and the impact that concepts such as the Garden city model had on them. Ken Worpole. *Here Comes the Sun: Architecture and Public Space in Twentieth-Century European Culture* (Reaction Books, 2000), 25–31.
- ¹³ Irina Tulbure. *Arhitectură și Urbanism în România anilor 1944–1960: constrângere și experiment* (Simetria, 2016), 219.
- ¹⁴ Tulbure, *Arhitectură și Urbanism*, 221.
- ¹⁵ Rică Marcus, *Parcuri și Grădini în România* (Editura Tehnică, 1958), 34–50.
- ¹⁶ The brochure contains examples of typified projects for architects to use: *Functional and Structural Study of Sports Building Made after Typified Projects with Proposals of Improvements of the Projects. Polyvalent Sports Halls with More than 1000 Places for Urban Centers and Sports Halls for Schools* (Institutul de Proiectare pentru Construcții Tipizate, 1979). In Romanian – *Studiu funcțional și constructiv asupra construcțiilor sportive realizate după proiecte tip în vigoare cu propuneri de îmbunătățire a proiectelor. Sali de educație fizică și sport școlare, sali polivalente cu capacități de 1000 locuri pentru centre urbane.*

- ¹⁷ “Săli de sport gemene,” *Arhitectura RPR* 3–4 (May 1972), 115.
- ¹⁸ In the socialist period, each county had a designated design institute where the architects, engineers, and other specialists were employed. Individual practice was abolished at the beginning of the communist regime, together with the private property. Under these conditions, the main investor was the state, and everything was thoroughly controlled. More about this subject can be found in the volume of Ana Maria Zahariade, *Arhitectura în proiectul comunist. România 1944-1989* (Simetria, 2011).
- ¹⁹ An article from 1968 featured a round table with important actors of the local authorities, and the conclusions were that in order to continue and even increase the sports activities of the region new sport infrastructure was needed. They also announced the new project for the “23 August” Sport Complex, located near the existing stadium of the city. In “Baze sportive – factor determinant în organizarea și buna desfășurare a activităților sportive de masa și de performanță,” *Steagul Rosu*, 5 April 1968, 3.
- ²⁰ The date of 23 August was the National Day of Romania during the socialist period, and it symbolised the moment from World War II when Romania turned against Germany and allied with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).
- ²¹ Interview made by the photoreporter Ioan Bișcă for the local newspaper *The Awakening (Deșteptarea)*, Ioan Bișcă, “Paraboloid hiperbolic sau bazinul de inot,” *Deșteptarea*, 9 May 2018, <https://www.desteptarea.ro/paraboloidul-hiperbolic-sau-bazinul-de-inot/>.
- ²² Unfortunately, I have not found the original drawings for this sports hall until now. The structural engineer, Gheroghe Jitaru, mentioned these dimensions in an article from the local propaganda newspaper *The Red Flag* in D. Mitulescu, “Premiera Santierului Sala Sporturilor,” *Steagul Rosu*, 6 June 1971, 1.
- ²³ Mitulescu, “Premiera Santierului Sala Sporturilor,” 1.
- ²⁴ “Fototeca,” *Steagul Rosu*, 1 June 1974, 5.
- ²⁵ Tulbure, *Arhitectură și Urbanism*, 200.
- ²⁶ Florin Popescu, “Sala Sporturilor din Bacău a fost debransată de la rețeaua de gaz, din cauza datoriilor. Sportivii, nevoiți să facă dușuri reci,” *Ziarul de Bacău*, 1 September 2022, <https://ziaruldebacau.ro/sala-sporturilor-din-bacau-a-fost-debransata-de-la-reteaua-de-gaz-din-cauza-datoriilor-sportivii-nevoiti-sa-faca-dusuri-rci/>.
- ²⁷ Romanian Parliament, Law no. 422/2001 regarding the protection of historical monuments, Monitorul Oficial, nr. 938 of 20 November 2006, <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/29761>
- ²⁸ The cultural project is entitled 5+5 *Buildings for the National Cultural Heritage 1950-1977*, <https://www.inforom-cultural.ro/5+5/index.php>

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Chapter 5

Remaking Nature

Environmental and Urban Industrial Development during and after State Socialism, the Case of Industrial Navoi and Aktau (formerly Shevchenko) in the 1960s–2020s

Nadezda Gobova

INTRODUCTION

In the twentieth century, countries around the globe began extensively exploring their remote and previously uninhabited territories in search of underground minerals and fossil fuels, establishing extraction and processing sites away from the main historical centres of habitation. However, these projects rarely included plans to create extensive, permanent residential and social infrastructure for the personnel of these new enterprises. In contrast, the Soviet socialist state pursued broad industrial and urban expansion, as well as the establishment of large cities near industrial sites in remote and often previously uninhabited regions of the country.

Construction in the Arctic Circle, plagued by extremely low temperatures for most of the year, or in the southern deserts, with torrid heat and scarce living resources, posed many challenges but did not alter the planned Soviet programme of industrialisation and urbanisation. Various economic and ideological narratives served as reasoning for such complex developments in remote regions. Among them was the need to create protected and secluded infrastructure to serve the secret nuclear technology sites during the Cold War and its precursor, the project of socialist resettlement in the early socialist period. One of the major determinants during these developments was the economic growth strategy, which relied on extensive industrialisation and continuous exploration and extraction of natural resources. Another had ideological reasoning and assumed a rapid expansion of the Soviet socialist infrastructure and associated ideology and culture across immense and scarcely populated territories of

the Soviet Union. Additionally, the new economic policy assumed that the workers of the Soviet industries and their families should permanently live in close proximity to their places of work, the industrial enterprises, rather than commute long distances.¹

Under the conditions of the free market economy, such infrastructural investments would probably have no validity and would lack the necessary qualifying personnel willing to permanently relocate and live in the deep Siberian forests, deserts, or the Arctic Circle. However, the Soviet socialist state planning system, in pursuing its goal of colonisation of remote territories, fully subsidised the distributed industrial and urban projects and built extensive transportation networks to connect them. These infrastructural developments were guided not just by the economic pursuits for profit but also by the ideological vision of the future of the Soviet socialist state as equally developed throughout its many geographical areas. During the earlier Soviet period, primarily enforced mechanisms were employed to initiate population resettlement and provide a workforce for remote industrial regions. Yet, during the post-Stalinist period, state authorities used the promise of creating high-quality urban infrastructure and advanced social services to attract young, educated workers and highly qualified specialists to relocate to remote cities permanently.

Such continuous urban expansion beyond the comfortable living geographical zones was facilitated by the work of various Soviet scientific institutions, which were tasked with developing new technologies to improve the living conditions of residents in remote regions. The complex system of field studies explored ways to improve the microclimate in residential areas. These included studies of soils to make them suitable for cultivation and construction purposes, development of technologies providing the necessary amount of water for industrial and residential use, studies of heat regulations in the cities, and studies of species of urban vegetation capable of surviving and thriving in extreme climate conditions.² Additionally, various design and planning institutions collaborated with climatologists and ecologists to explore new methods of organising the urban environment and innovative architectural forms that could mitigate severe climate conditions in cities. The continuous Soviet programme of industrialisation and urbanisation of remote regions was accompanied by a particular interest in and research of the natural environment. The programme was also characterised by complex and problematic relationships between socialist economic development and

urban growth, which were dependent on the extraction and industrial processing sites and the natural world.

The dramatic increase in the Soviet infrastructural development during the 1960s to 1980s and its damaging effect on both the natural environment and the living built environment triggered an unprecedented social backlash and resulted in the organisation of a large social and environmental movement in the Soviet Union.³ The deterioration of living conditions in the cities and the fear of a technogenic catastrophe brought the ecological agenda closer to the forefront of many disciplines, including architectural and planning discourse.⁴ This change in professional rhetoric paralleled the shift in Soviet socialist design and planning tactics, moving away from the previous preoccupation with the beautification of cities during the Stalinist period and towards a more rational and environmentally oriented vision. It also instigated research seeking to create a synergy between the natural environment and human infrastructural development.⁵

The focus on creating a “healthier built environment for a socialist society” and its new theoretical foundations in the 1960s to 1980s can be linked to a long history and tradition of Russian and early Soviet explorations of natural systems, as well as questions of positioning human anthropocentric activities within them. These early pioneering investigations were led by scientists such as Vasily Dokuchaev, Mikhail Budiko, and Vladimir Vernadsky and were concerned with both the scientific and philosophical spheres.⁶ Later, these original ideas were largely revived, revised, and built upon to create a platform for a new complex system of thinking about the organisation and management of the socialist urban environment.⁷

The new studies were initiated in collaboration with scientists and engineers to propose methodologies and practical solutions to mitigate the harmful impact of existing industrial infrastructure on the built and natural environments.⁸ While many methodological proposals and design ideas remained within the sphere of theoretical investigations, several schemes were endorsed by authorities and crystallised into a unique body of state-building and planning regulations, as well as environmental legislation. Among them were zoning regulations requiring the creation of protection zones for the natural environment and the provision of regulated distances between built infrastructure, conservation regulations, requirements on the provision of quantities of green spaces in cities, methods of environmental research assessment, studies of aeration of industrial and residential areas, and many more essential and subsidiary planning and design rules.⁹

This chapter discusses two examples of such unique and largely problematic relationships between socialist industrialisation and urbanisation processes and the natural environment, addressing the creation of two Central Asian cities in the late Soviet period, Aktau and Navoi. The chapter draws attention to the socialist urban industrial heritage not only through the case studies of the physical infrastructure but also through the analysis of underlying intentions and theories of constructed and natural worlds developed throughout the socialist experience of city planning in the southern regions, and how they regarded the nature, climate, and ecology.

RECONFIGURING NATURE: SOCIALIST FOUNDATION OF AKTAU AND NAVOI

In 1975, the International Union of Architects awarded the Patrick Abercrombie Prize for urban planning and design to two Soviet architects and planners, Iosif Orlov and Nikolai Simonov. The jury recognised their work for the “considerable effort of creating complete urban complexes in the hostile natural conditions”¹⁰ when creating two cities in Central Asia: Navoi and Aktau (formerly Shevchenko), situated on scarcely populated and deserted lands. The jury particularly praised the complex thinking and holistic approach in the planning of new cities and the creation of encapsulated urban environments with more tolerable conditions for human living through the development and use of unique technologies.¹¹

Navoi was established in 1958 on previously uninhabited lands in the southwestern part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (now Uzbekistan), in the Malik steppe and the valley of the Zarafshan River. It was planned as a settlement for workers of the Mining and Metallurgical Complex, specialising in the extraction of uranium and gold. Aktau was located on the Mangyshlak Peninsula in the western part of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (now Kazakhstan) on the border of the Caspian Sea, and also served as a settlement of the uranium mining industry. Both Navoi and Aktau emerged as a result of the discovery of large uranium deposits, which were a crucial resource in the development of the Soviet nuclear programme. In the later period, large oil and gas deposits were also found on the Mangyshlak Peninsula, where Aktau served as a major administrative centre.

Initially, Navoi was designed by the Gorstroiproekt Institute in Moscow. The first plan proposed residential districts formed by one- and two-storey individual houses, assuming each family would have individually aired

courtyards and patios with pergolas. Such traditional types of low-rise dwellings are common in southern countries with hot climates, where residents spend most of the day outside, sheltered from direct sunlight, and cook their food outdoors on an open fire. However, such an extensive horizontal scheme for the low-rise city was rejected as not economically viable, as it would require large reserves of land and significant investments in building a lengthy network of engineering services to provide electricity, water, and gas to individual homes. Additionally, this traditional scheme did not correspond with the state course of development and “implementing the progressive ideas of Soviet urban planning [...] and the creation of a fundamentally new structure of the city,”¹² which would represent an innovative and unique vision and achievements in the communist USSR.

In 1960, the design of the city was delegated to the architectural studio of the Leningrad Research and Design Institute of Energy Technologies, which proposed a new plan. The Institute specialised in the development of many projects for the industrial and related residential complexes within the frame of the Soviet atomic programme and designed such cities as Seversk (former Tomsk-7, the secret name during the Soviet period), Zheleznogorsk (former Krasnoyarsk-26 – also Soviet secret name), Zelenogorsk, Obninsk, Dubna, and Akademgorodok in Novosibirsk.¹³ The planning project for Navoi was created by a team of authors, including architects V. Ivanov and I. Orlov, engineer G. Smorodin, and builder A. Korotkov.

Navoi was situated on the border of irrigated lands and had a connection with the industrial zone and existing transportation routes. Initially, its territory stretched eight kilometres from south to north and occupied a width of 1.5 kilometres, assuming the future linear growth of the city to accommodate the population of 300,000 residents.¹⁴ The master plan envisaged a compact city planning structure, a rational system of engineering services, and the implementation of cost-effective and fast construction methods. The planners proposed a rectangular grid of streets, with nearly 50 per cent of the land reserved for public green areas, a complex system of watering and landscaping the territory, and large open spaces for streets and public squares. The urban area of Navoi was functionally divided into industrial, communal, residential, and recreational zones. The two-kilometre protection zones, marked by three rows of green landscaping, separated the residential areas from the industrial enterprises.

The planners utilised the universal scheme of the *mikrorayon* as the primary urban planning unit. The *mikrorayon* was developed in the Soviet Union as an optimal and rational system of mass housing construction, featuring the free positioning of residential blocks and the strategic placement of various social services and cultural programmes. It was implemented across all geographical regions and climate zones in the country. When planning for the southern regions, the architects utilised available methods and resources to modify the typical residential blocks and define their positioning, thereby improving the internal microclimate of apartments and external residential courtyards.

Thus, in Navoi, in *mikrorayons* 1, 2, 3, and 4, the spaces between residential blocks of flats and essential service infrastructure, such as shops, kindergartens, and schools, were reduced to minimise walking distances in the hot climate conditions. The best orientation of housing blocks at Navoi's latitude was calculated as southern and eastern for the three- and four-room apartments and southeast for the one-room apartments. The architects proposed new types of residential blocs (101-1 BG) with external galleries and double-sided orientation of apartments, allowing for cross-ventilation and sun insolation of the living rooms.¹⁵ Various small architectural forms, such as canopies, benches, and sculptures, were created to provide shelter from the sun in all corners of the city.

In Navoi, a particular emphasis was placed on the organisation of large areas of urban vegetation and various types of green landscaping. A network of green alleys, streets, and shaded passages provided protection to residents from the summer heat. The engineers created an extensive irrigation network of distributed open pools and fountains to water vulnerable trees and grasses. The decorative water and humidification system of the *mikrorayon* 4 consisted of twenty-six pools connected by the system of open reinforced concrete *aryks*, hidden water channels traditionally used in Uzbekistan for irrigation purposes, fountains, sculptural compositions, and retaining and decorative walls. (Fig. 5.1) A large open public swimming pool was constructed in the centre of the city, and an artificial lake with a total area of 22 hectares was created in the city park.¹⁶ Many natural elements of Navoi appeared as a result of technological design and were integrated into the overall planning of the city to alter its horrid climatic conditions and create mediated microclimate zones within the residential districts.

Almost all buildings in Navoi, as well as a number of industrial facilities, were built on weak sandy and clay soils, which can easily lose their



Figure 5.1: The system of fountains and aryks in Residential Mikrorayon 4 in Navoi, 1977
(Photo: I.I. Denisenko, Pastvu.com)

structural stability once they come into contact with water. This can occur due to the abundant watering of urban vegetation or the malfunction of the water supply and sewerage system, which can cause significant and uneven subsidence of the soil. To resolve this problem, scientists and specialists from the Department of Foundations of the Moscow Engineering and Construction Institute proposed an electro-osmosis method of soil stabilisation, which used the passing of electrical current through the soil in order to change its properties.¹⁷

Such treatment and modification of the soil to make it suitable for industrial development and the construction of a city would require substantial economic investment. However, the discovery of unstable soil, which was inappropriate for construction, did not alter the initial plans of the Soviet authorities and planners; instead, it prompted them to seek technological solutions. In the case of the Soviet socialist planned economy, financial and labour resources were often allocated based on the rigid top-down planning system, ideological determinations and commands from higher echelon authorities. In challenging situations, nature was perceived as an object of alteration, exploitation, and production.

CONTESTING NATURE: SOCIALIST CONSTRUCTION OF AKTAU AND ITS INDUSTRIAL ENTERPRISES

In parallel with the design and planning of Navoi in Uzbekistan, the Leningrad Research and Design Institute of Energy Technologies was developing another large project for the new city of Aktau. Aktau was established in 1963 on the Mangyshlak Peninsula of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (now Kazakhstan), on the border of the Caspian Sea. The city initially served as a settlement for workers of the Caspian Mining and Metallurgical Complex (PGMK), which specialised in the extraction of uranium ore, its processing, and its enrichment.

The Soviet planners, architects, and engineers faced the challenging task of creating industrial infrastructure and a modern city on remote, sparsely populated, and previously deserted land that lacked freshwater deposits. Aktau's climate also posed a big challenge. It was sharply continental and dry, characterised by a high wind regime, frequent sandstorms, and significant fluctuations in air temperatures throughout the year, from frigid winters, down to minus 30 degrees Celsius, to sweltering summers, up to plus 45 degrees Celsius.

During the first years of development, all resources, including water, food, and fertile soil, were delivered to Aktau by air or sea from different regions. Despite all the difficulties and requirements for significant investments, the Soviet authorities had an ambitious plan to transform the “deserted land into the green oasis” by using the most recent innovative nuclear technologies capable of providing water and energy to the city and industries.¹⁸ To achieve this goal, the world's first industrial-scale fuel-reproducing fast breeder reactor (FBR) and the largest nuclear-powered water desalination plant were designed and built by Soviet engineers. The desalination plant received water from the Caspian Sea and provided fresh water for the mining industry and the city. Historian Stefan Guth, whose research focuses on the history of nuclear technologies, described Aktau as “the most comprehensive project of atomic-powered nature transformation to have been realised in the Soviet Union.”¹⁹

Aktau was situated as a linear settlement along the border of the Caspian Sea and the desert. The infrastructure of the city was offset from the sea cliffs, allowing plenty of space along the coast for public and recreational use. The location of the city along the coast determined its linear planning structure. It had three main transportation arteries: the coastal road and central prospect, which connected the main residential

areas and were intended for public transport and pedestrian use, and the secondary road, which was planned to separate the residential areas from land reserved for servicing infrastructure, where it was screened by a protective green zone. Protective gaps separated industrial and residential zones, and areas with a better microclimate along the sea were allocated for residential districts. A number of perpendicular boulevards connected the city line with the coastal line.

Like Navoi, Aktau experienced the linear and progressive development of residential districts, accompanied by the simultaneous construction of social infrastructure, including kindergartens, schools, shops, and polyclinics. The *mikrorayons* were formed by various types of specially developed residential blocks, including five-storey large prefabricated panel housing and seven-storey buildings of concrete block construction with a gallery system of open ventilated corridors, cross-ventilated flats and decorative screens.²⁰ The spaces between the apartment blocks were lined with green vegetation to protect the residents from the sandy winds and sweltering heat. As in many closed cities that contained or served the nearest nuclear technology sites during the Soviet period, the *mikrorayons* and streets in Aktau were not marked on general maps and remained untitled for security reasons. Instead, the city infrastructure was assigned digital numbers, while individual residents' addresses were read as a numerical code.²¹

The orientation of houses and communal courtyards in Aktau was planned to correspond with wind direction, allowing air from the sea to enter the residential areas and protect them from the dry, sandy gusts of the desert. The most considerable and internationally prized achievement was the transformation of the deserted lands of Aktau into the "green oases" by planting experimentally chosen types of trees and organising artificial ponds and fountains in the public areas. The city was infused with social and cultural infrastructure, which was easy to reach within walking distance.²²

In 1970, the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR established the Mangyshlak Experimental Botanical Garden in the centre of Aktau. It occupied an area of 39 hectares and was considered one of its kind in the southern region of the Soviet Union. The scientists and workers of the botanical garden conducted experiments and research on plant introduction and acclimatisation in the arid conditions of the Kazakhstan Caspian region.²³ Its function was also to develop and preserve a special collection of plants capable of surviving in the extreme natural conditions of the Western

Kazakhstan desert. The architects and planners of Aktau emphasised the new principle of organisation of the urban environment, with a focus on the synthesis of landscape, urban vegetation, and volumetric design:

The relative share of urban planning architecture, landscaping and volumetric architecture have changed. They began to be considered in interconnection, in their dependence on each other, and urban planning, as a fundamental activity, begins to focus primarily on the system of landscape and *blagoustroistvo*, and creation of architecture of volumes depend on them.²⁴

Navoi and Aktau were designed and built simultaneously by the same team of planners and architects, and often were represented together in the Soviet professional press. Various Soviet architectural publications and documentary films²⁵ portrayed the rationally planned and calculated urban environment of the two cities, which embodied the latest innovative planning and design ideas. Photographs in Soviet journals often presented highly organised architectural environments and carefully orchestrated urban scenarios.²⁶ Documentation and interviews with planners highlighted the measured layouts of streets and considered designs of housing and residential courtyards.

Such sanitised images of the residential spaces of Navoi and Aktau created the impression of infrastructural safety, order, and calculated equilibrium between nature and the city. Perhaps they also had an extended effect on the viewer, projecting the infrastructural ideal further onto the concealed industries associated with these cities. However, situated just a few kilometres from the residential settlements and hidden from public sight, the extraction and production sites could reveal a far less organised infrastructure. Secretly developed during the Cold War period of technological race, they came to the attention of the international community some decades later as sites of colossal environmental damage.

Aktau and its extraction and processing industries became associated with the large deposits of radioactive uranium in the open pits near Koshkar-Ata Lake, located close to the Caspian Sea. By 1965, the open pits contained more than 400 million tons of toxic and radioactive waste.²⁷ The expansion of industries and agricultural activities around Navoi inevitably required the continuous extraction of water from the nearest Zarafshan River, which resulted in a diminishing of its length. This had an adverse effect on the water supply to Navoi and reduced the amount of water in the Amu Darya River, an essential tributary to the disappearing Aral Sea.²⁸

INHERITING SOCIALIST URBAN AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS

Both Aktau and Navoi were created as comprehensively planned and rationally organised cities with experimentally designed and calculated ecologies. Initial planning revealed that such fragile anthropogenic urban landscapes would not survive and thrive without continuous and systematic management and maintenance. When planning and building such expanded and largely artificial urban settlements in regions with severe climates and restricted living resources, it was presumed that the socialist state would always be able to provide the necessary means to sustain them.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the residents of Aktau and Navoi faced significant changes. The new governments and economies could no longer provide sufficient and equally distributed resources to maintain existing urban infrastructure. The market economy dictated its own rules and created new focuses on investment and development regardless of the established strict order of the socialist period. Existing residential districts became depreciated and neglected, while many rigidly designed and purpose-built public buildings proved to be not so easily convertible to accommodate the needs of private businesses and new functions. New, often unauthorised, infrastructure rapidly appeared on vacant land, leading to a series of spatial, social, and environmental clashes in these cities.

In the post-socialist period, Navoi and Aktau underwent significant social and economic transformations. They remained closely associated with original and new expanding industrial activities in their respective regions and followed different political and economic courses of their countries, which inevitably shifted their statuses and strategies for future development. Kazakhstan has become one of the largest suppliers of uranium, accounting for approximately 20 per cent of the world's total production. The nuclear reactor in Aktau has been shut down, as its decommissioning has become a complex and prolonged process, monitored and subsidised internationally. The reasons were related to the absence of previous experience in dismantling reactors of this type and size, and the finding that the reactor was designed and built without envisaged decommissioning. The removal of its hazardous waste and its complete conservation will take at least fifty years and is a multi-step process.²⁹

The main change in these cities was economic, connected to the shift in sources of funding and management methods. Initially, the Soviet state industrial agencies initiated, subsidised, and supervised the development

of Aktau and Navoi. Industrial construction paralleled long-term residential planning. The production capacity of state enterprises defined the planned size of the population and the amount of funding allocated for urban development and maintenance. The industries as places of work and their related settlements had strong economic, social, and ideological links.³⁰ When the Soviet Union was dissolved, central industrial agencies in Moscow withdrew their financial and technological responsibilities for the infrastructure they had built, leaving new state authorities of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to take over the industries and related cities. The new governments came to discover the complex specifics and hidden problems of the inherited industrial and residential infrastructure, as well as the highly problematic state of the ecology.

Today, despite the increased extraction and production activities in these regions and the substantial wealth gained by the state and privately owned enterprises, they no longer bear direct responsibility for sustaining Aktau and Navoi and have no obligation to contribute to the improvement of the living conditions of their personnel in these cities. They are also not automatically obligated to allocate funding and compensation for the negative impact they make on the nearest settlements. Therefore, the cities are left alone to confront both the highly problematic environmental legacies of the socialist past and the negative ecological impact of currently operating enterprises.

Initially, Aktau and Navoi were deliberately situated several kilometres away from related industrial and extraction sites, separated by special protection zones, to minimise their negative impact on residential districts. Today, the work of independent enterprises is no longer aligned with the urban development strategies of these cities, leading to hazardous spatial and environmental conflicts. Thus, Aktau continues its progressive growth in a linear direction along the coast towards the highly problematic site of Koshkar-ata Lake, the open storage of radioactive tailings and toxic waste.³¹ The residents of the new residential districts built in the northern part of the city consistently complain about the toxic smell of chemicals emanating from the nearest industrial sites located to the north of the city. Controversially, in the last decade, Aktau has seen a lot of attention from politicians and developers who proposed to build a new “Kazakhstan’s Dubai” in this location, advertising and attracting investors for the construction of luxury resorts on the coast of the Caspian Sea.³²

Meanwhile, the socialist infrastructure of Aktau, prized by the Soviet and foreign architectural community in the past and still largely

appreciated by residents and those who left the city after the dissolution of the Soviet Union,³³ remains in a dilapidated state, having lost much of its original structure and functions. The city's seafront – once a large public space reserved for recreational purposes for all residents – has been divided, privatised, gated, and filled with new residential and commercial functions for the privileged few. The new booming construction of residential high-rises in this area follows the principle of perimeter development of an urban block with enclosed private internal courtyards and no public recreational spaces. The development of new territories is largely sporadic and lacking a coherent planning strategy and vision.

Navoi has seen comparatively less commercial intervention into its socialist period urban fabric, and most of its Soviet infrastructure still preserves its original uniformity, landscaping, and everyday living scenarios; however, much of it is in a dilapidated state and requires significant repairs and upgrading.³⁴ The new social and commercial functions appeared in the converted ground levels of socialist apartment blocks and new pavilions built along public pathways in *mikrorayons*. In Navoi, the newly inserted infrastructure exhibits greater conformity with the already established urban patterns, scale, and materiality, compared to Aktau, which allowed for the preservation of the character of the socialist part of the city. The system of *aryks*, organised to provide the water for urban irrigation and humidification, is largely in a dilapidated state and requires significant repair and maintenance. Much of the existing urban vegetation of the socialist period districts of Navoi remains in a comparatively good state (Fig. 5.2). However, it also continues to shrink in size and lose its original quality due to the lack of investment and maintenance. The city continues to grow, and some of the new residential districts, built with residential blocks, exhibit a certain visible continuity with the socialist period *mikrorayons* in terms of scale and open, connected internal courtyards. At the same time, many peripheral areas were developed with densely tessellated private housing, providing minimal provision for public recreation zones and services.

In recent decades, the territories of socialist Aktau and Navoi were significantly expanded, mainly via the extensive construction of individual low-rise housing. This urban sprawl contradicts the initial socialist plans for urban development, which aimed for a holistic vision and rationality to sustain a higher quality of life in these cities. Currently, local authorities rely less on the rigid planning and zoning system of the past and tend to embrace new flexible approaches driven by commercial interests and



Figure 5.2: Soviet residential *mikrorayon* in Navoi in 2023
 (Photo: Michail Drabkin, me-frai.livejournal.com/340936.html)

developers' initiatives. Extended areas of new peripheral settlements are characterised by high density, an absence of vital supporting social infrastructure, and a lack of public parks and green vegetation. The central microdistricts of the socialist period contain the largest amount of green public spaces compared to newly developed districts.

The residents of the new sprawling residential districts often had to rely on private transportation to reach shops, schools, and kindergartens, which put an additional environmental strain on already polluted cities. Many residents living in expanding suburban fringes of these cities have to walk long distances to reach the nearest public transport stops, which can be particularly challenging in the arid climate. Additionally, many residents of Aktau and Navoi have a limited water supply and complain about the low quality of the drinking water. Specifically, in Aktau, where the water is treated through the complex desalination process before it can be used for residential and industrial purposes, the authorities tend to limit its supply to some residential districts and prioritise the supply for new developments such as hotels and premium-class residential high-rises.³⁵

The withdrawal of the once-integrated and essential urban components of these cities – large green zones and water landscaping, which created

a more tolerable microclimate for residents – altered the ecology of the cities and revealed new, striking environmental and social inequalities among the population of these cities. While some residents can enjoy the green vegetation in their private gardens, a view of the sea line, and smart climate control systems in their air-conditioned houses and cars, others live on deserted and industrially contaminated lands in harsh climates with limited access to water, vegetation, and public transportation.

Despite the current extensive urban development and growth of both cities, there are minimal intentions for the continuation and creation of spatial and functional links between the old socialist planning schemes and recent developments. The new urban patterns and commercial functions, driven by the market economy, are rapidly emerging and occupying various vacant lands in cities, including those in close proximity to polluted and contaminated industrial zones. This complicates the existing urban and ecological conditions in the discussed cities. At the same time, the problems associated with inherited old socialist city infrastructure and the ecological legacies of past industrial activities largely remain unaddressed as complex and costly matters that require significant investment.

CONCLUSION

While in all political systems and economies the building process has always been (and remains) an anthropocentric activity, the Soviet socialist state emphasised, in particular, the dominating position of a socialist builder above the natural world. Soviet architects, urban planners, and engineers played a significant role in shaping the narratives of the state ideology, which portrayed nature as an obstacle to socialist economic and technological progress. Through their expertise and ideologically charged planning and design practices, various forms and functions of material infrastructure were created to transform and utilise the natural environment and subdue its energy and resources for the advancement of a Soviet socialist state.

The legacy of the planning and construction of Navoi and Aktau, along with their related industries, demonstrates the controversial treatment of the natural environment during the late Soviet socialist period. On the one hand, large-scale industrial extraction and processing of natural resources were often conducted in careless, wasteful, and dangerous manners,

giving little consideration to future environmental consequences. On the other hand, the planning and design process of the cities of Aktau and Navoi can be characterised by a comprehensive measurement and complex consideration of existing environmental and climate factors, presenting an example of the development of unique urban planning models and policies aimed at improving the standards of everyday life in these regions.

Enormous efforts were made to develop and sustain the growth of particular species of plants, provide water for living and industrial purposes, and transform soil to become an appropriate medium for the construction and planting of urban vegetation. The planners and authorities assumed that the creation of a rigid system of urban living with strictly controlled social patterns of residential and public infrastructure would guarantee a higher level of social and environmental equality for all the residents. However, this was not fully achieved in practice due to the rushed development and the lack of allocated resources. At the same time, the planning of the cities was characterised by infrastructural openness and functional clarity, with minimal urban divisions and physical boundaries compared to the current condition.

During the time of the socialist, centrally planned economy, many experimental urban ideas were realised through extensive state investment programs, whereas in the market economy, they proved to be unviable. Currently, under the condition of limited centralised management and reduced state investment for maintenance and preservation, the socialist period infrastructure in Navoi and Aktau has become obsolete, derelict, and unsustainable. Additionally, the damaging consequences of the Soviet industrial activities largely overshadowed the experiments and achievements in environmental city planning and construction.

Such a criticised and largely rejected Soviet urban planning experience may require a new degree of assessment, especially in comparison with the current market-driven schemes of city development and rapid, uncontrolled urban sprawl. The question can be raised of whether today's city planning and management practices could revisit past design approaches and planning methodologies applied to industrial cities with severe climates and limited living resources, and whether some of the valuable urban policies, such as zoning, environmental design, systematic monitoring and maintenance, could be acknowledged and revived. While heritage experts tend to draw more attention to disappearing buildings of the socialist period, highlighting their unique functions and architectural

features, it is much more challenging to identify the historical significance of larger urban systems and place historical markers and designations onto the existing socialist urban landscapes and ecologies. If such rehabilitative revisions could be accomplished by the planners and authorities in Aktau and Navoi, and the initial historical socialist urban layer of these cities could be granted a higher status, it could positively change the general cultural attitude, elevate the social standing of the residents, and attract new economic investments.

It is essential to recognise that Navoi and Aktau, as well as many other cities of the late socialist period, were planned and partially built as examples of complex and detailed thinking about the materiality and relationships between the urban landscape, climate, ecology, technological design, and social well-being. They represent a heritage of built infrastructure, planning policies, accumulated theory, and practical knowledge in the spheres of environmental design and city planning.

NOTES

- ¹ Gobova, Nadezda, “The History of the Socialist City of Yekaterinburg (Formerly Sverdlovsk): Planning, Construction, Social Urban Development and Architectural Design, 1920s–1980s” (PhD diss., University College London, 2020), 42–5, 93–5.
- ² For instance, see: D. Maslennikov and M. Gostinceva, “Insoliatsionnye karty – osnova regulirovaniia teplovogo rezhima gorodskoi sredy” [Insolation Maps are the Basis for Regulating the Thermal Regime of the Urban Environment] (Russian), *Arkhitektura SSSR* 6 (1973): 24–6.
- ³ N. Mirovitskaya, “The Environmental Movement in the Former Soviet Union,” in *Environment and Society in Eastern Europe*, eds. Andrew Tickle and Ian Welsh (Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 30–59.
- ⁴ The new turn to ecological agenda in urban planning and architectural design was signified in formal and informal projects and publications by Soviet architects and presented in various exhibitions, including Expo’74. See more in M. Panteleeva, “Peripheral Landscapes: Ecology, Ideology and Form in Soviet Non-official Architecture,” in *Urban Planning during Socialism: Views from the Periphery*, eds. Jasna Mariotti and Kadri Leetma (Routledge, 2024), 231, DOI: 10.4324/9781003327592.
- ⁵ Jonathan Oldfield, Julia Lajus, and Denis J. B. Shaw. “Conceptualizing and Utilizing the Natural Environment: Critical Reflections from Imperial and Soviet Russia,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 93, no. 1 (2015): 1–15, DOI: 10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.93.1.0001.
- ⁶ Jonathan D. Oldfield, *The Soviet Union and Global Environmental Change: Modifying the Biosphere and Conceptualizing Society-Nature Interaction*, Routledge Studies in the History of Russia and Eastern Europe, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2021), DOI: 10.4324/9781003158615.
- ⁷ For instance, see V. A. Kolyasnikov, *Edinstvo Gradostroitel’noy Teorii i Praktiki – put’ k Noosfere*, (Architecton, 1997).
- ⁸ See, for instance, V. N. Belousov. “Ozдорovlenie Gorodskoi Sredy – Vazhneishaia gradostroitel’naya zadacha” [“Improving the Urban Environment is the Most Important City Planning Task”], *Stroitel’stvo i Arkhitektura* 1 (1977).
- ⁹ For instance, SNiP II-K.2-62 (Russian abbreviation) *Stroitel’nye Normy i Pravila* [Building Construction Regulations] “Planning and Development of Populated Areas. Design Standards” (Gosstroii, 1962).

- ¹⁰ “L'effort considerable de la creation d'ensembles urbains complets dans des conditions naturelles hostiles” (French).
- ¹¹ The Patrick Abercrombie Prize for urban planning and design, The Results of Competition of 1975 (Prix de l'Union Internationale des Architectes 1975), Secretariat General, C/587, from International Union of Architects' Archive in Paris.
- ¹² T. Kadyrova, K. Babievsky, and F. Tursunov, *Architectura Sovetskogo Uzbekistana [Architecture of Soviet Uzbekistan]* (Izdatel'stvo literatury po stroitel'stvu, 1972), 132.
- ¹³ K. Rendel, *VNIPIET – Gody Sverhsenii* (Sankt-Petersburg, 2017), 171, http://elib.biblioatom.ru/text/vnipiet-gody-sversheniy_2007/go,2/.
- ¹⁴ Rendel, *VNIPIET – Gody Sverhsenii*, 181.
- ¹⁵ Kadyrova, Babievsky, and Tursunov, *Architectura Sovetskogo Uzbekistana [Architecture of Soviet Uzbekistan]*, 129.
- ¹⁶ Kadyrova, Babievsky, and Tursunov, *Architectura Sovetskogo Uzbekistana*, 130.
- ¹⁷ Rendel, *VNIPIET – Gody Sverhsenii*, 181.
- ¹⁸ Rendel, *VNIPIET – Gody Sverhsenii*, 184.
- ¹⁹ Stefan Guth, “The Nuclear Landscape as a Garden: An Envirotechnical History of Shevchenko/Aktau, 1959–2019,” in *Tracing the Atom: Nuclear Legacies in Russia and Central Asia*, eds. S. Bauer, and T. Penter, (Routledge, 2022), 21. DOI: 10.4324/9781003246893.
- ²⁰ A. S. Krivov and M. I. Levin, *Shevchenko. Arkhitektura Novogo Goroda [Shevchenko. Architecture of a New City]* (Izdatel'stvo Kazahstan, 1982), 91–2.
- ²¹ Yu.V. Nesterov and Petrukhin N. P., *Syr'evaya Baza Atomnoi Promyshlennosti. Sobytiya, Lyudi, Dostizheniya [The Raw Material Base of the Nuclear Industry. Events, People, Achievements]*. (AO Atompredmetzoloto, 2015). http://elib.biblioatom.ru/text/sryevaya-baza-atomnoy-promyshlenny-nosti_2015/go,212/.
- ²² Krivov and Levin, *Shevchenko*.
- ²³ Plant introduction: the introduction of (cultivated varieties) of plants into places where they did not grow before, or the introduction of wild plants into culture.
- ²⁴ Krivov and Levin, *Shevchenko*, 78.
- ²⁵ For instance, film “Gorod v Pustyne” [“City in the Desert”] (Central'naya Studiia ordena Lenina i Krasnogo Znameni, Moskva, dir. L. Kristi, 1971), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTFgOh6jSyo> (accessed 25 May 2024).
- ²⁶ “Gorod Navoi, Uzbekskaya SSR.” *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura* no.1 (1970), 70–2 and “Gorod Shevchenko, Kazakhskaya SSR.” *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura* no.1 (1970), 76–7.
- ²⁷ *Central Asia. Atlas of Natural Resources* (Asian Development Bank, 2010), 85.
- ²⁸ *Central Asia. Atlas of Natural Resources*, 81.
- ²⁹ Guth, Stefan, “The Nuclear Landscape as a Garden: An Envirotechnical History of Shevchenko/Aktau, 1959–2019,” 36–7.
- ³⁰ Rendel, *VNIPIET – Gody Sverhsenii* (Sankt-Petersburg, 2017), http://elib.biblioatom.ru/text/vnipiet-gody-sversheniy_2007/go,2/.
- ³¹ Guth, Stefan, “Legacy or Promise? Coming to Terms with the Soviet Nuclear Heritage in Aqtau, Kazakhstan,” Paper presentation at the conference “Nuclear Technology in the Context of Political Change,” Universitat Pompeu Fabre, Barcelona, 17–18 January 2019.
- ³² A. Haritonova, L. Shuldán, and A. Shtendera, “Genesis and Stages of Renovation in Architecture and Urban Planning of New Cities (Based on the Example of Aktau (Shevchenko),” *Electronic Journal of the Faculty of Civil Engineering Osijek-e-GFOS* 17 (2018): 24–38, DOI: 10.13167/2018.17.4.
- ³³ The historian Stefan Guth indicates that approximately 80,000 highly qualified workers of the nuclear industry left Aktau and returned to Russia after the fall of the USSR. Many current and former residents of Aktau exchange their nostalgic memories on the social media websites, describing their environmental and cultural experiences of the cities through texts, photographs, and videos. These materials present a valuable source of learning about and understanding of the existed organisation of everyday life and past urban ecologies in the city. See, for instance, one social media group with 20,000 members: https://www.instagram.com/shevchenko_insta/

- ³⁴ Gleb Bashlychev, “Navoi, Uzbekistan,” video, 2023. Provides visual insight into the current state of the old socialist infrastructure, accessed 21 August 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiMYsejplQig>.
- ³⁵ Often, the residents discuss the water supply problems in social media groups and individual blogs. Also, some local media regularly cover the water shortage and its unequal distribution between residential districts of the socialist period and new private and commercial developments. For instance, in “Aktau stanet Dubaem? Kak budut razvivat’ turizm in Mangistrau” [“Will Aktau become Dubai? How Tourism Will be Developed in Mangistrau”], <https://tengrinews.kz/article/aktau-stanet-donce-integrated-and-essential-urban-components-of-these-cities-large-green-zones-and-water-landscaping-which-created-a-more-tolerable-microclimate-for-residents-altered-the-ecology-of-the-cities-and-revealed-new-striking-environmental-and-social-inequalities-among-uaem-kak-budut-razvivat-turizm-v-mangistau-2535/>.

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PART II

**APPROPRIATING
STATE-SOCIALIST
URBAN HERITAGE**

Chapter 6

When Does a Space End?

Yugoslav Socialist Memorials and the EU 'Anti-Totalitarian' Reckoning

Tatjana Aleksić

INTRODUCTION

Last and First Men, the only film by the Icelandic director-composer Jóhann Jóhannsson, premiered at Berlinale 2020, two years after the director's premature death. One level of this experimental film consists of very long, black-and-white shots of large concrete memorials, commemorating victims of some of the deadliest World War II battles, civilian massacres, and concentration camps, which are located all over what used to be Yugoslavia.¹ The images are played against the background of the hauntingly sad music composed by Jóhannsson and Yair Elazar Glotman, while the clear voice of Tilda Swinton recites segments from Olaf Stapledon's hundred-year-old vision of the future annihilation of the human race. Extending for up to 4 minutes and 30 seconds, the end credits duly acknowledge a large crew that collaborated on the project, as well as many institutions in the West for their funding, assistance, and support. They also provide details of the novel's title, author, and year of publication. And wait as long as one might, save for two "Balkan team" names, one will not get a single mention of any of the monuments posing in the film, nor of their locations, purpose, or creators. In a multimedia project of this calibre and ambition, that would be the basic requirement. General confusion persisted during the Q&A session, in which the filmmaking team demonstrated a disheartening level of unawareness of either the locations or the purpose of the structures featured in their collective enterprise. Quite a few younger Berlinale attendees questioned the monuments' actuality, believing them to be part of a set constructed to accompany the musical score.²

Last and First Men is beautifully crafted, with bleak yet striking aesthetics that fit the subject of human obliteration, featuring images sometimes

montaged to directly correlate with passages from Stapledon's novel. Some scenes are several minutes long, during which the camera slowly pans and tilts over and around specific segments or sculptural details of the monuments, only rarely zooming out to capture the entire structure embedded in its surrounding natural space. What seems to be the teleology of this audio-visual exercise is the production of an alienating effect, fitting for the subject of a text lamenting the impending evanescence of the human race, while completely disregarding their actual purpose. One could argue that utilising these neglected, disavowed, and defaced structures in a film mourning a future human apocalypse may even be appropriate. Jóhannsson's impulse for their inclusion in the film seems to have been a nostalgic realisation that their own makers lost faith in their narrative power.³ However, the production crew's total indifference to the fact that they filmed on authentic sites of mass killings, with thousands of unclaimed bodies buried underneath, is emblematic of a relatively recent misappropriation of these sites of collective trauma for virtually any kind of pop culture exoticisation, or ignorant exploitation. It is a truism that monuments have always been contentious sites of memory politics, the first ones to be removed or erected on the occasion of many a political turning point. But what is to be done with memorial sites that commemorate victims of mass atrocities? Does their political time likewise expire? This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing debates on the ethics of memory preservation in the wake of political and regime changes.

SPOMENIKS

Jóhannsson's movie utilises some of the most representative Yugoslav *spomeniks*, as they are now collectively known, from a South Slavic word for monument or memorial and designed by prominent Yugoslav architects and sculptors from the 1960s and 1980s.⁴ From their origins in grassroots initiatives⁵ to the aspiration of becoming living memorials, the *spomeniks* defy platitudes about "communist" or "totalitarian" impositions on collective memory, with which these structures have been described since their recent anonymous reappearance in the global media sphere.⁶ Frequently positioned in remote natural locations, *spomeniks* do not occupy prominent urban areas, where they would be intended to "leave sovereign imprints on the daily life of citizens."⁷ Integrated into the landscape and creating sites in which the visitor is invited to interact with the natural

spaces and their constructed extensions, Yugoslav memorial complexes were used for televised commemorative events and educational trips, but were much more popular as recreational grounds for family picnics and weekend breaks.⁸ Even a superficial comparison with monumental architecture in other formerly socialist countries would be enough to testify to the overall absence of socialist realist or ideological motifs in the *spomeniks*.⁹ Quite the contrary, they were direct products of the politics of “decentralised planning,” focused on the loosening of state powers, and promoted by none other than the known theorist of *Yugoslavism*, Edvard Kardelj.¹⁰ Their abstract form is a result of both the stylistic choices of their makers and of the planning committees’ determination to promote a universal, optimistic message for the future, finding the many local monuments erected in decades immediately following World War II too preoccupied with traditional “funeral symbolism.”¹¹ Public monuments in Yugoslavia were not to be considered as sites of mourning but as symbols of stability, reconciliation, and progress.¹² And yet, the *spomeniks*’ futuristic form is the reason one review of Jóhannsson’s film finds them “unsettling,” because they look like nothing rooted in the past.¹³

However, this abstractness of form had quite a significant political message as well, and the *spomeniks*’ construction and dedication to unspecified “victims” of equally unspecified “fascists and their domestic collaborators” was not itself without controversy.¹⁴ One aspect of this was that in weakening the hold of ethnonationalist particularisms by engineering the memory of the common Yugoslav antifascist liberation struggle, crimes committed by one ethnicity against others had to be handled delicately.¹⁵ The other was that such abstraction led to the translating of civilian massacres and related counter-memory politics and practices as acts of “patriotic deaths” for the new Yugoslavia, which directly interfered with planning for some memorials.¹⁶ At the time when the last ones among them were finished, like Petrova Gora in 1989, this shared memory was already fading into oblivion among younger generations, in addition to being further manipulated by ever louder narratives of inter-ethnic trauma caused during World War II. Additionally, the communist stigma that became attached to antifascist resistance only kept feeding the perception of *spomeniks* as ideologically tainted relics. Divisive claims of ethno-religious victimhood led to extensive historical revisionisms, one dimension of which was, expectedly, the altering of both the narrative and material memoryscapes in the successor states. This ethnocentric *ressentiment* was profoundly influenced by the contemporaneous pan-European



Figure 6.1: Bujan Memorial Park by Ivan Sabolić, Niš, Serbia, 1963. A modern chapel was erected on the site in 2004, designed by Aleksandar Budjevac, appropriating the victims for the ethno-religious pantheon. (Photo: Darko Ković, 2024)

anti-communist push, unleashing a vengeful wave of *damnatio memoriae* across the post-Yugoslav political landscape.¹⁷ Nowhere else in the post-Yugoslav space was the destruction of monuments dedicated to partisan struggle so formidable as in Croatia, where roughly 3,000 antifascist monuments were demolished, usually with local communities' cooperation or silent consent.¹⁸ Darko Suvin notices a conspicuous absence of shocked reactions at this specific memoricide, which was “following the same Talibanic rage and theological hatred as in the dynamiting of the Buddhas of Afghanistan (but not incurring the same liberal disapproval).”¹⁹

In the domain of material history, the destruction of much of Yugoslav anti-fascist legacy left the symbolically emptied public space, which was filled up with religious and other examples of traditionalist monumental architecture, precisely the kind that was previously designedly replaced by modern *spomeniks*.²⁰ For the post-socialist mindset, the *spomeniks*' transnational character was as much an unwanted reminder of the recent past as was their implicit or explicit ideological background. Memorial

sites that could be reclaimed for national purposes were left alone, frequently with the addition of religious elements, as was done at the Sutjeska Battle National Park Memorial (Valley of Heroes) in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the Memorial Complex Bubanj in the Serbian city of Niš. With a bit of memory engineering, both of these were misappropriated as sites of Orthodox Christian, that is, Serbian, sacrifice, thus obscuring the multiethnic and multireligious fabric of both the partisan brigades killed in the deadliest battle of the Yugoslav liberation wars, as well as of the civilian prisoners in the Crveni Krst lager in Niš (Fig. 6.1). In the post-Yugoslav memoryscape, the monument is reinterpreted as lamentation over ethnic victims, in addition to a strong appetite for the rehabilitation of proven fascist collaborators (Fig. 6.2). In contrast to socialist monuments' depictions of courageous defiance oriented towards the future, post-socialist sentiments focused on sites of civilian massacres, expressing a "defensive semantics of ethnonationalist ideologies, turned towards the past."²¹ It is also not unheard of that creators of some of the most compelling *spomeniks* went on to author monuments to perpetrators in the Yugoslav wars.²²

POSTHUMOUS NATIONAL UNIFICATIONS

The Yugoslav heir states are not alone in this process of the forced amalgamation of unprocessed trauma of victims and perpetrators.²³ Concurrently with the wars of Yugoslav fragmentation, Europe was busy reunifying in the wake of the fall of communism, which allowed for creative liberties with its new historical narrative. Much of the 1990s was quite busy with the demolition, removal, and re-monumentalisation of European space, which is true of both its political East and the West.²⁴ It is not possible to interpret the post-Yugoslav revisionist turn in neutral theoretical terms, as Lefebvre explains alterations to the European memoryscape, claiming that the abandonment of the historical memory that monuments represent is simply the "end of the space," a process that becomes inevitable once the imperative for memorialisation no longer aligns with public needs.²⁵ There is a big difference, after all, between a statue dedicated to an individual, be it a Ramses, a Louis, or a Lenin, and a memorial to victims, or collective liberation efforts that *spomeniks* represent. Distinction should likewise be made between "reactionary" destruction of Yugoslav memorials to victims of fascism, and "progressive" acts of toppling down

monuments to colonialist and figures implicated in the transatlantic slavery, occurring during the summer of 2020 across the USA and Western Europe.²⁶ Moreover, recent erasures of the histories of antifascism directly lead to the rapprochement between liberal and fascist ideologies that most of Europe is currently experiencing.

Adjustments to the common European narrative galvanised the gradual cancellation of distinctions among the concepts of communism and Stalinism, ultimately fusing communism and fascism into indistinct variants of totalitarianism.²⁷ This is not merely a vindictive omission by the liberal-democratic political option that emerged victorious from the Cold War, but a tendentious revisionism that is bent on ignoring the fact that communists were an integral part of the antifascist alliances that won World War II.²⁸ The very *raison d'être* of new monuments dedicated to victims of “totalitarian terror” springing around Europe is presenting entire national collectives as victims of either one or the other totalitarian ideology.²⁹ In this victimisation narrative, there are no perpetrators, save some unnamed non-nationals adherent to ideologies hostile to European democracy.³⁰ War is treated as a tragedy that indistinctly affects communities of victims and perpetrators, resulting in universal defeat and suffering.³¹

Post-Yugoslav ethnicities “constantly revise [their] memories to suit [their] current identities,” and the monuments that do not fit these embellished self-narratives must be removed,³² while in their place national regimes raise monuments to national victims, with complete disregard for their political life, and even whether they died as victims or perpetrators. As an example, consider the Belgrade monument dedicated to “Victims of war and defenders of the Motherland from 1990-1999,” the monument of such an incoherent purpose that it has already been erected twice, in different forms, and by different political parties in power.³³ The only common denominator for all these victims and defenders seems to be their ethnicity, as the monument supposedly includes victims of Serbian ethnicity killed in Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina but excludes Serbian citizens of Albanian ethnicity killed in Kosovo. Should we even question whether ethnically Serbian perpetrators of war crimes were included among “defenders of the Motherland?” All this is merely speculative, given that no context exists that would explain this unloved monument’s confused aspirations.

Meanwhile, in Croatia, a new monumental project is under development, with the ambition of “reconciling Croatia,” as it will be dedicated to

“all victims of WWII and the post-war period, regardless of their religious or ideological affinities” (emphasis in the original).³⁴ What is really behind the lofty rhetoric of reconciliation is a much more mundane attempt at spiffing up the Croatian national narrative, which will not only obliterate ethnically marked victims of the Croatian fascist regime during World War II, the very fascist nature of that regime and its genocidal intention at a specific historical moment,³⁵ but could finally construe the Ustaša regime as a collective victim of communist totalitarianism. If massacres were committed by a few criminal individuals, as revisionists of the Croatian World War II fascist regime claim, the implicit genocidal state politics is no longer a valid argument.³⁶ These developments are interpreted as part of a “transition ideology” with clearly right-wing revisionist roots based in “ethno-methodologism and the superiority of Western civilisation,”³⁷ wherewith the EU “has embraced an anti-totalitarian ideology that contributes to [... the] relativisation and rehabilitation of the fascist past.”³⁸ One recent symptom of such historical confusion is that, in October 2023 there were precisely zero public events commemorating the liberation of any Serbian cities in World War II, and this silence included even the more recent Russification of this tradition, which put an undue emphasis on the role of the Red Army in the liberation of the country.³⁹

On the other hand, if we consider a lesser-known monument by Bogdan Bogdanović, the Memorial Park to the Fallen Fighters in the Liberation Wars of 1804–1945, it becomes clear that such a synthesis of historical periods was also done in Yugoslavia. Constructed in the Serbian town of Knjaževac in 1971, the Park commemorates “local victims of all the region’s liberation wars, from the First Serbian Uprising against the Ottoman occupation of 1804 to that fought by the Partisans during World War II.”⁴⁰ Unlike many *spomeniks* authored by the same architect and in the same period, the Knjaževac monument remains well-maintained. A reason for this is probably the monument’s focus on the transhistorical martyrdom of the local population through what is presented as an enduring perpetuity of struggle and resistance.⁴¹ As a possible form of resistance to manipulations with historical memory, some critics hope for a public realisation that national collectives should not be burdened by crimes they never committed.⁴² Others propose a responsible rethinking of public commemorative practices, or “demonumentalisation,” which, among other actions, should include the construction of anti-monuments dedicated to victims of national politics rather than its proponents.⁴³ A memorial dedicated to all civilian victims of Yugoslav wars, unveiled in

2011 in Podgorica, Montenegro, could be an illustration of such demonumentalisation and distancing from the glorification of national causes.

LEGACIES OF THE FUTURE

The transformation of Yugoslav monuments into Jóhannsson's film set proceeds in a couple of steps: their anonymous use disassociates them from specific temporalities and localities, opening the path to their abstraction into objects that simultaneously belong to all humanity and to nobody in particular. Jóhannsson's film makes use of the *spomenik* structures as vacant surfaces along which his camera pans and tilts to reveal their bizarre form, their cold material, and their impenetrable function – which correlate with Stapledon's narrative about odd mutations, harsh habitats, and the imminent tragedy of the future humans. Given the poignant message of human extinction in this film, such a use of the *spomeniks'* abstract forms arguably appears apt. When the narrator declares the inevitable extinction of the human race, the camera glides across the symbolic representations of human heads and bodies emerging from the stone of the Tjentište monument honouring the thousands of civilians and partisans killed at the site of the Sutjeska battle in 1943. When Swinton's disembodied voice elaborates on the unsightly mutations and telepathic communication abilities of our distant descendants, we look at Bogdanović's alien-looking snake coils of the Smrike complex, or the geometric lines inscribed on the Garavice monument, both dedicated to victims of fascism in Bosnia, and citing the medieval tradition of the *stećak* tombstones.

In the few reviews published of Jóhannsson's film, there is hardly a consensus about his utilisation of the *spomeniks*. Branislav Jakovljević endorses the film, denying that Jóhannsson is attracted to the sensationalism surrounding the monuments, and praises his perception, both attuned to the artistic visions of their makers, as well as complementing Stapledon's narration:

Jóhannsson neither caricatures nor wonders at them. [...] [Instead, he] seeks to free the power of the monuments with his camera and allow them to be what they are: meditations on the time, and thus on the relationship between the past and future, but also on the channels through which the future speaks to its past, or, the present moment.⁴⁴



Figure 6.2: Bujan Memorial Park, Niš, Serbia. The site, where approximately 10,000 prisoners from the nearby concentration camp were executed by the Nazis, for years stood defaced by messages like “Communists killed Serbs here.” (Photo: Darko Ković, 2024)

Svetlana Slapšak, on the other hand, dismisses the film as an exercise in exoticism, accusing its author of “colonial desire.” By alienating the *spomenik* sites from both their creators and their original function as funeral monuments, Jóhannsson erases them from the register of sites of memory with global, universal significance.⁴⁵ Through crass nationalist devaluation of the Yugoslav ideology of brotherhood and unity, and following the atrocities committed throughout the wars of Yugoslav dissolution, monuments to the common, multiethnic struggle and cohabitation have all but lost their referents. They have inevitably become blank slates open to interpretation through any other system of values.⁴⁶ Raino Isto optimistically claims that even such alterations of meaning carry a utopian potential for the future of *spomeniks*, a seed of a new life that could take them to point zero of their already abandoned past:

They are simultaneously linked to the future, but the character of that future is cast into doubt by their visual treatment as abandoned structures akin to ruins. They suggest a promise of memory but also the promise of radical change, of new social structures.⁴⁷

Jóhannsson’s movie is not the only example of the misuse of Yugoslav memorial sites. By now, there is a whole genre of photography, performance, and video art that revels in the ignorant fascination of the

spomeniks, which arises from positions of dismissive hegemony that merely sees these socialist/communist/Eastern European memorials as repositories of discredited political practices, and therefore fit to be used as a prop for any artistic, or even recreational purpose. In the mix of a casual disregard for their meaning and simultaneous fascination with the monuments' allegedly otherworldly form, Kulić denudes unadulterated colonial mentality, enabling various entities to appropriate thus anonymised monumental structures for self-promotion or financial gain.⁴⁸ Although not the only one, Jóhannsson's movie is the most recent high-profile example that raises the question of cultural (mis)appropriation of historical legacies in general, but particularly those belonging to societies and historical periods, such as Yugoslav Socialism, that are considered totalitarian, failed, defeated, or otherwise insignificant. And while we do not have to necessarily subscribe to the rather essentialising claim that any non-commemorative use of monuments automatically qualifies as dishonouring the victims, it could be worthwhile to think about why Yugoslav monuments, and, by extension, Yugoslav victims, do not deserve the same kind of reverence shown to memorials to other victims. Would it be considered unacceptable to create an abstract performance at some better-known places of authentic human suffering and death?

CONCLUSION

This article raises the issue of an ethical approach to the commemoration of victims of war atrocities in the former Yugoslav space and, more broadly, to the emergence of a colonial attitude to the history and sacrifices of non-Western subjects. In the process of post-Yugoslav transition, the specificities of Yugoslav World War II resistance to fascism have been largely obfuscated in the rush to fit the self-serving common EU narrative of anti-communism, which conveniently glazes over European overwhelming complicity with the fascist project.⁴⁹ However, accompanied by a specific "hierarch[isation] of victimhood,"⁵⁰ post-communist historical revisionism allows for Eastern European victims of genocidal massacres to be ignored. The roles that non-Western subjects performed in World War II likewise refocused from that of allies (Soviets fighting their way to Berlin) to fitting the hegemonic European narrative of that conflict (Soviets raping their way to Berlin). It has become permissible for top-level EU politicians to publicly discredit China's and Russia's

victories in World War II as a narrative that “people buy into” because “they don’t read that much.”⁵¹ Most importantly, this article raises the issue of how Western colonial attitudes have been swallowed bait and hook by the post-Yugoslav citizenry, eager to catch up with their ethnic consciousness and compensate for the stigma of belonging to the defunct and failed “other Europe.” Given that Yugoslav Socialist heritage has no willing custodians or heirs, the memorials to victims of fascism are part of the cultural property that is a free-for-all. While some authors do not find such appropriation particularly problematic, others deplore the kind of content that is created at these sites, given that the “inadequate presentation of memorial legacy obliterates the significance of the unique historical heritage within Europe,” which greatly surpasses the structures themselves.⁵²

Considering the points made above, I would like to slightly modify Kulić’s proposition regarding Western colonial impulses towards the memory of the Yugoslav Socialist period. Granted that Western rhetoric can hardly contain their colonial desire, and that Johannsson’s creative process follows the same logic of using resources belonging to various “Others” with careless disregard of their purpose, the neglect of Yugoslav World War II memorials has been a wholehearted self-orientalising effort through which post-Yugoslavs actively continue to adjust their victorious narrative of autochthonous struggle against European fascisms to Europe’s narcissistic obliteration of its own reprehensible history. Despite the obvious failings of his work process, we can perhaps understand Johannsson’s movie as a parable about the post-Yugoslav peoples’ inability to comprehend the significance of their legacy until they see it scattered with ruins. As the future humans approach their inevitable destruction, they signal to us, who are their ancestors, a necessity of rethinking our legacy, without which any future existence is inconsequential:

We want to make the past make the best of itself. We seek the direct attention of the past individuals to truths which would be otherwise neglected. Those of us who still care about the life of the mind attempted to regret that humankind did not choose a decent suicide before the degeneration began.⁵³

Since Stapledon indicates that these future humans are not bothered by the aesthetically unsightly mutations to which they were exposed during the millions of years of future evolution, the viewer must suspect that their regret refers to moral degeneration, and that they somehow blame

us, their ancestors, for not cutting it at its root. Is Jóhannsson's film reprimanding us, Yugoslavs, for neglecting our own antifascist past before turning on one another in some of the most abhorrent violence recently seen anywhere? Or, is he casting a wider net, envisioning the European, and indeed, global, right (re)turn? If so, then Jóhannsson's employment of the *spomeniks* to show the Yugoslav future lying scattered among the ruins of its past emerges as a dire warning to all humanity that its unhinged past may turn to be the ruin of its future.⁵⁴ All this ultimately resounds with how a Serbian interviewee in the documentary *A Second World*, that makes a flimsy connection between the *spomeniks* and the Yugoslav fragmentation, paraphrases George Santayana's famous dictum: "Whatever nation that does not appreciate its past is condemned to destruction in its future."⁵⁵ Bogdan Bogdanović, who created many of the *spomeniks*, was well aware of the impermanence of their meaning, although he probably could not have predicted the zeal for their physical annihilation:

[The monuments] will last if they acquire a new spiritual legitimacy. [...] If that does not happen, what will remain is the bare factual essence, and the monuments will be reduced to indifferent reminders. In any case, it is certain that to future generations those monuments will not be telling the same things they are telling us, but the important thing is that they do not go silent.⁵⁶

Some of this future has already arrived: despite their physical destruction, many of the Yugoslav monuments have gained an immaterial presence in digital archives, a good example of which is the Monument Database, curated by Donald Niebyl. A less ambitious project is the recent series titled *Memorials of Others: The Monuments of Former Yugoslavia*, by the photographer Yuval Shiboli, which emphasises the dignity of the *spomeniks* and hands them back their narrative. Ultimately, the virtual recreation of Vojin Bakić's *Monument to the Victory of the People of Slavonija*, dynamited by the Croatian army in 1991, symbolises future potentials for the reinterpretation of physical space in a new language and form altogether. In one of the many efforts by antifascist activists in the region, this monument has been recreated as a hologram, stored in an app, and made available to visitors in, and of, the future.⁵⁷ This is indeed an apt reinterpretation of the language of memory for future generations, a necessity that Bogdanović already recognised in his writings. He may not have been prophetic about the destruction of Yugoslavia, but he was certainly aware of the inevitable expiration of monuments' context over time, the process that can only

further accelerate in the future. Despite some very recent demonstrations of defiant pro-fascist sentiments in Croatia,⁵⁸ which Europe seems to tolerate quite well,⁵⁹ the virtualisation of Bakić's monument points to the fact that the struggle for memory in the region is not yet over, and that further adaptations may become essential if we want the *spomeniks* to convey meaningful values to future generations.

NOTES

- ¹ A full list of locations is now available at the film's Wikipedia page, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_and_First_Men_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_and_First_Men_(film)).
- ² In a video presentation of the film, dated 9 April 2020, Jóhannsson's collaborator Glotman provides full authorship details of the novel, as well as the year of its publication, while referring to the filming locations as "Eastern European brutalistic monuments," https://www.google.com/search?q=first+and+last+men+music+johannsen&rlz=1C5GCCM_en&oq=first+and+last+men+music+johannsen&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOdIBCDYzMTFqMG03qAIAAsAIA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:157451fo,vid:tUzeN39Oc5w,st.o.
- ³ Wendy Mitchell (2020) quotes the director's excitement upon discovering the *spomeniks* in 2014: "These statues are a little bit like they are from another planet dropped into the nature. They kind of have fallen into neglect, as a reminder of a past most people don't care about. Some are covered in graffiti, overgrown by vegetation. *They are these beautiful beacons of this old Yugoslav social utopia*" (emphasis mine). The film producer goes on to emphasise the intentional treatment of the monuments "like spaceships."
- ⁴ Although Kulić criticises the use of the term *spomenik* as "orientalising," in this article I use it to distinguish Yugoslav abstract monumental architecture as a category of its own. Vladimir Kulić, "Post-Socialist Orientalism: Yugoslav Monuments and Their Reception in the Media," in *Shaping Revolutionary Memory: The Production of Revolutionary Memory in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory, 2023), 358–73.
- ⁵ Haike Karge, "Local Practices and 'Memory from Above': On the Building of War Monuments in Yugoslavia," in *Shaping Revolutionary Memory: The Production of Revolutionary Memory in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory, 2023), 92–113.
- ⁶ Amos Chaple, "The Birth of Yugoslavia's 'Spomeniks,'" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 23 October 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/spomenik-yugoslavia-monuments-rare-photos/31518968.html>.
- ⁷ Gal Kirn, *Retracing the Ruptures of Art and Memory in the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle* (De Gruyter, 2020), 196.
- ⁸ Jovanović Weiss claims that the grounds of many memorial complexes have been repurposed into recreational grounds since the end of socialism (Jovanović Weiss 2017, 3). In fact, their tourist potential was always part of the vision, as commissions planned for easy access to memorial parks from highways and roads (Karge 2023, 128–9), and they were always popular weekend getaways but had since the wars and due to the "communist" stigma attached lain mostly neglected, if not destroyed, by nationalist zealotry.
- ⁹ Bogdan Bogdanović, the author of many of the large abstract *spomeniks*, perceived remnants of "crypto socrealism" in Yugoslav monumental architecture, visible in their "triumphalism" (Bogdanović 2001, 121).
- ¹⁰ Edvard Kardelj, *The System of Planning in a Society of Self-management: Brioni Discussions* (Socialist Thought and Practice, 1976), 12.
- ¹¹ Karge, "Local Practices and 'Memory from Above'", 98.

- ¹² Todor Kuljić. "Novi javni spomenici u regionu: oružje u građanskom ratu sećanja" [New Public Monuments in the Region: Weapons in the Civil War of Memory], *Peščanik*, 10 September 2019, <https://pescanik.net/novi-javni-spomenici-u-regionu-oruzje-u-gradjanskom-ratu-secanja/>. Probably guided by this logic, Yugoslav commissions that discussed the commemoration of important World War II events in 1959 rejected any suggestions for the erection of a monument at the site of the Jasenovac concentration camp, or the Kragujevac civilian massacre, because monuments were reserved for victories.
- ¹³ Peter Bradshaw, "Last and First Men Review – Eerie Sounds and Unearthly Images from a Posthuman World," *The Guardian*, 30 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jul/29/last-and-first-men-review-tilda-swinton-johann-johannsson>.
- ¹⁴ Given the extent to which World War II in Yugoslavia was marked by inter-ethnic conflict, such formulaic statements occluded the ethnicities of both victims and perpetrators, allegedly in an attempt to create a Yugoslav national consensus. With the re-awakening of national consciousness in Yugoslavia in the 1980s, however, most victims became recognised exclusively as ethnic ones.
- ¹⁵ Tea Andersen Sindbæk, *Usable History?: Representations of Yugoslavia's Difficult Past – From 1945-2002* (Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2012), 43.
- ¹⁶ Heike Karge, *Sećanja u kamenu – okamenjeno sećanje?* [Memories in Stone – Petrified Memory?] (Čigoja štampa, 2014), 135.
- ¹⁷ Sinan Gudžević, "Memoria and damnatio memoriae," *Republika XVII*, no. 358–9 (2005): n.p.
- ¹⁸ Branimira Lazarin, "Razbijanje tišine," *Portal Novosti*, 29 September 2023, <https://www.portalnovh.osti.com/razbijanje-tisine/>
- ¹⁹ Darko Suvin, *Splendour, Misery, and Possibilities: An X-Ray of Socialist Yugoslavia* (Brill, 2016) 18.
- ²⁰ Kuljić, "Novi javni spomenici u regionu"; Karge, *Sećanja u kamenu – okamenjeno sećanje?*
- ²¹ Kuljić, "Novi javni spomenici u regionu."
- ²² Edin Hajdarpašić, "Antifascism is Not a Monument," *The Disorder of Things*, 9 July 2020, <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2020/07/09/antifascism-is-not-a-monument/>.
- ²³ Some examples of the architecture of national reconciliation are the contentious Valley of the Fallen (officially the Valley of Cuelgamuros since 2022) in Spain, or the Arlington National Cemetery in the US, likewise not uncontroversial.
- ²⁴ Many formerly communist countries have used the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as an opportunity to remove the last monuments still standing that were dedicated to Soviet liberation from Nazism. The monuments thus (un)intentionally became collateral victims in these countries' *damnatio memoriae*-style scrubbing of communist legacies (Tašković 2022).
- ²⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Blackwell, 1991.
- ²⁶ Ante Lešaja, *Zatiranje povjesne memorije* (Zagreb: Savez antifašističkih boraca i antifašista Republike Hrvatske, 2024), 323–35.
- ²⁷ Boris Buden and Želimir Žilnik, *Uvod u prošlost* [Introduction to the Past] (Centar za nove medije, 2013).
- ²⁸ Gal Kirn, "Transformation of Memorial Sites in the Post-Yugoslav Context," in *Retracing Images: Visual Culture After Yugoslavia*, eds. Daniel Šuber and Slobodan Karamanić (Brill, 2012), 251–81.
- ²⁹ One of the post-socialist monuments that creates the semantic identification between two "totalitarian occupations" of Hungary is the Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation in Budapest, erected in 2014 to directly face the Monument for Soviet Heroes, dedicated to those Soviet soldiers who died in the siege of Budapest and were buried underneath.
- ³⁰ Avoiding relativisation, it still must be noted that this memory politics is not quite dissimilar to that of the Yugoslav Socialist regime erecting monuments to unspecified victims of unspecified "fascists and domestic collaborators."
- ³¹ Lazar Stojanović, "Using Facts about the Wars in the Former Yugoslavia for Film," 11 May 2015, <https://www.recom.link/en/tri-prozora-8/>.
- ³² Bojana Pejić, "Yugoslav Monuments, Art and the Rhetoric of Power," in *MONUMENTI: The Changing Face of remembrance* (Dobra knjiga, 2014), 10–13.
- ³³ Tomislav Marković, "Kuju su to otadžbinu branili srpski vojnici u ratovima devedesetih" [What Motherland was Defended by Serbian Soldiers in the 1990s Wars], *Al Jazeera*, 9 December 2023,

- <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2023/12/9/koju-su-to-otadzbiniu-branili-srpski-vojnici-u-ratovima-devedesetih>.
- ³⁴ Stela Lechpammer, “Nikola Bašić: Moj spomenik žrtvama Drugog svjetskog rata pomirite Hrvatsku” [My Monument to World War II Victims Will Reconcile Croatia], *Večernji list*, 16 December 2019, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/ovako-ce-izgledati-spomenik-za-zrtve-drugog-svjetskog-rata-1366708>.
- ³⁵ Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 135.
- ³⁶ Branka Trivić, “Razvrstavanje stradalih: Srbija podiže spomenik samo svojim žrtvama” [Segregation of Victims: Serbia to Erect a Monument to Own Victims Only], *Radio Free Europe*, 25 July 2015, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/razvrstavanje-stradalih-beograd-podize-spomenik-samo-svojim-zrtvama/27154375.html>.
- ³⁷ Kirn, *Retracing the Ruptures of Art and Memory in the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle*, 4.
- ³⁸ Kirn, *Ibid.*, 18–19.
- ³⁹ Reference the recent tradition of celebrating the Besmrtni puk [Immortal Regiment], first organised in 2014 in Russia, and transplanted to Serbia in 2016.
- ⁴⁰ Vladimir Kulić, ed., *Bogdanović by Bogdanović: Yugoslav Memorials through the Eyes of their Architect* (The Museum of Modern Art, 2018).
- ⁴¹ A similarly transhistorical *spomenik*, easily appropriated for the national cause, exists in North Macedonia. The Ilinden/Makedonium, projected by Iskra and Jordan Grabul in 1974, commemorates major events of the uprising against the Ottomans, but also the Partisan struggle in World War II, and has been well taken care of.
- ⁴² Branka Trivić, “Razvrstavanje stradalih”; Aleksandar Vučić spent most of the year of 2024 single-handedly defending Serbia from the UN Srebrenica Resolution, falsely claiming that its text accuses the entire nation of being “genocidal.”
- ⁴³ Kuljić, “Novi javni spomenici u regionu.”
- ⁴⁴ Branislav Jakovljević, “Spomenici (iz) budućnosti” [Monuments of/from the Future], *Peščanik*, 22 February 2022, <https://pescanik.net/spomenici-iz-buducnosti/>.
- ⁴⁵ Svetlana Slapšak, “SF Jugoslavija,” *Peščanik*, 8 March 2021, <https://pescanik.net/sf-jugoslavija/>.
- ⁴⁶ Denis Derk, “Sramimo li se što je Bakićev spomenik kulisa za europsku apokalipsu” [Are we Ashamed that Bakić's Monument is a Backdrop for European Apocalypse], *Večernji list*, 1 March 2021, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/sramimo-li-se-sto-je-bakicev-spomenik-kulisa-za-europsku-apokalipsu-1472673>; Jurica Pavičić, “Nijemci su snimili alegoriju Republike Hrvatske. TV seriju o tupsonima...” [Germans Made an Allegory of the Republic of Croatia. A TV Show about Dummies...] *Jutarnji*, 27 February 2021, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska-nijemci-su-snimili-li-alegoriju-republike-hrvatske-tv-seriju-o-tupsonima-15053783>.
- ⁴⁷ Raino Isto, “‘I Will Speak in Their Own Language’: Yugoslav Socialist Monuments and Science Fiction,” *Extrapolation* 60, no. 3 (2019), 312.
- ⁴⁸ Vladimir Kulić, “Post-Socialist Orientalism”.
- ⁴⁹ Kirn, *Retracing the Ruptures of Art and Memory in the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle*, 4.
- ⁵⁰ Nadine Blumer, “Disentangling the Hierarchy of Victimhood: Commemorating Sinti and Roma and Jews in Germany's National Narrative,” in *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma: Reassessment and Commemoration*, ed. Anton Weiss-Wendt (Berghan Books, 2013), 205–28.
- ⁵¹ EUSS, European Union Institute for Security Studies, “Europe's Weakness Exposed: We are Losing Trust – Kaja Kallas's Urgent Wake-Up Call to Europe,” *YouTube*, uploaded by eudebates.tv, 3 September 2025, 16:38, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPN1doH5EFg>.
- ⁵² Igor Lasić, “Očišćeni Bakić,” *Portal Novosti*, 23 August 2019, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/ocisca-ceni-bakic>
- ⁵³ Jóhann Jóhannsson, *Last and First Men* (Iceland: Zik Zak Filmworks, Icelandic Film Centre, 2020), 45:50.
- ⁵⁴ Isto, “I Will Speak in Their Own Language” 320.
- ⁵⁵ Oscar Hudson and Ruben Wooding Dechamps, *A Second World* (UK: Gallivant Film, 2016), 16:36.

- ⁵⁶ Bogdan Bogdanović, *Glib i krv* [Mud and Blood] (Beograd: Helsinški Odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2001), 32.
- ⁵⁷ Sandro Đukić, *Tišina koja je srušila spomenik* [Silence that Tore Down the Monument], 2023, <https://silence-monument.com/hr/naslovnica/>.
- ⁵⁸ Heni Erceg, “Kako naprej?” [How to Move Forward?], *Mladina* 30 (25 July 2025), <https://www.mladina.si/242397/kako-naprej/>.
- ⁵⁹ I refer to the July 2025 record breaking concert of Croatian singer Marko Perković (stage name Thompson), a controversial right-wing figure who openly flaunts his pro-fascist sentiments for the Ustaša Nazi puppet regime. Croatian regime’s renewed wave of Ustaša nostalgia and historical revisionism has been a focus of critique at home and tepid commentary within the European Union. Cf. Martens, “Rechtsextreme Parolen auf Kroatien größter Bühne” [Right-wing Extremist Slogans on Croatia’s Biggest Stage]. *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 6 July 2025, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/ein-grosskonzert-des-musikers-marko-perkovi-in-zagreb-110577474.html>.

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Chapter 7

Above Nostalgia, Beyond Stereotypes

Tourism, Feminism and Activism as Paradigms of Contemporary Revalorisation of Modernist Legacies in Post-Yugoslav Space

Jovana Janinović

INTRODUCTION

More than three decades after the collapse of communism, the post-socialist urban landscape and its liminal transformations across Central and Eastern Europe remain a fascinating topic for scholars from various disciplines.¹ While contemporary literature increasingly scrutinises the concepts of “socialist” or “post-socialist city,” questioning whether such an analytical framework still makes sense,² it is indisputable that modernist architecture and socialist spatial arrangement still represent a dominant framework or at least a canvas upon which the urban mosaic of post-socialist development has been painted. Urban scholarly work of the last decades extensively analysed the challenges of post-socialist urban management, mainly from the perspective of “de-communisation” of urban space³ and contentiousness of socialist built heritage.⁴ Indeed, in the aftermath of communism, Central and Eastern European cities faced the challenge of coming to terms with the socialist urban fabric in their search for new visual identities. To move beyond the socialist paradigm, public spaces were supposed to be “cleansed” of architectural, mnemonic, and symbolic legacies of communism and transformed into the postcards of the new, Westward-looking political orientation and modern societies.⁵ Consequently, over the last three decades, the architectural legacies of socialism became marginalised at best and, at worst, absorbed and consumed by the rampant forces of capitalist urbanisation. This transformation led to a stark spatial dichotomy: on the one hand, the concrete greyness of the surviving socialist buildings, and on the other, the visual cacophony of colours, shapes, logos, and materials emblematic of unrestricted capitalist urbanity.

The aftermath of this spatial anarchy is seen in the highly polarised landscapes of post-socialist cities. The socialist-era urban forms, designed with a specific ideological and functional ethos, now stand in juxtaposition to the chaotic, market-driven developments of neoliberal late capitalism. This clash highlights the physical and aesthetic differences, underscoring deeper socio-economic and cultural divides that have emerged in the wake of rapid urban transformation. However, a new generation of scholars, photographers, journalists, and the general public has recently begun to rediscover and renegotiate the legacies of the socialist modernist era. This renewed interest has sparked a discourse centred on the (heritage) values of dissonant legacies of socialist-era modernist architecture in the region.⁶ Scholars are examining how these contentious forms can be integrated into the contemporary urban fabric in meaningful ways. This involves exploring strategies for preservation, adaptive reuse, and recontextualisation of these structures within the current socio-economic paradigm. Moreover, this discourse is not just about architectural conservation but also about reclaiming and reinterpreting the narratives embedded within these spaces. It involves understanding how these forms can serve as cultural and historical markers, offering insights into the past while contributing to the identity and continuity of urban spaces in the present. As such, this scholarly engagement aims to foster a more nuanced and inclusive approach to urban planning and heritage preservation that acknowledges the complex histories and ongoing transformations of post-socialist cities.

The origins and causes of this renewed interest in modernist architecture cannot be reduced to “usual suspects” – the “memory boom” of recent years or communist nostalgia. Depending on the local context and circumstances, the scrutiny of socialist modernism also arose as a response to the imminent threat of destruction, a reaction to the Western tourist gaze, and fascination with everything socialist, or the global circulation of knowledge and scholarly “laboratorization” of socialist and post-socialist urbanity. This can be easily verified by grasping the diversity of outlets engaging with the topic – from scientific studies and online educational resources to exhibitions, photo books, documentaries, policy documents, and newspaper articles. Whether seeking to commercialise, orientalise, preserve, or simply fill in the gap in the history of architecture, the use of the modernist paradigm in urban development has shown the abundance of aspects, topics, and connotations that deserve critical examination. For

years, these projects primarily focused on post-Soviet spaces of modernity; however, modernism in the former Yugoslavia has emerged as a particularly inspiring analytical category.

Three major tendencies contributed to such development, reinforcing the “path-dependency” theory of post-socialist studies.⁷ On the one hand, the “in-betweenness” of Yugoslavia and its global entanglements made its modernist architecture even more aesthetically intriguing and ideologically charged than in other parts of the Eastern Bloc. On the other hand, the peripherality in both scholarship and practice of architecture, and the consequent local ignorance towards modernist legacies, provided a fertile ground for Western researchers to fill in the gaps in the urban history of the region. Third, the unrestrained nature of capitalism and the rampant commercialisation of spaces, along with the deregulation of urban planning and corruptive urban development that followed the dissolution of the federal state, created a myriad of dramatic spatial cohabitations, controversial urban projects, and radical landscape devastations. As such, legacies of socialist modernism in the former Yugoslavia remain a fruitful avenue for exploring the social production of heritage and contemporary interactions among urban, social, economic, and cultural spheres.

In this chapter, I aim to contribute to the ongoing debates on the valorisation of modernist legacies in former Yugoslavia from the perspective of three major global tendencies, whose adoption, I argue, re-centred the architectural discourse in the region and fostered heritagisation-from-below. While scholarship has primarily addressed modernist legacies in Yugoslavia from the perspectives of contemporary history, architecture, or memory politics, I aim to contribute to this debate by analysing the causes of this recent cultural reappropriation of modernist architecture. However, the chapter seeks to move the discussion beyond commodification, socialist nostalgia, and the Western gaze as the major drivers of the revalorisation of socialist modernist heritage in Europe. Focusing on tourism, feminism, and activism, I aim to interrogate how these three global paradigms shape attitudes towards socialist modernism and facilitate its preservation and interpretation. I argue that these global movements are not only stimulating engagement with socialist modernism and offering new perspectives on socialist urban legacies, but also fostering heritagisation-from-below and positioning socialist modernism within the global architectural discourse.

TOURISM: BETWEEN CONTENTIOUS AND CONTAGIOUS

As one of the major economic activities of the twenty-first century, tourism has profoundly transformed how we experience, appropriate, and transmit heritage, arts, history, and culture. In Central and Eastern Europe, tourism has served as a mediator of the contested history of socialism and contemporary socio-political agendas, shedding light on the heritage of socialism as an essential tourism asset of the region. With its capacity to bring attention to the marginalised and often contentious urban spaces,⁸ and sanitise, embellish, and cleanse landscape, history, and narrative, tourism undoubtedly facilitated the heritagisation of socialist legacies across Europe.⁹ In this sense, tourism has significantly contributed to enhanced awareness, understanding, and respect for the architectural and cultural values of socialist modernist heritage in Europe. The influx of international tourists, often driven by a fascination with the unique aesthetic and historical significance of monuments and buildings, has prompted local stakeholders to reconsider their value. This has led to efforts to preserve and repurpose these structures, integrating them into the contemporary urban landscape in ways that cater to international visitors and maximise the tourist experience and satisfaction.

Some of the most iconic socialist modernist buildings, hence, owe their prominence to tourist appeal – including Warsaw’s Palace of Culture and Science, Berlin’s Fernsehturm, and Chisinau’s State Circus, which all owe much of their landmark status to tourists’ fascination with their out-of-ordinary architectural design. Indeed, as tourism became one of the dominant ways for experiencing the heritage and history of the city, most of the cities of Central and Eastern Europe became scrutinised in light of the “(post)socialist heritage tourism,” promoting socialist urban landmarks, historical sites, and cultural patterns as the utmost tourism product of the region.¹⁰ Capitalising on even the non-ordinariness of communist history and architecture, the attractiveness of the communist socio-cultural framework, and the Orientalisation of communist urban landscapes,¹¹ tourism stakeholders quickly re-appropriated socialist modernist legacies as a central feature of popular “communist tours” across the continent. As part of the larger-scale research conducted in eight post-socialist capitals, in which I engaged in the participatory observation of post-socialist tours, the so-called contentious legacies of socialist modernism almost without exception emerged as highlight landmarks, contextualised through anecdotal storytelling and socialist urban exceptionalism.

In Serbia, for example, the “Yugotour: Rise and Fall of a Nation,” the first and most popular guided tour of communist-era Belgrade, adds a few of the “hidden” modernist gems to the tourist map of Belgrade, most notably the Genex Tower. The Genex Tower, also known as the Western City Gate, stands as one of the most emblematic symbols of Yugoslav brutalist architecture, embodying both the aspirations and complexities of the socialist era. Designed by the renowned architect Mihajlo Mitrović in 1977, the two interconnected towers – one residential and one office tower with a circular restaurant-observation deck – quickly gained prominence in architectural circles due to their avant-garde design and size. However, despite its architectural significance, like many other modernist structures in the region, the Genex Tower was largely marginalised and neglected after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, falling victim to the socio-political shifts and economic challenges of the post-socialist transition. But, in recent years, the tower was brought back to the spotlight, appearing on the cover of the Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA’s) 2018 exhibition catalogue “Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980,”¹² becoming an indispensable landmark on guided tours’ itineraries and even being officially listed as a cultural heritage site by the Government of Serbia in 2021. Undoubtedly, this recent heritagisation of the tower has been significantly influenced by the rise of tourism, which played a pivotal role in revalorising modernist legacies throughout the region.

The Yugotour, in particular, has been instrumental in bringing the Genex Tower back into the public consciousness and conservation agendas (Fig. 7.1). By incorporating the tower into its itinerary, the popular guided tour of communist-era Belgrade played a crucial role in enhancing the aesthetic appreciation of the building as a cornerstone of conservation and preservation considerations. Throughout the guided tour, tourists are not only introduced to the tower’s striking architecture and urban design but are also educated on the broader ideological and social contexts that shaped its creation. Through detailed interpretations, the tour elaborates on the principles of the Athens Charter and Le Corbusier’s ideas, explaining how these influenced the tower’s design and interior arrangement. The educational aspect of tourism helps visitors appreciate the tower not just as a visual landmark, but also as a site of historical and cultural significance. By engaging tourists in the broader narrative of Yugoslav modernism, Yugotour facilitates a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Genex Tower, transforming it from a neglected relic into a valued cultural asset. Through tourism, the tower’s aesthetic and

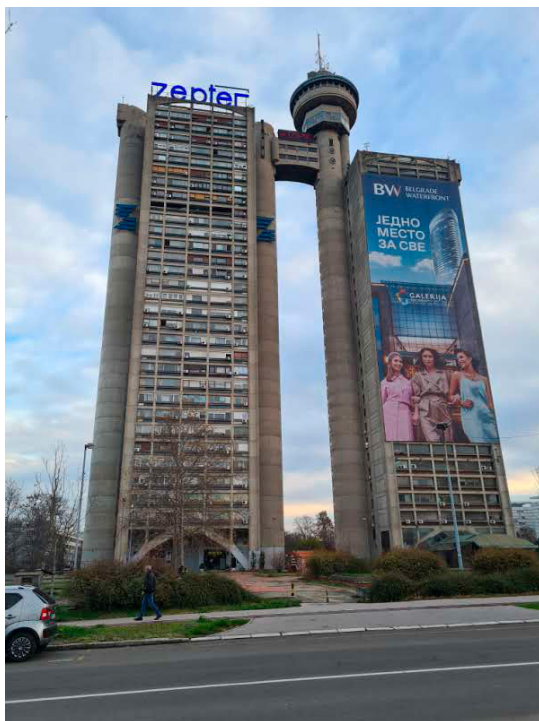


Figure 7.1: The Genex Tower, part of the “Yugotour: Rise and Fall of a Nation” tour, is both a tourism site and the advertising panel for the Belgrade Waterfront urban re-development project. (Photo: Jovana Janinović, November 2021)

historical dimensions are brought to the forefront, fostering a renewed interest in its preservation and a broader awareness of the modernist heritage of the post-Yugoslav space. Consequently, it may be argued that tourist-driven revival contributes not only to the renewed appreciation of modernist architecture but also acts as a bottom-up heritagisation mechanism, shedding light on the cultural and aesthetic values of modernist landmarks and becoming one of the critical drivers of their official recognition and conservation.

It is important to note that tourism related to modernist landmarks has been largely ignited by popular culture products, where Kampenaers’ Spomenik database, the MoMA exhibition, the *Unwanted Heritage* documentary, and a number of articles in prominent media outlets such as *The New York Times* undoubtedly contributed to the global popularisation of modernism.¹³ The photogeneity of these eccentric and often eclectic modernist buildings and monuments further encouraged international architecture lovers and urban explorers to popularise Yugoslav architecture by creating virtual spaces and viral social media campaigns centred on the “ruinophilic” charm and Orientalisation of the socialist built

environment.¹⁴ Hence, the commodification of modernism, both through popular culture and tourism, discharges heritage from historic tensions and cultural dissonances, facilitating engagement with contentious legacies and turning abandoned sites into key landmarks of post-socialist cities.

FEMINISM: GENDERED ARCHITECTURE AND HERITAGE-MAKING

The introduction of a gender perspective in heritage studies has led to a critical re-evaluation of how heritage is defined, interpreted, and preserved. As a global movement, feminism has profoundly impacted the field by challenging traditional narratives and advocating for more inclusive and equitable representations of history and heritage. Traditionally, expert-driven Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) and practices have often overlooked or marginalised the contributions and experiences of women, leading to a predominantly male-centred narrative of history and cultural perspective.¹⁵ Feminism in heritage studies challenges this imbalance by advocating for the inclusion of women's voices, stories, and roles in the construction and transmission of heritage. It emphasises the need to recognise and preserve not only spatial embodiments of feminist intellectual and activist legacies¹⁶ but also, more broadly, the cultural and historical significance of sites, objects, and practices associated with women, thereby ensuring a more comprehensive and equitable understanding of heritage. As the movement gained momentum, several countries launched campaigns to reinsert women into national cultural heritage, develop feminist heritage collections, and recognise the architectural, artistic, and urban value of women-made built environments.¹⁷

In a recent article entitled "Gendered Heritage in the Material Culture of post-socialist Skopje," Biljana Volchevska highlights the stark discrepancy between the representation of women in two distinct heritage landscapes in contemporary Skopje, arguing that modernist monuments showing women as emancipated in antifascist struggle have been strongly contrasted by contemporary "Skopje 2014" portrayal of women as subordinated and mythologised, in a symbolic shift from "producers to reproducers."¹⁸ While research on the exact mechanisms through which feminism fuels the heritagisation of urban sites associated with notable women remains scarce, in recent years there has been a growing interest in female artists and architects of former Yugoslavia as the avant-garde pioneers of the contemporary feminist movement.¹⁹ In particular, in "Code Switching: Female Architects

of Yugoslav Late Modernism – Between Domesticity and Avant-Garde,” Dragana Zorić addresses the architectural figure of Svetlana Kana Radević, Montenegrin architect, as an epitome of the subtle negotiations of gender, public imaginaries, traditional roles, and architectural discourses of socialist modernism.²⁰ Indeed, the last decade in contemporary Montenegro saw Kana Radević’s elevation to prominence in both international and domestic cultural spheres, reflecting a broader movement to reassess and celebrate women’s contributions to arts and architecture.

A pioneering Montenegrin architect, Svetlana Kana Radević (1937–2000) was renowned for her significant contributions to modernist architecture in Yugoslavia. Radević’s most notable work includes the Hotel Podgorica, a modernist landmark for which she was awarded a prestigious “Borba” prize, becoming the first female architect and the youngest laureate of the federal architectural award. Considered to be the “Nobel” of domestic architecture, the Borba Prize for Architecture represented the foremost measure of architectural achievement in former Yugoslavia, serving as a symbol of professional excellence and a tool for promoting the ideals of “brotherhood and unity.”²¹ Built in the 1960s, Hotel Podgorica represents one of the most praised architectural oeuvres of post-war architecture in Montenegro, designed in harmony with the scenic surroundings of the Morača River and seamlessly integrated into the riverbank landscape through the extensive use of local river gravel. When the hotel was privatised in the early 2000s, it underwent a major reconstruction that included replacing the original pebble-stone interior with marble, altering the building’s unique character and historical value, and reflecting broader trends in the region’s approach to modernist legacies in the post-socialist era. However, in recent years, Hotel Podgorica has come into the spotlight as architects, civil society, media, and urban activists have started a campaign to grant the building the status of protected cultural heritage. Although efforts to list it as cultural heritage began in 2012, it was not until 2021 that the hotel was officially classified as a cultural heritage of national significance. This decision was significantly influenced by the increasing recognition of Kana Radević’s architectural legacy and the broader awareness of the need to preserve modernist heritage in Montenegro.

The heritagisation of Hotel Podgorica and its role in contemporary heritage discourse is indeed profoundly intertwined with the fetishisation of Kana Radević and her recent promotion into a feminine icon. Stereotyped as the “first female architect,” “woman in a man’s world,” “cosmopolite from the periphery,” and a “heroine of Yugoslav modernism,” Kana



Figure 7.2: Kana Radević mural in the city centre of Podgorica (Photo: Jovana Janinović, April 2024)

Radević became in recent years one of the most prominent female historical figures in the region (Fig. 7.2). Her works, featured in the famous MoMA exhibition, the Vienna Biennale, and the Podgorica exhibition, all fetishised Radević’s personality and legacy, contributing to a heightened cultural interest in her oeuvre, most notably the Hotel Podgorica. Several domestic and international media outlets reiterated these stereotypes, subjecting Radević to both admiration and feminist exoticisation, which in turn elevated the profile of her architectural work. One such passage particularly illustrates the scope of the phenomena:

Her archive includes a photograph of her accepting the prize, clad in a black velvet dress, an ornate lace collar, and a large, confident smile as she shakes hands with the all-male jury – one of many photographic displays that attest to her cultivation of the glamorous, feminised public image of an elegant cosmopolite.²²

In recent years, Radević was featured on a mural in the city centre of Podgorica, on a commemorative postage stamp, and in the “Remarkable

Women of Montenegro” artistic project.²³ The public and activist mobilisation surrounding the Hotel Podgorica leveraged these romanticised and stereotyped images, using them to argue for its preservation. As a result, the building’s designation as a protected heritage site was significantly driven by the broader fascination with Radević’s persona and achievements, which galvanised the activism necessary to secure its heritage status. Even the official decision on the protection of Hotel Podgorica credits the historical importance of the building to the prominence of the “first female architect in Montenegro,” and confines the architectural merit to the feminine “sensibility” of the hotel’s embeddedness in the natural environment. This showcases the extent to which feminist stereotypisation can act as a catalyst for the revalorisation of neglected modernist legacies, and, to a similar extent, position socialist modernism within the global architectural discourse.

ACTIVISM: RECLAIMING HERITAGE THROUGH GRASSROOTS MOBILISATION

While increasingly crucial in urban studies, the role and impact of community activism and public participation remain surprisingly absent from heritage scholarship.²⁴ Yet, social movements have been instrumental in mobilising communities to protect and reclaim heritage sites and urban landmarks.²⁵ In Central and Eastern Europe, the “cleansing” of communist memoryscapes and the political erasure of socialist heritage seldom served as a catalyst for various urban movements across Central and Eastern Europe. Examples of such civic mobilisations aimed at preserving socialist heritage include the controversial replacement of the East German Palace of the Republic in Berlin, redesign of the GTC Mall in Skopje, demolition of Kvity Ukraine (Flowers of Ukraine) in Kyiv, relocation of Bronze Soldier in Tallinn, degeneration of the riverbank landscape of Hotel Podgorica, or the destructions of Bratislava’s Trade Union House Istropolis, Prague’s Transgas complex and Vilnius’ Lietuva Cinema. Hence, grassroots movements favouring socialist modernism are becoming increasingly important forms of urban advocacy and heritage-building from below.

In the former Yugoslavia, due to the weak civil society,²⁶ the democratic deficit and post-socialist urban rebranding, socialist modernist architecture was frequently sacrificed to the interests of private investors, failing to mobilise significant civic movements. Probably the most striking

example was the makeover of Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, which, through the controversial “Skopje 2014” project, replaced most of its post-war architecture in the city centre with neo-baroque structures, despite the widespread vocal discontentment.²⁷ Yet, in the previous decade, civic awareness throughout the region has matured, and the protests against the demolition and degradation of important modernist gems, such as Hotel Podgorica in Montenegro and, more recently, Hotel Jugoslavija in Belgrade, point out the general trend of architectural revisionism, where modernism has been re-evaluated through societal mobilisation. In the case of Hotel Podgorica, in particular, the contention was activated not because of the imminent threat of demolition but due to the aesthetic degradation of the riverbank ensemble and the construction of the new skyscraper in the hotel’s immediate proximity, which overshadowed the hotel. Hence, urban activism is not only about preventing the outright demolition of modernist structures but also about raising voices against the more subtle “plastic surgery” of modernist landscapes, where iconic buildings are obscured by newer, more extravagant developments.²⁸

Most recently, the residents of Belgrade engaged in the campaign in defence of the iconic modernist landmark of former Yugoslavia, Hotel Jugoslavija. Hotel Jugoslavija, situated along the banks of the Danube River, was completed in 1969 and became the largest and most luxurious hotel in former Yugoslavia. Designed by the prominent Yugoslav architect from Croatia, Lavoslav Horvat, the hotel embodied the ideals of Yugoslav modernism, characterised by clean lines, expansive use of glass, and a focus on functional, minimalist aesthetics. This approach aimed to convey a sense of monumental scale and grandeur while remaining integrated into the surrounding landscape. The landmark of New Belgrade held a particularly significant role in the social and political life of Yugoslavia throughout the twentieth century, hosting international summits, government meetings, and cultural events. While the hotel itself was privatised in the post-socialist transition of Serbia, it is the recent alteration of urban plans for the area and the hotel’s sale to a new investor, intending to construct 155-meter-tall towers in its place, that instigated the urban grassroots mobilisation. In the process, protesters gained significant support from local civil society and the media, using it as a platform for emancipatory activism – shedding light not only on the architectural values of the building but also on the controversial investment plan. In particular, activists revealed and problematised the detailed Urban Regulation Plan,²⁹ financed by the very same investor (published in the *Official Gazette*), who

had purchased a hotel one year before the official transfer of ownership. Besides residents, protests were joined by a number of architects, heritage professionals, and academics who mobilised their expertise to articulate the corruptive urban planning, heritage devastation, and democratic deficit in the country.

In the case of Hotel Yugoslavia, the protests articulated not only the public resentment towards the contemporary treatment of modernist heritage but also broader communal frustration with uncontrolled development, commercially driven urbanisation, and a system that marginalises citizens in urban decision-making processes. In particular, activists urged a detailed re-evaluation of the hotel's historical and cultural significance, as well as the controversial urban plan that would allow for such a large-scale redevelopment project in the already dense urban area. The repertoire of contention included protest messages such as "We won't let Yuga go" and "NATO couldn't take it down. Private investors won't either," referring to the fact that the hotel survived the bombing in 1999 when parts of the building were seriously damaged. In autumn 2024, with the announcement of the beginning of demolition, the protests in Belgrade intensified, and the activists advocated for the recognition of the artistic, architectural, and historical importance of Hotel Jugoslavija as a major cultural landmark and the last standing object in Serbia bearing the name of the former state.

Unlike in the Hotel Podgorica movement, where activism eventually led to the heritage listing of the building – albeit too late to prevent its degeneration – it was unlikely that Hotel Jugoslavija could be inscribed in the heritage register again, and the controversial redevelopment project was prevented. While the recently adopted Plan of Detailed Regulation³⁰ allowed "the removal of all the exhibiting objects in the area of urban plot M4" (where the Hotel Jugoslavija is situated), the activists continue to protest (as in October 2024) against the corruptive practices in urban planning and to advocate for the protection of the building. This signals an exciting turn in the contemporary treatment of modernist architecture, which becomes increasingly recognised through urban grassroots movements and civic mobilisation. Urban activism serves both as an impetus for the revalorisation of modernist heritage and a channel for articulating urban and social discontent with contemporary politics in the region.

CONCLUSION

The contentious legacies of socialist modernism in the former Yugoslavia undoubtedly represent a laboratory for studying contemporary heritagisation processes and the social dynamics (notably tourism, feminism, and activism) that instigate the re-evaluation of contested urban heritage. The impact of global phenomena on local heritage dynamics and the resurgence of interest in the socialist modernist legacies of post-Yugoslav space signal an interesting shift in contemporary heritage discourse in the region. Far from being mere remnants of a bygone era, these architectural landmarks are becoming sites of active engagement, negotiation, and re-valorisation through various lenses, including tourism, feminism, and activism. Each of these paradigms offers unique insights and contributions to the understanding of the challenges and opportunities of preservation of modernist heritage.

Tourism has played a significant role in reviving interest in socialist modernism, transforming once-neglected structures into iconic landmarks. The allure of these buildings for international tourists has not only fuelled local efforts to preserve them but has also positioned them within a global architectural discourse. This tourism-driven re-valorisation often detaches these structures from their contentious historical contexts, re-framing them as cultural assets and drivers of economic development. Feminism has introduced a critical re-evaluation of heritage, emphasising the need to recognise the contributions of women to the built environment and to reassess how gender influences architectural narratives. The case of Kana Radević highlights how feminist movements can spur the heritagisation of modernist legacies, often by romanticising and stereotyping the figures associated with them. While this can elevate the profile of neglected sites, it also raises questions about how gendered narratives are constructed and perpetuated. Activism, particularly in the context of grassroots movements, has emerged as a powerful force in advocating for the preservation of socialist modernist architecture. In the face of rampant commercialisation and political erasure, community-driven efforts are increasingly reclaiming these spaces as part of a broader struggle for cultural and historical recognition. However, the effectiveness of such movements in the post-Yugoslav space has been uneven, often hindered by democratic deficit, weak civil societies, and the dominance of private interests.

The analysis of the impact of tourism, feminism, and activism on re-heritagisation processes in former Yugoslavia highlights the ongoing tensions between preservation and transformation in post-socialist urban landscapes. As global processes intersect with local contexts, the re-valuation of modernist legacies continues to evolve, reflecting broader socio-cultural dynamics and the contested nature of heritage in the region. This paper contributes to the emerging discourse by examining these intersections and by advocating for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to heritage that acknowledges the complex histories and contemporary relevance of socialist modernism in post-Yugoslav space.

NOTES

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- ² Owen Hatherley, *Landscapes of Communism: A History through Buildings* (London: Penguin, 2015); Branislav Machala and Jorn Koelemaji, "Post-Socialist Urban Futures: Decision-Making Dynamics behind Large-Scale Urban Waterfront Development in Belgrade and Bratislava," *Urban Planning* 4, no. 4 (2019): 6–17; Slavomíra Ferenčuhová and Michael Gentile, "Introduction: Post-Socialist Cities and Urban Theory," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 4–5 (2017): 483–96.
- ³ Dino Domić and Christina Goulding, "Heritage Consumption, Identity Reformation in Post Civil War Croatia," *Annals of Tourism Research* 36, no. 1 (2009): 85–102; Nebojša Čamprag, "International Media and Tourism Industry as the Facilitators of Socialist Legacy Heritagization in the CEE Region," *Urban Science* 2, no. 110 (2018); Craig Young and Sylvia Kaczmarek, "The Socialist Past and Postsocialist Urban Identity in Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of Łódź, Poland," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 53–70.
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- ⁵ Duncan Light and Craig Young, "Urban Space, Political Identity and the Unwanted Legacies of State Socialism: Bucharest's Problematic Centre Civic in the Post-Socialist Era," *Nationalities Papers* 41 (2015): 515–35.
- ⁶ Mariusz Sokolowicz, Aleksandra Nowakowska, and Blazej Ciarkowski, *The Ambiguous Legacy of Socialist Modernist Architecture in Central and Eastern Europe*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2023).
- ⁷ Juliet Johnson, "Path Contingency in Postcommunist Transformations," *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 3 (2001): 253–74 on socialist urban legacies, but also fostering heritagization-from-below.
- ⁸ John Lenon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (London: Thomson, 2000).
- ⁹ Nebojša Čamprag, "International Media and Tourism Industry as the Facilitators of Socialist Legacy Heritagization in the CEE Region," *Urban Science* 2, no. 110 (2018); Jovana Janinović, "Longing for the Unwanted: Legacies of Socialism and Urban Heritage Tourism in Contemporary Belgrade," in *Urban Heritage in Europe: Economic and Social Revival*, ed. G. Sonkoly (Routledge, 2023), 199–219; Duncan Light, "Gazing on Communism: Heritage Tourism and Post-Communist Identities in Germany, Hungary and Romania," *Tourism Geographies* 2, no. 2 (2000): 157–76; Magdalena Banaszkiwicz,

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- ¹⁰ Agnieszka Balcerzak, "The Charm of the PRL: Memory Culture, (Post)Socialist Nostalgia, and Historical Tourism in Poland," *Slovenský Národopis* 69, no. 2 (2021): 255–73; Magdalena Banaszekiewicz, Nelson Graburn, and Sabina Owsiakowska, "Tourism in (Post)socialist Eastern Europe," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 15, no. 2 (2017): 109–21; Duncan Light, Remus Cretan, Sorina Voiculescu, and Ioan Sebastian Jucu, "Introduction: Changing Tourism in the Cities of Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 22, no. 4 (2020): 465–77.
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- ¹² Exhibition catalogue and more information available at: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3931>
- ¹³ *Neželjena baština* (2016) is a documentary directed by the Croatian filmmaker Irena Škorić, which traces the destiny of Yugoslav monuments from 1945 to 1900.
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- ²² Anna Kats, "Svetlana Kana Radević (1937–2000)," *Architectural Review*, 12 July 2021, <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/reputations/svetlana-kana-radevic-1937-2000>
- ²³ "Remarkable Women of Montenegro" (2023) was a project implemented by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in cooperation with the Women's Rights Center and several Montenegrin municipalities. It aimed to bring the exceptional female figures from Montenegrin history into the spotlight and make them more visible in public space through mural painting and a series of additional activities.
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- ²⁶ Scholars argue that civil societies in post-socialist Europe remained passive for decades, and citizens were predominantly sceptic towards institutions, primarily due to the legacy of communist-era mistrust of organisations, the persistence of private alternatives to public life, and the lasting impact of forced participation under authoritarian regimes. See, for example, Marc Morje Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
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- ³⁰ Plan Detaljne Regulacije bloka 11 i dela bloka 10, gradske opštine Zemun i Novi Beograd (September 2024).

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Chapter 8

Beyond the Narrative of the “Wild 1990s”

Cultural and Architectural Legacy of Soviet Industry

Polina Gundarina and Marina Sapunova

INTRODUCTION: LEARNING FROM STILL SOCIALIST URBANISM

In 2017, the director of the Chelyabinsk Metal Combinat (ChMZ), Anatolii Shchetinin, was invited by the Palace of Culture ChMZ to give a celebratory speech.¹ The palace had just turned sixty years old, and this event brought together the residents and factory workers in its grandiose hall within the Stalinist building. Shchetinin loudly proclaimed that despite the financial crisis the Metal Plant faced lately, he and his workers would save “our palace” and “our factory” should any visitors be worried about it.² “Our palace” is a cornerstone of “our community,” and the Metal Plant will do everything to keep the place running. The hall burst into applause.³

The history of industrial paternalism over Soviet citizens dates back to the years of Stalin’s industrialisation (1928–41), gaining momentum during the post-war years and the growing social appeal of Khrushchev’s Thaw.⁴ Chelyabinsk Metal Plant is a stark example of the lasting legacy of this set of practices, where *industrialny gigant*, a strategically important “giant enterprise,” not merely supplied the Soviet Union with resources but formed a district around the enterprise itself, dictating both urban and architectural, and societal and cultural foundations of what would comprise a socialist city, *sotsgorod* ChMZ.⁵ *Sotsgorod* of Chelyabinsk Metal Plant is an approximately 140,000 people district in the industrial city of the Ural Mountains region in Russia, Chelyabinsk, widely recognised as a centre of the metal industry.⁶ During the 1940s to 1960s, the plant commissioned housing units and infrastructure for its workers, combined with specific material conditions and societal practices applied to the area.

This chapter argues that these practices, commonly referred to as industrial paternalism at the Chelyabinsk Metal Plant, persisted beyond the Soviet era. This persistence was particularly striking during the market

reforms and privatisation of the industrial sector after 1991, known as the “wild 1990s” in the historiography of post-Soviet transformations.⁷ The plant’s lasting influence created a narrative that erased the history of pre-existing settlements and forced labour camps, shaping its history as a Soviet interpretation of *terra nullius*. Through empirical research employing archival and ethnographic methods, this study demonstrates how the plant’s material and cultural paternalism persists in contemporary Russia. It contributes to understanding post-socialist transformations and may impact broader discussions on global socialism and industrial urbanism.⁸

This chapter examines how socialist architecture was used to perform and shape history, tracing its influence following the dissolution of the USSR. Against popular belief, the 1990s transformation of the Chelyabinsk Metal Plant’s industrial district did not lead to immediate commercialisation or neglect of Soviet infrastructure. Through interviews with an urban activist and a district citizen, as well as an analysis of archival footage from a Soviet industry-based film studio and regional press, we demonstrate how these iconic buildings have remained symbolically and spatially significant in the post-Soviet era. In conclusion, we reflect on how the contemporary uncritical acceptance of these architectural symbols contributes to the erasure of the socialist city’s past and reinforces the myth of the “nobody’s land” development of ChMZ.⁹

The concept of “still-socialist urbanism” serves as a significant point of reflection in this investigation.¹⁰ The anthropologist Michał Murawski, who introduced the concept, challenges the idea that the end of state socialism meant a complete break with socialist urbanism, arguing instead that many aspects of its urban forms, practices, and ideologies continue to shape urban life in post-socialist societies. Furthermore, Murawski highlights the common “failure-centric” view in scholarly assessments of socialist architecture, which often focuses on the unrealised goal of a communist society. But as this built environment still shapes daily life in former socialist countries, it is essential to reassess the impact of socialist urbanism on contemporary material culture and modernity.¹¹ By examining “still-socialist urbanism,” we challenge the historiographical tendency to marginalise the enduring influence of socialist architecture and urban planning. This perspective also underscores the complexities of memory politics, where Soviet-era structures continue to shape everyday life and foster a sense of pride and identity, reflecting broader struggles over historical interpretation and national identity in former socialist and Soviet countries.

SOCIALIST CITIES AS NOBODY'S LAND: THE ORIGINS OF SOVIET INDUSTRIAL DISTRICTS

Socialist cities, or *sotsgorods*, emerged in the early 1930s under architect Nikolay Milyutin, coinciding with the onset of Soviet industrialisation.¹² These cities were organised functionally and hierarchically for large-scale industrial production, often far from existing infrastructure.¹³ *Sotsgorods* included housing, schools, hospitals, and recreational facilities. The original intention was to promote principles of equality and unity, but, in practice, these ideals were overshadowed by production goals, reflecting the early Stalinist focus on rapid industrialisation, state centralisation, and the establishment of hierarchical structures.¹⁴ Soviet *sotsgorods* quickly became essential for industrialisation and war efforts. The most notable ones were developed during the early five-year plans, centred on critical industrial hubs such as Kharkiv and Zaporizhia in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) or Magnitogorsk Steel Plant in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Early *sotsgorods* were strictly linear and rigidly planned settlements with mainly low-rise buildings and minimal infrastructure.¹⁵

Socialist cities featured unique architectural forms, infrastructure, and social engineering tools.¹⁶ *Sotsgorods* focused on creating labour-living collectives (*trudo-bytovye kollektivy*), socially homogeneous units that were dependent, controlled, managed, and tied to the industry.¹⁷ This integration of work and community living aimed to attach the workforce to the industrial enterprise and collectivise daily life, reducing turnover and increasing production through discipline.¹⁸ Today, the descendants of Soviet workers mainly inhabit these *sotsgorods*, and the influx of new residents is minimal due to their often remote locations and poor job offers limited to a single industry.¹⁹

Over the years, socialist cities served various ideological roles in Soviet Union. They symbolised the arrival of socialist modernity and the implementation of grand projects, crucial for centralising authority in the 1930s. New Soviet *sotsgorods* were mythologised as triumphs over nature and "nobody's land," highlighting human willpower and creating a civilisation without a past.²⁰ This narrative had a significant impact on both external and internal audiences. For generations of Soviet citizens, these cities provided a close-knit community and stable employment, shaping their identities and motivations.

The historian Mark Meerovich offers a darker interpretation of the history of *sotsgorods*. He notes that most housing in early Soviet socialist

cities was built with scarce resources and economic constraints, resulting in poor quality. Linking housing to workplaces also created social control that undermined residents' autonomy. Meerovich also points out that many major projects from the 1930s onward were built using forced labour from GULAG (Main Directorate of Correctional Labour Camps) prisoners.²¹ Others, too, highlight the difficult lives of residents in the early years of the existence of *sotsgorods*, as they were often relocated from different and distant regions of the Soviet Union. They had to manage hygiene, establish neighbourhoods and trade, fight for resources, and tame "empty spaces" like forests and swamps, as was the case for pre-war socialist cities like Uralmash and Khimmash in Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk Tractor Plant District.²²

These assessments are not unique to the chapter's case study of the socialist city built around the Chelyabinsk Metal Plant. Initially conceived during the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32), this socialist city was primarily constructed after World War II. Today, these efforts leave a lasting legacy on the district. First and foremost, this legacy is characterised by its unique and well-preserved neoclassical architectural forms, wide and open public spaces, and lush greenery, as well as the centre of the district – the Palace of Culture. This fact receives different interpretations. Although researcher and urban activist Ilya P. notes, for example, that "*Sotsgorod ChMZ* is perhaps the only district in Chelyabinsk today with a very pronounced and outstanding identity,"²³ it becomes clear that the identity of the heroic industrial settlement continues to overshadow and hinder critical conversation about the initial origins of the district.

SOCIALIST CITY OF CHELYABINSK METAL PLANT: CONSTRUCTING A NARRATIVE, ERASING THE PAST

In 1932, the Soviet government decided to build a metallurgical plant in Chelyabinsk, given the suitable properties of the local deposit, as well as its "deep rear location" and the possibility of becoming the centre of all industry east of the Urals. Several small settlements, such as Pershino, known since the mid-eighteenth century, and Kazantsevo, which would later become part of the larger Metallurgical District of Chelyabinsk, were chosen to settle the workers. However, full-scale construction of the plant and the surrounding area, named initially Bakalsky, only began in 1941 due to the mobilised resources that had to be sent to the needs of the

front, which in turn were generated by the intensive and often forced mobilisation of labour at the expense of the repressed and exiled in the hinterland, as well as evacuated factories from western Soviet territories. Since the project was not only highly strategic for wartime but also for the future of Soviet industry, it required the recruitment of a large number of new labourers. It was placed under the jurisdiction of the Soviet secret police, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD).

Soon enough, the first echelons of forced labourers began to appear on the construction site: mobilised prisoners from across the Soviet Union, including those from Alma-Ata (Kazakh SSR), Chelyabinsk and Gorky prisons (RSFSR), and Tashkent (Uzbek SSR), organising a camp system under the name Bakallag (short for Bakal Camp or Chelyabmetallurgstroy later). A significant portion of the initial workforce comprised deported Soviet Germans, who were conscripted into labour brigades under strict discipline and minimal living conditions. By the summer of 1942, approximately 4,000 prisoners and 26,000 Soviet Germans were involved in the construction of the Chelyabinsk Metal Plant (Chelyabinskiy metallurgicheskii zavod, or ChMZ), which produced such essential products for the war front – an alloyed tool, heat-resistant and other types of steel – and the surrounding socialist city, known as *ChMZ sotsgorod*.²⁴ These labourers vividly remembered the harsh conditions:

We were brought in large groups... From here, under guard, we walked through the forest, east of the river, to the future camp. Here, we built dugouts in the frozen ground with two-tier bunks. A new life began, or rather, a struggle for survival... inside... it was slightly warmer than outside; at night, the blanket often froze to the floor...²⁵

In 1949, the camp settlement area was incorporated into the city of Chelyabinsk as an administrative unit known as the Metallurgical District.²⁶ Before this, the area primarily featured low-rise (one- to two-storey) wooden and brick residential buildings in poor condition. However, during World War II, the Chelyabinsk Metal Plant became a vital supplier to the front lines. The plant's prestigious status within the Soviet industrial complex facilitated the development of the area, which in turn attracted more workers and scientific personnel with university educations.

The core of the Metallurgical district began to take shape from the late 1940s to late 1950s, following the approval of an architectural and

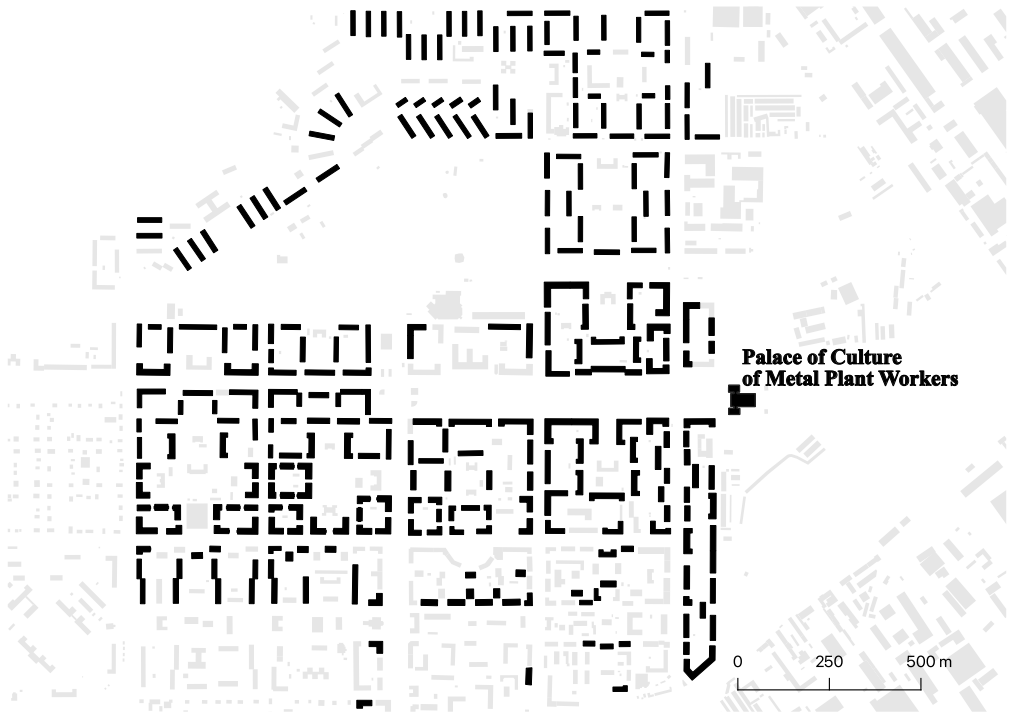


Figure 8.1: A socialist city ensemble features a boulevard that terminates at the Palace of Culture of Metal Plant Workers (1954–57). To the east begins the industrial zone of the Chelyabinsk Metallurgical Plant. Residential buildings are shaded to indicate construction period, highlighting housing built in the 1940s–1960s. (Marina Sapunova, Maria Karaselnikova, 2024)

urban planning project at Leningrad’s Lengiprogor Institute.²⁷ This project envisioned residential construction with social and cultural facilities arranged in a grid pattern with perimeter block planning. Bogdan Khmel’nitsky Street was designed to be the district’s central axis, featuring four five-storey neoclassical residential buildings and a pedestrian area with a green square. These architectural choices symbolised a shift from the early 1930s mythology of intense industrial mobilisation towards celebrating the Stalin Constitution and the emergence of a state projecting prosperity and welfare.²⁸ Wide boulevards lined with five-story Stalinist buildings, interspersed with abundant greenery, aimed to enhance the quality of life for residents. By the mid-1950s, the district’s population had surged to approximately 50,000, reflecting the city’s continued expansion and the broader success of Stalinist urban planning.²⁹ The centre of the architectural ensemble of the main street was the Palace of Culture of

Metal Plant Workers (Dvoretz Kultury Metallurgov), a centre for state-organised entertainment and leisure for workers and residents, constructed from 1954 to 1957 (Fig. 8.1).³⁰

"GIFT TO WORKERS": ICONICITY OF THE PALACE OF CULTURE OF METAL PLANT WORKERS

The plant's provision of housing and infrastructure for its workers helped reduce employee turnover and fostered a sense of loyalty and identity among its workforce. The plant reinforced its patronising image of a caretaker through the organisation of various events and reward systems. In November 1947, A. Abramova wrote in the newspaper *Chelyabinsk Metallurg* about the children's nurseries: "When we go to work, we know that our children are in caring hands." The same issue mentioned that the factory had launched buses for nursing mothers, transporting them from the workshop to the socialist city and back at specific times.³¹

The district continuously received new infrastructural additions. From 1965 to 1970, the area underwent significant development, marked by the construction of twenty kindergartens, a hospital, a law college, a clinic, various clubs, and residential buildings. Later, the *Salyut* cinema and the *Stroitel* swimming pool were added.³² This infrastructure was framed rhetorically as "gifts" from the factory to the metallurgists, with the grandest gift being the Palace of Culture of Metal Plant Workers, completed in 1957 and opened on 5 November, just days before the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution. The (unnamed) journalist at the plant's newspaper wrote: "The plant workers received a *good present* for the October holiday. The appearance of the building is pleasing; all the rooms are tastefully decorated" (emphasis by authors).³³

As is often the case with iconic socialist buildings, their architecture is not only meant to transmit certain political expressions, social meanings, and identities;³⁴ tied with specific local characteristics, the socialist iconic architecture is intended to represent specific communities and nurture their beliefs and self-identification.³⁵ The Palace of Culture of Metal Plant Workers was an impressive and monumental building: the entrance was marked by eight wide pillars, and the building was spatially isolated from the neighbouring houses, emphasising its dominant role in the architectural and urban ensemble. The palace interior included various rooms and halls for different activities: large concert auditoriums, a library, a



Figure 8.2: The Palace of Culture of Metal Plant Workers during a celebrational event in 1972 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the USSR. (Photographed by Liudmila Lebedeva, published on <https://pastvu.com/p/2337471>, uploaded by ssgen 6 April 2025)

sports hall, and separate rooms for creative activities. At the pinnacle of the pediment stood a sculpture entitled *Mir* (Peace), a woman striding forward with a palm branch raised in her hand. The 4.5-metre-tall sculpture, made of concrete with marble chips, is still preserved (Fig. 8.2).

There is some debate over the origins of the project. Some local historians attribute it to the Ministry of Metallurgical Industry, while others credit Architectural Workshop No. 3 of GIPROGOR, led by architect A. Zaitsev under the Directorate of Architecture at the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR.³⁶ What remains indisputable is that this late Stalinist standardised design was replicated extensively across key Soviet industrial centres, with nearly identical palaces of culture being built, with only minor variations, in Severodonetsk (Ukrainian SSR), Biysk (RSFSR). Nonetheless, the Palace of Culture of Metal Plant Workers stood out from the rest due to its expansive decorative elements, both inside and out, as well as the broad square in front of it.

This Palace of Culture was more than a representative structure; it was the heart of community life for workers and their families. It offered a wide range of activities, from professional and hobby clubs to women's and youth organisations and became known for hosting all-Union

famous creative groups like the Metallurg choral chapel and the children's ensemble Nadezhda.³⁷ The cultural and leisure offerings of the palace found their thankful audience among the residents: by 1983, around 8,000 people were involved in creative groups at the palace.³⁸ The palace also united people through collective events, creating cherished memories for attendees. Alexey K., who visited as a child, still remembers the awe and wonder of those moments. The attention to the spatiality of the palace in Alexey's recollection is notable:

As a child, it was simply a fantasy [to be inside the palace]. We often visited it for theatrical performances during big celebrations, which would always be followed by fun games in the cinema hall with Ded Moroz and Snegurochka, and finally, receiving gifts in the foyer by the cinema hall in an improvised little [Santa Klaus] house. I was always simply impressed...³⁹

LASTING LEGACY: VALUES OF THE PALACE OF CULTURE, 1990S AND 2000S

Throughout the changing ideological course of the USSR from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, the Palace of Culture continued to play an important role as a representative stage for Metal Plant workers and a central role in the iconography of the district and the plant presented on postcards and in anniversary albums. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Palace of Culture continued to play this role despite the crises.

During the denationalisation and privatisation of the housing and industrial sector in the 1990s, social and cultural infrastructure, previously financed by factories and enterprises, came under threat. Deprived of subsidies, industries sought to eliminate unprofitable assets that were difficult to commercialise – primarily cultural infrastructure. This was partly due to the fact that large buildings were difficult to repurpose for individual enterprises, and they had high maintenance costs; moreover, the struggle to divide up large industries was much more urgent. The Chelyabinsk Metallurgical Plant was one of the main protagonists of this dramatic and indeed “wild” struggle in ferrous metallurgy.

In 1993, the plant's labour collective voted to privatise the facility, transforming it into the joint-stock company Mechel.⁴⁰ However, this privatisation did not solve the problem; it only intensified the battle for control over stake acquisitions. By 1995, the entire metallurgical sector was in crisis, and Mechel had to suspend production temporarily due to

a coke shortage.⁴¹ This period was rife with lawlessness and criminality; notably, in 1995, the plant had two rival directors, each undermining the decisions of the shareholders' board, further complicating the power struggle.⁴² Despite resistance from local authorities, in 1999, a representative of the Swiss company Glencore took over leadership;⁴³ notably, all of that happened against the background of month-long delays in workers' salaries and the use of ration coupons.⁴⁴ After nearly a decade of fierce contestation, the plant merged in the early 2000s with the larger Steel Group Mechel, but the tensions surrounding the plant's privatisation even led to a political murder in 2002, when a deputy who had chaired the regional committee on state property management in Chelyabinsk and had interests in the plant's privatisation was assassinated in Moscow.⁴⁵

Amidst the struggle over the plant's ownership, many of its former assets, such as clubs, cinemas, and parks, were neglected, leaving their maintenance and the well-being of its workers to fate. The district's housing, built in conjunction with the plant, was successfully transferred to municipal ownership under the management of a state-funded Production Housing Repair Association (PHROA). By 1995, PHROA was responsible for servicing approximately 300 houses, including major and routine repairs, road maintenance, landscaping, and the upkeep of streets and courtyards.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, the Chelyabinsk Metallurgical Plant, now newly formed Mechel Joint Stock Company, retained ownership of the sanatorium, stadium, and the Palace of Culture of Metal Plant Workers.⁴⁷ This selective divestment of assets reflected pragmatic reasons: while the housing was transferred to the municipality, other facilities were retained for strategic reasons, as they could be used to capitalise the plant and serve as collateral in future economic transactions. Yet, as subsequent events around the Palace of Culture demonstrated, this decision also carried symbolic significance and enabled the plant to maintain its influence on the city's social and cultural life.

Preserving the Palace of Culture during the years of economic and political transformation after 1991 and surviving the "wild 1990s" has become a source of pride and a bonding idea for residents and plant workers. In 2000, Valery Alyushkin was appointed as the director of the palace. Rising from a worker to deputy head of the Metallurgical District Administration during the Soviet era, he demonstrated strong leadership skills.⁴⁸ His appointment strategically aligned the interests of the municipality and the plant, ensuring the palace continued as a community and corporate events hub.

In 2007, in honour of the fiftieth anniversary of the Palace of Culture, Valery Alyushkin said, "Our Palace is one of the few in the country that has managed to preserve all the creative groups [from the Soviet era]..." Alyushkin added that it was possible to preserve, rather than sell it off, the rich interior decorations in the palace made of marble and Czech crystal: "And yet many such palaces have recently undergone a makeover: externally they remained the same, with majestic columns, but inside they were stripped of all decoration, including mouldings and paintings."⁴⁹ Alyushkin strongly emphasised the financial relations between the palace and the plant:

Thanks to its *owner*, the Chelyabinsk Metal Plant, the Palace of Culture has no financial problems. The plant allocates about 25-30 million roubles to our "temple of arts," making us probably the only Palace of Culture in the Chelyabinsk region that the plant fully finances. It is wonderful that metallurgists support us! Children of the metallurgical plant workers, the plant workers themselves, and the plant veterans are all going to the Palace. However, the doors of the Palace of Culture are open not only for them but also for absolutely all residents of the Metallurgical District. (emphasis by authors)⁵⁰

The history of the palace's triumphant resistance through crises influences the contemporary discourse surrounding the district and its perception. In 2010, the Palace of Culture was granted state protection and recognised as a cultural heritage site of regional significance. While the palace is under protection, constant debates are held about the residential heritage of the district, especially regarding the "German Quarter," a series of houses built by German prisoners of war and the labour army for the factory workers in the late 1940s, resembling Northern European architectural style with bay windows and gables. These houses, sometimes referred to as "Little Germany" or "Frowning Hamburg," are unique monuments, atypical for both late 1940s Soviet architecture and for this district, where the main housing stock was built in the 1950s in a neoclassical style. In 2021, another expert evaluation confirmed that this quarter "does not contain a historical value"; therefore, these already dilapidated houses are constantly threatened by demolition.⁵¹ Due to the lack of communal repairs, many residents of the "German Quarter" who inherited their apartments but cannot sell them "because no one will buy those [due to their emergency condition]" express their willingness to be relocated to newer housing.⁵²

The conflict between the perspective of urban preservationists, who see the architectural and historical value of the quarter – especially as one of the last reminders of the district’s German history – and the residents, who have suffered for years from neglect by the authorities and municipal services and have been dragged into legal disputes over heritage evaluations, stands in stark contrast to the relatively successful development of the former Soviet Palace of Culture. It would be simplistic to claim that selective heritage values are at play in the district only because the palace symbolises Soviet power and resilience, while the “German Quarter,” associated with foreign influence and “uncomfortable” histories, is marginalised. What might be more important here is the lasting influence of a strong patron – the Metallurgical Plant – that reinforces the pride of a powerful industrial region, of which the Palace of Culture stands as a physical testament. Meanwhile, the “German Quarter” has been neglected for decades, both physically and symbolically, and thus its potential heritage value is alienated from the community and is now valued only by a small group of local historians and researchers.

The Palace of Culture of the Chelyabinsk Metallurgical Plant also demonstrates the absence of a critical dialogue surrounding the Stalinist era and the darker aspects of this architectural legacy. It remains a celebrated symbol in the city: a large photograph of the palace hangs prominently in the Chelyabinsk City Hall as a wall art at meetings between the mayor and important guests.⁵³ The symbolism of the palace overshadows the possibility of engaging in critical discussions.

Finally, the continuity of the Palace of Culture’s influence from Soviet to post-Soviet times is not typical among former Soviet industrial sites. In the Kalininsky district of Chelyabinsk, for example, the Palace of Culture for Ferroalloy Workers (Palace of Culture *ChEMK*), a small constructivist building recognised as a cultural heritage site, has fallen into disrepair and was repurposed in the 1990s and 2000s. Similarly, the Palace of Culture of the Chelyabinsk Tractor Plant (ChTZ) was converted into a marketplace for shoes, much to the disappointment of locals.⁵⁴ On the other hand, in large industrial cities like Yekaterinburg (formerly Sverdlovsk), many palaces of culture in former Soviet *sotsgorods* – where industry continues to operate – have retained their functional and symbolic significance.⁵⁵ While it is difficult to generalise the transformation of former Soviet infrastructure, the case of the Chelyabinsk Metal Plant demonstrates that strategically important enterprises have managed to preserve and even expand their influence over time. This persistence is not only a reflection

of the industrial strength of the plant but also of the specific urban planning of Soviet socialist cities, which linked infrastructure, housing, and industry. However, the case of the Palace of Culture illustrates that the survival of such cultural institutions ultimately depends on the specific trajectory of industrial transformation, with some sites adapting and thriving while others fade into obsolescence.

CHELYABINSK METAL PLANT SOCIALIST CITY: STILL SOCIALIST URBANISM?

Researchers assessed that the basic premises of the societal transformations of many former socialist regimes were mainly characterised “by the (re)emergence of national identity and the rejection of socialist ties.”⁵⁶ In the case of the Metallurgist district, these “socialist ties” to the industrial sector remain intact, with the plant still being the largest employer. This deep-rooted identity is exemplified by the Palace of Culture of Metal Plant Workers, which serves as a source of pride for the district and an integral part of the plant’s infrastructure. In 2017, these narratives were reinforced again. During his congratulatory speech, the director of the plant, Shchetinin, several times reminded those present that “everything will be fine: you relax [in our palace], and we will work for you,” reinforcing the financial dependencies and connections between the plant and its infrastructure.⁵⁷

While the need for leisure and entertainment persists regardless of political changes, the symbolic significance of socialist architecture may be challenged and repurposed by different stakeholders, as seen in former industrial socialist towns. In Nowa Huta, Poland, the promotion of socialist heritage tourism fosters dialogue and allows for the coexistence of complex memories about the past;⁵⁸ meanwhile, in Dunaújváros in Hungary (formerly Sztálinváros), efforts are focused on showcasing the city’s “organic evolution,” where communism represents only a small chapter in its broader history.⁵⁹

In the Metallurgical District, the dominant narrative still glorifies the heroic role of the industry, often overshadowing the experiences of labourers forcibly deported to build the plant. The stories of these labourers, including those expelled from other regions of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Germans who were also compelled to construct the plant and district, remain largely marginalised. However, traces of this memory persist in the city’s only Roman Catholic church and the “German quarter”.

The activist Ilya P. refers to this as a “counter-memory” that primarily interests local historians and tour guides rather than residents or local authorities.⁶⁰ The neighbourhood has yet to immortalise the complex history of the construction of the socialist city in the form of a research tradition or artistic reflection.

NOTES

- 1 The Chelyabinsk Metal Plant (*zavod*) was renamed in 1983 to Chelyabinsk Metal Combine (*kombinat*). In this text, we use Metal Plant interchangeably for both names and the shorter name ChMZ.
- 2 This year, the disputes over bankruptcy of the enterprises were submitted to the local court. See “Zaregistrovano zayavleniye o bankrotstve vkhodyashchego v ‘Mechel’ metkombinata” [An Application for Banking Interaction with Mechel Iron and Steel Works was Registered], Arbitration Court of the Chelyabinsk Region, 22 March 2017, <https://rapsinews.ru/arbitration/20170322/278071258.html>. All further sources in Russian Latinised and translated by authors in English, if not indicated differently. Translation from interviews and direct quotes are quoted in the original Latinised language in the footnotes.
- 3 “Yubiley DK 60” [The 60 Years Anniversary of the Palace of Culture], posted by DK ChMK, 19 November 2017, 07:00–09:15, https://m.vk.com/video-113449860_456239018.
- 4 Maksim Lebskii, *Rabochii klass SSSR: zhizn’ v usloviakh promyshlennogo paternalizma* [The Working Class of the USSR: Life in Conditions of Industrial Paternalism] (Moskva: Gorizontal’, 2021), 32–82.
- 5 Socialist city, or *sotsgorod* was a type of urban settlement adopted as a way to modernise society and solve the housing crisis in the years of intense industrialisation and urbanisation starting from the early 1930s. These cities were centred on industry and aimed at fostering collective living, with shared facilities like kitchens and nurseries. See N. A. Milyutin, *Sotsgorod: Problema stroitel’stva sotsialisticheskikh gorodov: Osnovnyye voprosy ratsional’noy planirovki i stroitel’stva naselennykh mest SSSR* [Sotsgorod: The Problem of Building Socialist Cities], 1st ed. (Moskva: Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoye izdatel’stvo, 1930), 26–31.
- 6 A. I. Treivish and T. G. Nefedova, “Old-Developed Regions of the Ural Macroregion and Its Large Centers in the Middle,” *Regional Research of Russia* 12, no. Suppl 1 (2022): 168–75, DOI: 10.1134/S2079970522700393.
- 7 The “Wild 1990s” or *likhie devyanostye* is a term used in historiography and mass culture to describe the decade that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and specifically economic transformations to the market economy through the neoliberal reforms. The label “wild” reflects the chaotic, lawless, and often violent nature of this time, marked by hyperinflation and instability. For a review on discussions see Alexander Fokin and Olga Golechkova. “Novyye issledovaniya ob istoricheskoy pamyati 1990-kh godov. Mezhdistsiplinarnyy nauchno-issledovatel’skiy seminar s mezhdunarodnym uchastiyem ‘Likhie’ ili ‘svyatyye’: 90-e gody v fokuse pamyati i istoricheskoy politiki” [New Research on Historical Memory of the 1990s. Interdisciplinary Research Seminar with International Participation “Dashing” or “Saint”: The 90s in the Focus of Memory and Historical Politics], *New Literary Observer* 2, no. 186 (2024): 376–89.
- 8 Nadir Kinossian, “Rethinking the Post-Socialist City,” *Urban Geography* 43, no. 8 (14 September 2022): 1240–51, DOI: 10.1080/02723638.2022.2102332.
- 9 See Mikhail Ilchenko, “Uralmash mezhdú «naslediyem» i «utopiyey»: arkhitektura avangarda v poiskakh yazykov opisaniya” [Uralmash between “Heritage” and “Utopia”: Avant-garde Architecture in Search of Descriptive Languages], *Neprikosnovennyy zapas. Debaty o politike i kulture* 114, no. 4 (2017): 215–35.

- ¹⁰ Michał Murawski elaborates the concept to describe the enduring legacies and characteristics of socialist urban planning in former socialist cities after the fall of socialist regimes in Europe and collapse of the Soviet Union. See Michał Murawski, “Actually-Existing Success: Economics, Aesthetics, and the Specificity of (Still-) Socialist Urbanism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 4 (2018): 907–37, DOI: 10.1017/S0010417518000336.
- ¹¹ Murawski, “Actually-Existing Success,” 908–10.
- ¹² Milyutin, *Sotsgorod*, 26–31.
- ¹³ See Christina E. Crawford, *Spatial Revolution: Architecture and Planning in the Early Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022); Barbara Engel, “The Concept of the Socialist City: Plans and Patterns of Soviet Urbanism,” *International Planning History Society Proceedings* 19, no. 1 (2022): 663–78, <https://journals.open.tudelft.nl/iph/article/view/6516>.
- ¹⁴ See Mark Meerovich, *Nakazaniye zhlilishchem: zhlilishchnaya politika v SSSR kak sredstvo upravleniya lyud'mi. 1917-1937* [Punishment by Housing: Housing Policy in the USSR as a Means of Controlling People (1917–1937)] (Moscow: ROSSPEN: Political Encyclopedia, 2008).
- ¹⁵ Evgenia Konysheva, “Sovetskoye gradostroitelnoye proyektirovaniye serediny 1930-kh gg.: na perelome epokh,” [Soviet Urban Planning of the Mid-1930s: At the Turn of the Era], *Seriya: Sotsialno-gumanitarnyye nauki, Vestnik Yuzhno-Uralskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 30, no. 247 (2011): 71–7.
- ¹⁶ For the societal and cultural effects of the early Soviet *sotsgorods* and its new urbanites, who often were residents of rural areas before, see Sándor Horváth, “Everyday Life in the First Hungarian Socialist City,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 68 (2005): 24–46, DOI: 10.1017/S0147547905000189; Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia: Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949–56* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).
- ¹⁷ See Mark Meerovich, *Tipologiya zhlilishcha sotsgorodov-novostroyek* [Typology of Housing in Newly Built Socialist Cities] (Irkutsk, Russia: IGU, 2014).
- ¹⁸ See Evgenia Konysheva, S. Bakanov, and L. Nikitin, eds., *Gorod v Zerkale Genplana: Panorama Gradostroitel'nykh Proektov v Rossiiskoi Provintsii XVIII – Nachala XXI Vekov* [The City in the Mirror of the Master Plan: A Panorama of Urban Planning Projects in the Russian Provinces from the Eighteenth to the Early Twenty-first Century] (Chelyabinsk: Izd-vo ChGPU, 2008).
- ¹⁹ On the example of this tendency in Yekaterinburg, another major industrial city in the Urals. Elena Sh. and Elena S., interview by Polina Gundarina, 16 May 2022.
- ²⁰ See L. V. Yenina and N. B. Gramatchikova, *Pervostroitel'i Uralmasha Kak Performativnyy Proyeekt: Konstruirovaniye Zavodskoy Identichnosti* [Uralmash Pioneers as a Performative Project: Constructing a Factory Identity] (Yekaterinburg: Kabinetnyy uchenyy, 2021); Ilchenko, “Uralmash mezhdru «naslediyem» i «utopiyey».”
- ²¹ See Mark Meerovich, Evgenia Konysheva, and Dmitry Khmel'nitskiy, *Kladbishche Sotsgorodov: Gradostroitel'naya Politika v SSSR 1928-1932 Gg.* [Cemetery of Socialist Cities: Urban Planning Policy in the USSR (1928–1932)] (Moscow: ROSSPEN: Political Encyclopedia, 2011); for Uralmash, see Mikhail Ilchenko, “Uralmash: Re-Imagining Utopia, Re-Constructing Urban Space,” in *Post-Utopian Spaces: Transforming and Re-Evaluating Urban Icons of Socialist Modernism*, eds. Valentin Mihaylov and Mikhail Ilchenko, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), 33–57, DOI: 10.4324/9781003260769.
- ²² See Polina Gundarina, “The Soviet Palace: From Social Hub to Remnant of the Past and Back Again: Evolution of Soviet Club in Sverdlovsk-Yekaterinburg,” in *Echoes of Soviet Urbanism: Exploring Modernist Housing Narratives*, ed. Barbara Engel (DOM Publishers, 2024), 74–92.
- ²³ Ilya P., interview by Polina Gundarina, 17 October 2023.
- ²⁴ *Fritslyandiya na Urale*, 2018, 44; Anna Tsepkalova, “Trudovyye resursy na stroykakh GULAGA: Kharakteristika spetskontingenta Chelyabmetallurgstroya v 1940-e gody” [Labour Resources at Gulag Construction Sites: Characteristics of the Special Contingent of Chelyabmetallurgstroy in the 1940s], *Bulletin of Chelyabinsk State University* 12 (2011): 90–8.
- ²⁵ A. I Gets, “Gorkaya Byl,” *Vecherniy Chelyabinsk*, 1989, 11 edition. 103.
- ²⁶ The *Metallurgicheskiy rayon* (or Metallurgist's district) included territories more than a Chelyabinsk Metal Plant's socialist city like previously sparsely populated villages Kashtak and Pershino.

- ²⁷ Evgenia Konysheva, "Ansambľ sotsgoroda ChMZ" [Ensemble of the Sotsgorod ChMZ], *Cheľyabinskaya oblast'. Arkhitektura. Stroitel'stvo* 4, no. 7 (2004): 8–9; E. Zakharova, "BAKALLAG kak gradoobrazuyushchii faktor v istorii" [BAKALLAG as a City-forming Factor in the History of the Metallurgical District of Chelyabinsk], *Historical Demography* 2, no. 24 (2019), 53–7.
- ²⁸ Konstantin Bugrov, *Sotsgoroda Bol'shogo Urala* [Socialist Cities of the Big Ural] (Ural University Publishing House, 2018), 201–96.
- ²⁹ Larisa Yarosh and Sergey Lebedev, "O Metallurgicheskom rayone" [About Metallurgical District, Council of Deputies of the Metallurgical District, <https://metallsovet.ru/металлургический-район/о-районе/>, accessed 5 May 2024, (site discontinued according to Roskomnadzor).
- ³⁰ Yarosh and Lebedev, "O Metallurgicheskom rayone."
- ³¹ "Kogda my idem na rabotu, my znaem, chto nashi deti budut v zabotivnykh rukakh," *Cheľyabinskii Metallurg*, November 19, 1947. [Translation by authors.]
- ³² G. Rychkova, ed., *Nash dom – Metallurgicheskii rayon* [Our Home is the Metallurgical District] (GARO, 1995), 10–12.
- ³³ "K oktyabrskomu prazdniku zavodchane poluchili khoroshiy podarok. Vneshniy vid zdaniya raduyet, vse komnaty oformleny so vkusom." Sergey Lebedev, "Virtual Museum." <https://metallsovet.ru/виртуальный-музей/>, accessed 30 May 2024, (site discontinued according to Roskomnadzor). [Translation by authors.]
- ³⁴ See Susan Emily Reid and David Crowley, *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2000).
- ³⁵ See Benedict Anderson, "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism," in *The New Social Theory Reader*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 282–8.
- ³⁶ T. Stepankaya, "O istoriko-arkhitekturnoy tsennosti Dvortsa kul'tury Biyskogo khimicheskogo kombinata (AO «Polieks»)" [About the Historical and Architectural Value of the Palace of Culture of Biysk Chemical Combine (JSC «Polieks»)], in *Sokhraneniye i izucheniye kulturnogo naslediya Altayskogo kraya*. [Preservation and Study of the Cultural Heritage of the Altai Territory], ed. Y. Kiryushin (Barnaul, 1997), 226.
- ³⁷ "Dvoret kul'tury i tekhniki Aktsionernogo obshchestva Chelyabinskii metallurgicheskii kombinat Mechel (1957–...)" [Palace of Culture and Technology of the Joint-Stock Company Chelyabinsk Metallurgical Plant "Mechel" (1957–...)], United State Archive of the Chelyabinsk Region. F. P-791, 221 storage units, 1957–95, op. 1; foreword. <https://archive74.ru/kulturno-prosvetitelnye-uchrezhdeniya>
- ³⁸ *Chelyabinsk Metal Plant (Combinat)*, illustrated album (Chelyabinsk, 1983), 44.
- ³⁹ "V detstve okazatsya vo Dvortse bylo prosto mechttoy. My chasto khodili tuda na teatral'nyye postanovki vo vremya bolshikh prazdnikov, posle kotorykh vsegda shli veselyye igry v kinozale s Dedom Morozom i Snegurochkoy, i, konechno, poluchali podarki v foye u kinozala v improvizirovannom domike [Santa-Klaus]. Menya eto vsegda pristo voskhishchalo..." Alexey K., interview by Polina Gundarina, 20 October 2023. [Translation by authors.]
- ⁴⁰ *Kommersant-Vlast*, "Privatizatsiya metallurgicheskogo kombinata. Deystviya administratsii priznany nepravomocnymi" [Privatisation of a Metallurgical Plant. The Actions of the Administration Were Recognised as Unauthorised], 26 February 1993.
- ⁴¹ *Kommersant-Vlast*, "Istoriya: 1991–2000" [History 1991–2000], 18 September 1991; *Kommersant-Vlast*, "Privatizatsiya metallurgicheskogo kombinata."
- ⁴² *Kommersant*, "Skandal v AO Mechel" [Scandal at the Mechel PJSC], 8 April 1995.
- ⁴³ *Kommersant-Vlast*, "Les ne rubyat, a metallurgi letyat" [Metallurgists are Getting Fired], 20 February 1996.
- ⁴⁴ "Skandal v AO Mechel."
- ⁴⁵ *Kommersant*, "Ya samyy informirovannyi chelovek" [I am the Most Informed Person], 22 August 2002.
- ⁴⁶ Rychkova, *Nash dom – metallurgicheskii rayon*, 20.
- ⁴⁷ "Godovoy otchet po rezultatam raboty za 2023 god" [Annual Report on the Results of Work for 2023] (Chelyabinsk: Publichnoe Aktsionerное Obshchestvo "Chelyabinskii Metallurgicheskii Kombinat" [Public Joint Stock Company "Chelyabinsk Metal Plant"]), 14 May 2024.

- ⁴⁸ “Pochetnyye zhiteli Metallurgicheskogo rayona” [Honourable Residents of the Metallurgical District], Council of Deputies of the Metallurgical District, <https://metallsovet.ru/металлургический-район/почётные-жители-района/> accessed 29 May 2024, (site discontinued according to Roskomnadzor).
- ⁴⁹ “Nash dvorets – odin iz nemnogikh v strane, kotoromu udalos’ sokhranit’ vse tvorcheskije koll-ektivny... A ved’ mnogiye podobnyye dvortsy v posledneye vremya podverglis’ drugoy peredelke: vneshne ostalis’ takimi zhe, s velichestvennymi kolonnami, a vnutri lishilis’ vsego ubranstva, vkluchaya lepniny, rospisi.” *Vechniy Chelyabinsk*, “My District is Metallurgical. Jubilee,” 26 December 2007. [Translation by authors.]
- ⁵⁰ “U Dvortsa kultury blagodarya yego khozyainu – Chelyabinskomu metallurgicheskomu kombi-natu – net nikakikh finansovykh problem. Poryadka 25 – 30 millionov rubley vydelyayet CHMK khramu iskusstv. Seychas v Chelyabinskoy oblasti my, naverno, yedinstvennym Dvortsom kul’tury, kotoryy polnost’yu nakhoditsya na finansirovanii zavoda. Zdorovo, chto metallurgi nas podderzhivayut. Vo dvortse zanimayutsya deti rabotnikov metallurgicheskogo kombinata, sami zavodchane, veterany zavoda. Odnako dveri DK otkryty ne tolko dlya nikh, no i dlya absol’yutno vseh zhitel’ey Metallurgicheskogo rayona.” *Vechniy Chelyabinsk*, “Moy rayon Metallurgicheskii” [My district is Metallurgicheskii], 26 December 2007. [Translation by authors.]
- ⁵¹ The houses in the “German Quarter” were recognised as cultural heritage objects in 2017, but a re-examination in 2021 cancelled this decision. The expertise is not published in the public domain. For an analysis of the expertise, see *Komsomolskaya Pravda-Chelyabinsk*, “Yesli nemetskiy kvartal snesut – eto podtverdit, chto Chelyabinsk – gorod urodov” [“If the ‘German Quarter’ is Demolished – it Will Confirm that Chelyabinsk is a City of Freaks], 22 June 2021.
- ⁵² Ulyana Zaikova, “Arkhitekturnaya kalka. Pochemu novaya ekspertiza nemetskogo kvartala oka-zalas’ kopiyey predydushchey” [Architectural Copycat. Why the New Examination of the German Neighbourhood Turned out to be a Copy of the Previous One], *74.ru*, 24 June 2021.
- ⁵³ Konstantin Babushkin, “Zastroyschiki Chelyabinska vybrali uchastki dlya proyektov KRT” [Chelyabinsk Property Developers Selected Bids for KRT Projects], News Portal, 24 August 2023, <https://www.10bl.ru/news/ekonomika/zastroyschiki-chelyabinska-vybrali-uchastki-dlya-proekktov-krt/>
- ⁵⁴ Ilya P., interview by Polina Gundarina, 17 October 2023.
- ⁵⁵ For discussion of Yekaterinburg, see Polina Gundarina, “One Past, One Future? The Fate of Modernist Palaces of Culture in Post-Socialist Germany and Russia: Historical Background, Current Status, and Future Prospects,” in *Kulturhäuser – Demokratie Feiern (23/3)*, eds. Daniel Bartetzko, Danuta Schmidt, Till Schauen, Polina Gundarina, and Maximilian Kraemer, *Moderneregional 2023*, vol. 3, August 2023: 24–8.
- ⁵⁶ Nick Naumov and Adi Weidenfeld, “From Socialist Icons to Post-Socialist Attractions: Iconicity of Socialist Heritage in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Geographia Polonica* 92, no. 4 (2019), 384, DOI: 10.7163/10.7163/GPoL.0147.
- ⁵⁷ “Yubiley DK 60” [The 60 Years Anniversary of the Palace of Culture], 09:08, https://m.vk.com/video-113449860_456239018 [Translation by the authors.]
- ⁵⁸ Rasa Balockaite, “Coping with the Unwanted Past in Planned Socialist Towns: Visaginas, Tychy, and Nowa Huta,” *Slovo* 24, no. 1 (2012), 58.
- ⁵⁹ Katarzyna Zechenter, “The Repositioning of Postsocialist Narratives of Nowa Huta and Dunaújváros,” *Revue Des Études Slaves* 86, no. LXXXVI-1–2 (2015): 141–56, DOI: DOI: 10.4000/res.691.
- ⁶⁰ Ilya P., interview. See also the performance of Anastasia Bogomolova, *Bakal*, 2016, video documentation of two performances, photographs, installation, video, sculpture, 2016, <https://anastasiabogomolova.com/en/bakal>.

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Chapter 9

Cafeneaua Guguță

Heritage and Civic Activism in Chișinău

Abigail Karas

INTRODUCTION

The Cafeneaua Guguță is a socialist modernist building located in Ștefan cel Mare City Park in the centre of Chișinău, the capital of the Republic of Moldova. A popular hangout among the city's late- and post-Soviet children and young people, it fell into disrepair after the café's closure in 2007. This article examines the history and fate of the Guguță as the café became the subject of civic activism and protest, with residents, authorities, and private business battling over its privatisation and proposals for its demolition. While the building was at risk of demolition, as it was not included on the official list of objects of national heritage, I examine the process by which it has been "heritagised" from below, that is, it has been designated heritage by the people who interact with the space and have memories of the café's use. Through citizen intervention, the Cafeneaua Guguță was transformed into a symbol in the fight for Chișinău's urban public spaces. Citizen efforts to preserve the building, moreover, highlight the role of urban activism as a means to advocate for change, address social and political issues, shape the development and governance of their city, and push for change at a national level.

Adopting a case study approach, I examine the efforts to protect the café as a process of "commoning," which, in the case of the Guguță, not only manifests itself at the level of local activism but also raises questions about the constitution and functioning of the urban and citizens' rights to the city in contemporary Moldova. In this article, I adopt a Lefebvrian understanding of the city as a commons that needs to be reclaimed as "[t]he city is itself 'oeuvre,' a feature which contrasts with the irreversible tendency towards money and commerce, towards exchange and products. Indeed, the oeuvre is use value and the product is exchange values."



Figure 9.1: The abandoned Cafeneaua Guguță, April 2023 (Photo: Abigail Karas)

Lefebvre’s definition is complemented by the work of Hardt and Negri, who employ the same idea in their assertion of “the metropolis as a factory for the production of the common.”² In this sense, the city is a work in progress, socially produced through the daily practices and struggles of individual groups, who *create* something common as a framework for the urban, even in spaces subject to control and surveillance by both private and public state ownership.³ As such, the commons emerge as a powerful means for citizens to assert their “right to the city,” per Lefebvre.⁴

As Kalb and Mollona write, “[c]ommoning practices seek to enact shared rights to livelihoods for all and embody and express a popular sense that such rights should be protected and be enforceable.”⁵ In the contemporary city, citizens’ understandings of their right to the city have now become interwoven with calls for more liveable and socially equitable spaces.⁶ These rallying cries have become increasingly activated by heritage concerns, as urban heritage conflicts centre on and draw attention to issues of value creation, urban enclosure, and public participation.⁷ Drawing on the example of the movement to preserve the Cafeneaua Guguță – Occupy Guguță – this article examines how, as

a grassroots and autonomous social practice, citizen-led heritagisation processes can invigorate the urban commons. By tracing the history of the building and the movement to protect the Guguță and by examining its political, cultural, and social ramifications, this study of citizen-led heritagisation processes sheds light on the dialectical interplay between citizen agency and institutional authority and the potential of the urban commons as an alternative to both neoliberal capitalism and the now defunct system of state socialism that functioned in Moldova following Soviet occupation in 1940 until the country's independence in 1991.

THE HISTORY OF CAFENEUA GUGUȚĂ

Situated in the centrally located Ștefan cel Mare City Park in Chișinău, the Cafeneua Guguță building began its life as the Noroc (Good Luck) restaurant, designed in 1967 by Kudinov and Zakharov and opened in 1969. However, after just seven years, in 1976, the restaurant was closed and the building underwent a complete redesign led by Sergei Lebedev and Nicon Zaporozhan (who later became Deputy Chief Architect of the Chișinău municipality).⁸ During this process, both the exterior and interior of the building were reconfigured, and it was given a new name – Guguță.

This new moniker was inspired by a beloved character from Moldovan children's literature, created by the author Spiridon Vangheli. In Vangheli's stories, Guguță is a young boy known for wearing an oversized traditional lambskin hat called a *cușmă*, which was given to him by his father.⁹ Guguță demonstrates his generosity and kindness by inviting the entire village to seek shelter under his hat during a harsh winter storm: the more people gather under the hat, the larger it magically grows. The awnings over the main entrance to the building were, therefore, designed to be reminiscent of the domed shape of Guguță's hat.

In addition to this close link to Moldovan children's literature, the new café was designed to cater to children, particularly “for the capital's cultured little ones and for all the children coming to Chișinău.”¹⁰ Indeed, it was one of the few spaces in the city specifically designated for people and young people, described in the local press as “unique in the country” and “the best place to spend childhood.”¹¹ Many milestones of childhood and adolescence were celebrated at the café. One resident, for instance, recalled receiving their high school diploma there in 1985, while another celebrated the birthday of a classmate.¹² In 1987, a youth club – Molodezh'



Figure 9.2: The entrance of the abandoned Cafeneaua Guguță, April 2023 (Photo: Abigail Karas)

i moda (Youth and Fashion) – opened in the café, highlighting that the role of this space was not only to provide a space for children but also to nurture cultured, socialist citizens. The newspaper *Vechernii Kishinev* wrote on 4 February 1987 that “[the club’s] task is to introduce young men and women to modern fashion trends in clothing, cultivate musical tastes, and teach dancing.”¹³ This emphasis on cultivating taste highlights the significant role of the café in the aesthetic education of the city’s children. A key part of this was the idea that, with proper guidance, artistic and creative education would help to shape a child’s moral character in addition to their education in socialist ideology.¹⁴ In this way, the Guguță, along with the park in which it is located, served as a focal point of late-Soviet sociality, playing a pivotal role in shaping future generations and thus strengthening socialism.

Visiting the Cafeneaua Guguță was a part of Soviet Moldovan childhood as a place for the city’s children to socialise and play, underscored by its appearance in the 1981 Moldovan film *Perekhodnyi voзраст* (Coming of Age), directed by Ion Scutelnic. This was a feature that persisted into the 1990s and after independence. As one local activist described:

The Cafeneaua Guguță is part of my childhood, as it was the place my parents and grandparents took me for ice cream when we were in Central Park. There weren't so many places you could go, back then, in the 90s, I only remember one more besides this one.¹⁵

This association with childhood later proved important in the development of a movement around the Cafeneaua Guguță, rallying residents in support of the building, as, for many local citizens, their attachment to the café was predicated on memories of childhood within the space. Among activists engaged in the building's protection, this allowed for the co-construction of the meaning of the space and the creation of a shared sense of place by those who spent their childhoods or youth at the Guguță. This helped garner public recognition for the movement, contributed to the symbolic re-evaluation of the building, and bolstered efforts to save the building when it was threatened by private interests.

THE EMERGENCE OF OCCUPY GUGUȚĂ

In the early 2000s, the café ceased operations and became an abandoned corner of the park, falling into disrepair. Although it was municipal property, it was illegally privatised in 2007 and subsequently sold and repurchased by various companies, with a lack of transparency in the chain of ownership. In 2007, the Chișinău municipal council was the majority shareholder of S.A. *Guguță*. However, following a series of dubious transactions, the site became the property of the company Finpar Invest. This entity was “a core company of the real estate empire” controlled by Vladimir Plahotniuc, the Moldovan oligarch who obtained political supremacy from 2017 to 2019 through his political vehicle, the Modern Democratic Party (PDM).¹⁶

In 2017, Finpar sold the land of the Guguță (along with the Palace of Culture of Trade Unions in the city's Rîșcani area) to the company Regata Imobiliare. A year later, a demolition permit was obtained, and permission granted to build a thirteen-story business centre and hotel complex on the site, after judges of the Court of Appeal rejected petitions from both the Chișinău municipal council and the Agency for the Inspection and Protection of Monuments. Crucially, this involved the expropriation of land that had legally protected status as a part of Ștefan cel Mare City Park, an object of national heritage and number one on the country's register of

monuments protected by the state (although the Guguță building itself is not protected, despite being an interesting example of socialist modernist design, a fact that underscores the ambivalent relationship towards Soviet-era architecture across the city). As one Guguță activist asserted:

The fact that we even discussed the demolition of the café and the possibility of building a twelve-level [*sic*] hotel is a clear sign that there is something rotten in our law and values system. First of all, the building is located in the heart of Chișinău, in a green area, a historical park, placed number one on the list of protected monuments. There should be no possibility to build anything in the park.¹⁷

However, Ceslav Ciuhrii, the owner of Regata Imobiliare, claimed that the land on which the café is located is not a part of Ștefan cel Mare City Park and has its own cadastral number, a unique identifier assigned to it by the relevant planning authorities, and thus should be free to be developed.¹⁸

The liberalisation of Moldova's economy and privatisation, along with political factors in the country, have had a direct impact on the objectives of and attitudes towards cultural heritage. This process of expropriation of the café was emblematic of both the monopolisation of political power and economic interest since the country's independence and the issues of privatisation and commercialisation of property that occurred following the collapse of the state socialist regime, which fundamentally altered citizens' rights to the city and access to public space.¹⁹ The appropriation of land was facilitated by the often-arbitrary nature of planning rules inherited from the Soviet era and the ability or lack of will (as a result of both administrative and political corruption) to ensure compliance with regulations. The same can be said for heritage laws, which often lack effective mechanisms to ensure adherence to norms, leading to the demolition and destruction of urban heritage objects.²⁰ Indeed, of the 15,000 known heritage sites across the country, according to a European Commission pilot project on the rehabilitation of cultural heritage in historic towns, only 5,206 are included in the register of monuments protected by the state, and, even then, there is no guarantee of protection.²¹ In the case of the Cafeneaua Guguță, it was argued by pro-Plahotniuc forces and private business that, despite being public property, the park land could be privatised, despite its heritage status, as whoever possessed the building could take ownership of the soil beneath it.

As plans to demolish the building gained momentum, a small group of citizens began to follow the case. Although they had been aware of plans for demolition since at least 2014, in 2017, they began filing freedom of information requests to ascertain whether all the correct legal procedures had been followed. Alarm bells began to ring shortly as it became evident that proper procedure was not being adhered to. For example, public consultations were not adequately carried out, and meetings were held without representatives from the city's architecture department. Citizen activists, therefore, began searching for more documentation. Shortly thereafter, they began to involve other organisations, such as those involved in environmental struggles or fighting for greater transparency in Moldovan politics. Soon, they began to organise protests and demonstrations, calling people to meet in front of the Guguță.

In the eyes of these citizens, the appropriation and expropriation of the park land on which the café was situated was emblematic of the neoliberal capitalist model of urbanisation that proliferated after the collapse of state socialism. This created an environment in which those with economic and political capital were able to leverage their positions for personal gain, while the state proved unable to enforce the requisite rules and regulations as a result of corruption.

The co-optation of the Guguță by private interest became a focal point for citizens' dissatisfaction with the increased commodification and marketisation of urban spaces across the city, which prioritised the interests of the privileged few. As the group's manifesto asserted:

The park has served the city and its citizens – it is a meeting place for celebrations, a place for preserving our culture and our collective memory. Protecting the park is the responsibility of all city residents [...] the objects that are located within its boundaries, including the Cafeneaua Guguță, are in the national protection zone.²²

The threat to the Guguță thus served as a significant turning point in perceptions of Chișinău residents of their right to the city, galvanising a movement to reclaim control over the city's public space and empowering them to participate in decision-making processes.

Moreover, the Cafeneaua Guguță became a symbol of the country's poor governance under Vladimir Plahotniuc, specifically, as the plans to develop the site coincided with a broader consolidation of power that was happening at the time. Plahotniuc meticulously cemented his power

throughout 2017 despite lacking popular legitimacy and being widely reviled by the public. Thus, the activism of Occupy Guguță centred on the importance of this particular building and, in turn, broader issues of corruption and transparency in Moldova. This highlighted the need to enhance the protection of property rights and reduce corruption, as well as to improve the quality of public services across the city:

We wanted and still want to make the case of Guguță café a metaphor for the current state of affairs in Moldova. Cases like this happen all over Chișinău and Moldova – building irregularly without permit or with a permit obtained against the law, destroying the green spaces with constructions, having infinite law cases that bring social tiredness and loss of hope, corruption on all levels of decision making and across institutions, public disregard.²³

Thus, heritage activism – and activist movements coalesced around urban issues more broadly – functions as an outlet for broader critiques of the political, cultural, and social climate in Moldova since the collapse of the state socialist regime and the rapid neo-liberalisation of the city's governance, which emphasised both privatisation and deregulation alongside the introduction of capitalist market relations.

While the process of post-Soviet urbanisation led, in many ways, to the dispossession of urban residents, their interactions with and understandings of socialist modern heritage are problematised by their relationship to the contentious legacies of the country's Soviet past. The collapse of the state socialist regime was accompanied by a pressing need to decide which elements of the Soviet past Moldova should retain and which it should discard. Although many communist monuments and memorials were removed in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, many were later reinstated.²⁴ This highlights the contradictory and often equivocal relationship to the country's Soviet past.²⁵ Efforts to save the Guguță building necessarily entailed a re-evaluation of its significance to local culture, as one activist noted: “the building itself might not be an architectural marvel, but there are things making it valuable: the location, the façade, the inner bas-relief, the memory of the space, etc.”²⁶ The activists demonstrated a recognition of the inherited social capital of the space, by accessing past values and traditions, while also supported by individual memories of childhood spent at the café (and in the park) that helped to foster a shared sense of identity and community. Moreover, while a distinction tends to be drawn between national Moldovan heritage and

Soviet heritage, what made this building so important was that it served as a blending of the two, functioning as a monument to socialist modern architecture but also to Moldovan culture: “The bas-relief on the building, in the inside, the white one, was done by Igor Vieru, one of the great Moldovan artists, who passed away. It is a Moldovan composition.”²⁷ While working throughout the Soviet era, Igor Vieru was greatly inspired by traditional Moldovan folk art and also provided illustrations for Vangheli’s Guguță stories, from which the café drew its inspiration.

In its interaction with architectural remnants of the past, heritage preservation is intuitively concerned with the relationship between heritage and the present, as well as the introduction of new meaning and value. This heritagisation process is necessarily temporally disjointed, deeply concerned with discourses of history while also oriented towards the future, as it is activated by the role of this history in both the country’s present and its value for the future. This temporal rupture was indicated by the Occupy Guguță activists’ assertion that their process would be “permanent,”²⁸ using techniques to both disrupt and delay, through both public demonstrations and legal mechanisms, formulating a new concept of time that perhaps might be understood in opposition to the capitalist dogma that “time is money.”

In the case of the Guguță, the reappraisal of the building’s architectural forms, in light of the monopolisation of political and economic power under Plahotniuc, entailed the introduction of new values of openness and freedom to remnants of the Soviet past. This played a crucial role in the heritagisation process, reinterpreting the café as an intergenerational public good that should benefit both present and future generations of Chișinău residents rather than the interests of a small group of privileged few. Focusing on a single building served as a productive outlet for citizens’ political grievances, taking on new dynamics and expanding from a single point of focus to a much broader civic movement. It connected the wider public with the activism, imposing the group’s demands into the public discourse and connecting these issues with the lives of regular citizens: “We were in a way successful in imposing the topic – like the quality of the site, who owns the space, and what the uses of the space are [...] and how we should use them – on the public agenda.”²⁹ This underscores not only how urban activism functions to symbolically revalue previously marginalised architectural sites (after all, the café had fallen almost into ruin), but how heritage objects may be employed as a political mobilisation device, helping to empower a broad public. In this way, heritage and the

utilisation of the past can be seen as a means for building an alternative future through the creation of more open processes and equal social and economic relations, which, in the case of Occupy Guguță, were explicitly constructed in opposition to the state and private interest.

The new language acquired by the Occupy Guguță activists led to the promotion of a new discourse on governance and democracy in Moldova, serving as a springboard for critiquing broader issues faced by Moldovan society, which at that time included the government, corruption, and the capture of all state institutions by the system. Crucially, the Guguță protests coincided with the overturning of Chișinău's 2018 local elections,³⁰ in which the popular candidate Andrei Năstase was accused of political agitation and illegal campaign activities for telling people via Facebook to go out and vote on the day of the elections. As a result, an interim pro-Plahotniuc mayor was installed. This served as a galvanising moment for Occupy Guguță:

They have decided to demolish the Cafeneaua Guguță and they have decided to nullify the results of the elections in Chișinău [...] so we have decided to protest permanently, because a real patriot doesn't only shout "Moldova!" and wave the flag, but also fights for Moldova's freedom and democracy.³¹

The Guguță building was draped in banners with slogans such as, "I serve the country and the people, not the dictator" and, "Moldova will be independent."

CAFENEAUA GUGUȚĂ AS THE URBAN COMMONS

In Chișinău, the shift towards neoliberal modes of urban governance following the collapse of state socialism resulted in the co-optation of public space by power and profit interests, as illustrated by the case of the Guguță, alongside an increasingly atomised public. The erosion of communal signification within the city's public spaces alongside the dominance of profit-driven market interests reinforced an exclusionary approach to urban development following the country's independence, marginalising the voices and needs of residents, a trajectory shared by other countries that undertook the path of post-socialist transition.³² However, the Occupy Guguță movement challenged this dominant paradigm of privatisation and market-oriented approaches to the city's urban

development, described by Caroline Humphrey and Katherine Verdery as an “enclosure of the commons,” by promoting principles of equity and inclusivity.³³ In the view of the activists, the café (as part of the central park) was supposed to be a collective space, and, thus, they were reclaiming it as such. Their actions can accordingly be examined as a process of “commoning,” revealing the potential of the urban commons as a space of resistance in which residents can reclaim and reimagine public spaces, asserting their right to the city in a way that challenges the mechanisms of the market and public authorities. This was reinforced by the words of one Guguță activist, who asserted: “We are not protesting against somebody, we are building a movement and also rebuilding ourselves. We are rebuilding our political imaginary and political practices.”³⁴

While there has been some critique of the functioning of the commons, or the use of the term “commons” to index social concerns within the post-socialist context, given the persistent legacies of the socialist era on understandings of a common-property regime and the locally inflected functioning of post-socialist neoliberalism,³⁵ the Guguță activists articulated their activities within these terms: “it’s about urban commons, it’s about people being excluded from the decision making process.”³⁶ Moreover, as autonomous collective action and bottom-up self-organisation, I believe that the commons is an accurate descriptor for the movement, as Occupy Guguță employed participatory action to (re)produce urban commons at the local community level and, as such, to redress issues of spatial injustice. As architectural theorist Stavros Stavrides has explained, “[u]rban commoning neither simply ‘happens’ in urban space, nor does it simply produce urban space as a commodity to be distributed. Urban commoning treats and establishes urban space as a medium through which institutions of commoning take shape.”³⁷

The name of the movement itself draws from the transnational Occupy movement, which Stavrides has described as “an inspiring example of a culture based on equality, solidarity and collective inventiveness.”³⁸ The name Occupy Guguță was influenced by one activist’s time in the United States at the time of Occupy Wall Street in 2011, but also served to situate the movement within the broader occupied squares movement.³⁹ Sam Halvorsen has described how the Occupy movements sought “to critique the systemic failures of neoliberal capitalism and develop working alternatives for a more just and democratic society.”⁴⁰ In the post-communist context, this is further exacerbated by the promises and disappointments of capitalism following the collapse of state socialism, leading to economic

growth but also conditions of growing inequality. Caroline Humphrey describes this gap as a “culture of disillusionment” characterised by a “chasm of unbelief” that occurred as a result of the dispossession that has been characteristic of post-socialist forms of capitalism.⁴¹ Thus, the creation of a commoning culture promised a means of precipitating change through the creation of transformative and more egalitarian spaces. A key feature of Occupy Guguță was its attempts to formulate genuinely horizontal structures as a means to deconstruct the highly vertical and centralised structures that had developed within the country’s governance. As one activist asserted:

The horizontality was both a process, a label but also a struggle because most of us were coming from institutions where horizontality is not the norm. Most of us are used to environments where relationships are vertical, and the distribution of tasks is vertical, and we had to basically reinvent the whole thing.⁴²

Moreover, while focused on localised concerns, Chișinău’s activists were further connected to transnational protest movements, having picked up tactics they had learned abroad, not just through observation of the Occupy movements. For example, one activist had witnessed the use of drums at demonstrations in Poland. In Chișinău, they adapted this to their protests, using percussion to evade police restrictions as “they may say you are not allowed to pass here, but with drums you can hear them from everywhere and that has a power, you cannot put a fence around it.”⁴³ Thus, the use of the drums allowed for the development of a particular vocabulary of protest, communicating their grievances while also enabling the activists to evade enclosure and control. Additionally, in their interactions with the media, they drew from the experience of protests in Latin America and Spain, among other places, rotating who would act as the spokesperson or face of the movement:

From our readings of what happened [...] we were really inspired by some of the moments where people were saying: if a movement has one head, it is very easy for the police to cut it off – not literally – but if the movement has many heads and many voices it’s more difficult to do this. So, we [spoke to the press] on a rotational basis.⁴⁴

From this, we can see that, in addition to challenging domestic structures, the commoning processes of the Guguță activism also functioned

to connect to a network of publics inter- and transnationally, creating connections between these and other movements. Moreover, these connections underscore the non-hierarchical and horizontal nature of the movement, providing an alternative framework for the management of the commons to individualised private interest or centralised state power. As Hardt and Negri write, “[t]he common is not only the earth we share but also the languages we create, the social practices we establish, the modes of sociality that define our relationships, and so forth.”⁴⁵

When examining the Guguță movement within this context, this type of citizen-led heritagisation can be understood more generally as a process of commoning in that it is a cooperative and collective mode of value production (in this instance, the re-evaluation of the café and its socialist modern architectural forms as a positive element of the country’s heritage worth protection). The Guguță activists’ resistance to the expropriation of park land for redevelopment highlights the promise of the commons as an alternative to neoliberal and capitalist forms of urban governance, offering a more sustainable and enduring management of resources in the city. This is underlined by Piotr Juskowiak:

The dynamic nature of the commons is also revealed by the antagonistic nature of commoning practices which, although historically primary to the state and the capitalist economy, are activated over time almost always in counterpoint to public–private processes of enclosure and expropriation.⁴⁶

Thus, Occupy Guguță’s journey towards reclaiming the urban commons through citizen-led heritagisation and the promotion of participatory planning mechanisms represents a response to the challenges posed by the privatisation of urban spaces and the issues of urban governance that have characterised Chișinău since the country’s independence and post-socialist transition, but that were particularly foregrounded during Plahotniuc’s tenure in power.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE CAFENEUA GUGUȚĂ

The Cafeneaua Guguță remains a contested site, with plans still up in the air to demolish the building and construct an eight-story hotel (rather than the thirteen-story construction originally planned). It remains unoccupied in Ștefan cel Mare City Park, unrecognised by the register of

objects of architectural heritage of national significance, despite residents demonstrating the significance that the site has for them. Indeed, although its future remains uncertain, highlighting both the ambivalent relationship authorities have to Soviet-era architecture and the limits of enacting actual and efficient policies in the field of cultural heritage preservation in the Republic of Moldova, it is this contested nature that has allowed the building to gain such prominence, transforming the derelict construction into a symbol of freedom and democracy and reinterpreting it as hope for the future of the country.

The movement to protect the café is indicative of changes in the Chişinău urban space as well as the social and political relations in the city since Moldova's independence. The strategies employed by Occupy Guguţă were clearly an effective means of addressing the specific institutional, social, and political concerns that were reified in the architectural forms of the Guguţă, brought to the fore by the threat of its demolition. However, more importantly, the effectiveness of the movement lay in its promotion of community participation in addressing these issues, as evidenced by its successes in halting the demolition of the café and the construction of the hotel and business centre. Moreover, there was a clear longer term impact on patterns of participation and social organisation in Chişinău as a result of the movement, helping to form horizontal citizen networks and functioning as a mobilising force for civil society.

While Occupy Guguţă, as a loose group, dissipated following the elections in 2019 as Plahotniuc was forced to flee the country by an unexpected alliance formed by the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) and the Socialist Party (PSRM), the horizontal organisational structures created by the movement have subsequently facilitated community responses to emerging crises – the COVID pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the resulting wave of refugees into the country. Occupy Guguţă was, in the words of one activist, “a laboratory where we tested something, we tested some limits, but we also learned some skills like crowdfunding, fundraising, how to communicate with networks of people, to improvise and find very unexpected solutions to unexpected problems.”⁴⁷ While there is no longer an umbrella, like the café, under which the activists are united, one of those involved in the initial wave of activism underscored that “the people who were active then are also active now, so in this sense, the movement continues through its members.”⁴⁸ This culture of care and mutual aid is indicative of the commoning process and the mechanisms of

collective action and participatory citizenship fostered by Occupy Guguță, which focused on the entanglement of heritage and resistance as a means to uncover their potential for dealing with social conflicts from below and to promote a new politics of justice in the city as “it is a constant struggle, or well it’s basically the same struggle, but it takes different forms.”⁴⁹

Beyond the Guguță, we can view this type of civic activism and the reappraisal and resignification of buildings (and, more broadly, heritage) with contentious legacies as potential outlets for a new model of citizenship, in which heritage preservation might shape the political economy and the planning-legal framework may serve to enhance democratic values, increasing accountability and public involvement in democratic administrative procedures.

NOTES

- ¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Blackwell, 1996), 66.
- ² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Belknap Press, 2009), 350.
- ³ David Harvey, *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Right to the Urban Revolution* (Verso, 2012).
- ⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Blackwell 1991), 193–5.
- ⁵ Don Kalb and Massimiliano Mollona, *Worldwide Mobilizations: Class Struggles and Urban Commoning* (Berghahn Books, 2018), 13.
- ⁶ Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer, *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City* (Routledge, 2012).
- ⁷ Feras Hammami and Evren Uzer, “Heritage and Resistance: Irregularities, Temporalities and Cumulative Impact,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24, no. 5 (2018): 445–64; Nathaniel S. Trumbull, “Urban Pulse – Claiming ‘The Right to the City’: Architectural Preservation in St. Petersburg as Cultural and Political Catalyst,” *Urban Geography* 33, no. 7 (2012): 1000–7; see also Ștefan Rusu, *Chișinău – Arta, Cercetare În Sfera Publică* (Center KSA:K, 2011).
- ⁸ Anatolii V. Kolotovkin, Semen M. Shoikhet, and Iosif S. El’tman, *Arkhitektura Sovetskoï Moldavii* (Stroizdat, 1987).
- ⁹ See, for example, Spiridon Vangheli, *Guguță Și Prietenii Săi*, vol. 1 (Turturica, 1994).
- ¹⁰ Larisa Turia, “Cu Mamica La ‘Guguță,’” *Moldova* 3 (1982): 36–7
- ¹¹ Turia, “Cu Mamica La ‘Guguță.’”
- ¹² Correspondence, 3 August 2023; interview, 21 July 2023.
- ¹³ “‘Molodezh’ i Moda,” *Vechernii Kishinev*, 4 February 1987.
- ¹⁴ Miriam Morton, *The Arts and the Soviet Child: The Esthetic Education of Children in the USSR* (The Free Press, 1972), 5.
- ¹⁵ Interview, 21 July 2023.
- ¹⁶ RISE Moldova, “Nobil-Ul Lui Plahotniuc, Sechestrat de Procurori.” Rise.md, 2 July 2019, <https://www.rise.md/nobil-ul-lui-plahotniuc-sechestrat-de-procurori/?lang=ru>.
- ¹⁷ Interview, 13 July 2023.
- ¹⁸ “Ciuhrii Dezvăluie Cât a Plătit Pentru Cafeneaua Guguță Din Chișinău,” *Știri.Md*, 6 December 2021, <https://stiri.md/article/social/ciuhrii-dezvaluie-cat-a-platit-pentru-cafeneaua-guguta-din-chisinau/>.

- ¹⁹ David L. Ransel, “They Are Taking That Air from Us’: Sale of Commonly Enjoyed Properties to Private Developers,” in *Everyday Life in Russia: Past and Present*, eds Choi Chaterjee et al. (Indiana University Press, 2015), 140–60.
- ²⁰ Kyiv Initiative Regional Programme, “Raport de Evaluare a Patrimoniului Cultural Moldova” (2011), 18.
- ²¹ Guvernul Republicii Moldova Ministerul Culturii, “Registrul Monumentelor Republicii Moldova Ocrotite de Stat,” 2024, https://mc.gov.md/sites/default/files/14._registr.
- ²² Occupy Guguța, “Manifest,” Occupy Guguța, 2018, <https://occupyguguta.wordpress.com/manifest/>.
- ²³ Interview, 12 July 2023.
- ²⁴ Sergiu Musteața, “Dilemele Republicii Moldova,” *Archiva Moldaviae* IV (2012): 103–24.
- ²⁵ Irina Codrean, “R. Moldova – Intre Stefan Cel Mare Si Lenin,” *Ziarul de Gardă*, 31 August 2006, 95 edition, <https://www.zdg.md/old/95/divers/>.
- ²⁶ Correspondence, 18 July 2023.
- ²⁷ Interview, 21 July 2023.
- ²⁸ Occupy Guguța, “Manifest.”
- ²⁹ Interview, 12 July 2023.
- ³⁰ For more, see Armand Goșu, “Invalidating the Rightfully Elected Mayor of Chișinău Threatens the Regime of Oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc,” *Studia Politica* 18, no. 2 (2018): 293–314.
- ³¹ Occupy Guguța, “Manifest.”
- ³² Konstantin Axenov, Isolde Brade, and Evgenii Bondarchuk, *The Transformation of Urban Space in Post-Soviet Russia* (Routledge, 2006); Mariusz Czepczynski, *Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Sonia Hirt, “Landscapes of Postmodernity: Changes in the Built Fabric of Belgrade and Sofia Since the End of Socialism,” *Urban Geography* 29, no. 8 (2008): 785–810; Oleg Golubchikov, “The Urbanization of Transition: Ideology and the Urban Experience,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 4–5 (2016): 607–23; Sasha Tsenkova, “Beyond Transitions: Understanding Urban Change in Post-Socialist Cities,” in *The Urban Mosaic of Post-Socialist Europe: Space, Institutions and Policy*, by Sasha Tsenkova and Zorica Nedovic-Budic (Springer, 2006), 21–50.
- ³³ Caroline Humphrey and Katherine Verdery, *Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy* (Berg, 2004), 10.
- ³⁴ Interview, 12 July 2023.
- ³⁵ Liubov Chernysheva and Olga Sezneva, “Commoning beyond ‘Commons’: The Case of the Russian ‘Obshcheye,’” *The Sociological Review* 68, no. 2 (March 2020): 322–40; Insa Theesfeld, “The Role of Pseudo-Commons in Post-Socialist Countries,” in *Routledge Handbook of the Study of the Commons*, eds. Blake Hudson, Jonathan Rosenbloom, and Dan Cole (Routledge, 2019). 345–59.
- ³⁶ Correspondence, 18 July 2023.
- ³⁷ Stavros Stavrides, “On Urban Commoning: The City Shapes Institutions of Sharing,” in *Make_Shift City: Renegotiating the Urban Commons*, ed Francesca Ferguson (Jovis, 2014), 83.
- ³⁸ Stavros Stavrides, “Common Space as Threshold Space: Urban Commoning in Struggles to Re-Appropriate Public Space,” *Footprint: Delft School of Design Journal* 16 (2015), 13.
- ³⁹ Anna Feigenbaum, Fabian Frenzel, and Patrick McCurdy, *Protest Camps* (Zed, 2013).
- ⁴⁰ Sam Halvorsen, “Spatial Dialectics and the Geography of Social Movements: The Case of Occupy London,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42 (2017), 445; see also Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Polity, 2012).
- ⁴¹ Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life* (Cornell University Press, 2002), xxii, 40.
- ⁴² Interview, 13 July 2023.
- ⁴³ Interview, 12 July 2023.
- ⁴⁴ Interview, 12 July 2023.
- ⁴⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 350.
- ⁴⁶ Piotr Juskowiak, “Commoning with Henri Lefebvre,” *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 50, no. 4 (2022), 708.
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Chapter 10

Breka

Its Potential as an Affordable and Liveable Neighbourhood

Elsa Turkusic Juric

INTRODUCTION

Most of Sarajevo's population lives in neighbourhoods and complexes built after World War II on the principles of a modern functionalist city. These settlements are primarily associated with life in uniform multi-storey buildings and the dominance of open areas and green spaces, and they continue to shape the identity and cultural awareness of a generation of citizens.

This chapter examines different forms of twentieth-century housing, using the socialist-era Breka neighbourhood as an example that can also be recognised as a contemporary heritage site. Breka is an inseparable part of Sarajevo's urban culture, which is characterised by socially oriented housing. It was designed by architects who dedicated their designs and teaching to the improvement of contemporary architectural expression in Bosnia and Herzegovina, encouraged by the significant freedoms that architects and city planners enjoyed in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Built during the 1980s, Breka is the first complete neighbourhood to be constructed on the green slopes that are a recognisable backdrop to Sarajevo's urban core. At this time, the city's planned extension via a uniform orthogonal scheme of residential microdistricts (*microrayons*) had been completed, and a period of reflection on new developmental tendencies was beginning. In this context, the construction of Breka opened a new chapter in Sarajevo's spatial planning.

With the disintegration of the SFRY, however, the city would soon suffer the destruction of war (1992–5), followed by a phase of social and political transition. Societal transformations, inevitably linked to urban ones, are reflected in a city's housing. This article investigates the significance of Breka's architectural-urbanistic concept in relation to housing in contemporary architecture and the transformation of urban areas. It then asks

whether twentieth-century housing culture should be viewed only as a vital element of urban culture within changing conditions or whether it is also possible to use elements of (Breka's) architectural heritage to address contemporary social challenges. The research starts from the assumption that Breka is a model of Socialist collective housing that sought to modernise residential continuity while shaping a recognisable visual identity. It applies analytical, chronological, and comparative methods to consider the neighbourhood both as a whole and in detail, thereby contextualising its architectural-urbanistic concept within the challenges of Bosnia and Herzegovina's modern architectural development. To do so, it breaks the concept down into specifics, some of which were part of the planned project, while others were created through the process of inhabiting the space.

The analysis is primarily based on the study of archival materials at the Institute of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Sarajevo, as well as the author's observations in the field, including daily conversations with her fellow residents. Because so few publications have included Breka or the other modernist Sarajevo neighbourhoods as a subject, the primary academic sources were works by local engineers and architects: Midhat Aganović, Erdin Salihović, and Edin Zoletić. The contribution of this article is reflected not only in its filling of a research gap but also in its promotion of the residual culture of the twentieth century as a contemporary heritage.

SOCIALIST NEW HOUSING (RE)DEVELOPMENT IN SARAJEVO

The Socialist Yugoslav period (1945–92) saw the region's most intensive urbanisation to date, and, in this period, Sarajevo, a city with a unique symbiosis of gentle mountain landscapes and an Ottoman and Central European urban matrix, increased its housing capacity by two and a half times. The flag bearers of this modern urbanisation, which was founded on the premises of functional open-town planning, were large-scale housing developments as part of a national government project. Sarajevo's continuous expansion occurred via a regular orthogonal alignment of modern, fully planned neighbourhoods, which created a new urban core in the city's west. These microdistricts were separated by frequent wide roads and consisted of free-standing buildings of various heights, accompanying public facilities, and large green spaces.¹ For the most part, however, the role and significance of extant socio-cultural norms and the

topographic environment were suppressed in the process of their design. Similar but smaller residential areas, including Koševsko Brdo, Ciglane, and Breka, were built on the outskirts of the historic city centre. A significant part of Sarajevo's urban life is shaped by the experience of living in these areas and their symbiosis with the surrounding environment. High-rise apartments were also built in the inner city, but represented a much weaker level of investment in Sarajevo's housing capacity.

Yugoslav cities thus became machines for remaking people. They forced massive segments of the population to leave their old ways behind and adapt to a new urban life. [...] Yet, the fact remains: socialism was the most intense period of urbanisation in the whole region. Its effects, while far from perfect, continue to shape its cities in ways that, in many areas, remain unsurpassed in quality even twenty years after the collapse of the socialist state.²

The smaller neighbourhoods' sociological, temporal, and economic structures were diverse, and they cultivated the formation of a welfare state in the truest sense. Within the framework of construction regulations, the neighbourhoods contributed affordable housing, rationally designed living spaces, and economically viable construction³ through the typification and standardisation of apartments and the use of prefabricated elements. The realisation of such goals, established via a system of top-down urbanisation, was constantly encouraged by variations to the housing models. These were necessary because of the increasingly frequent reactions of architects, planners, urban sociologists, and the residents themselves, who complained about the uniformity and impersonality of the larger new neighbourhoods, as well as their dehumanisation of the community. Partly because of this, although the smaller neighbourhoods may superficially resemble their larger counterparts, they have their own specificities that can be traced through the transformations they have experienced, some of which continue to this day. These include the migration of populations after the breakup of Yugoslavia, changing political and economic conditions, the dominance of private property developers, the challenges of maintaining twentieth-century buildings, climate change, and the increasing number of vehicles that need to be accommodated on the city's thoroughfares. Further, the incompleteness of the neighbourhoods should not be underestimated as a determinant of their diversity.

The reasons behind the stalled construction of planned public facilities and accompanying contents were varied and included a lack of funds,

excessive and uncontrolled migration from rural to urban areas, the frequent overcapacity of architectural objects, and the non-implementation of planning measures. Many of these factors can partially determine the potential redevelopment of these residential areas and promote the re-examination of their role in the city's changing image. Improving the quality of life in neighbourhoods and understanding the arguments for the valorisation of their spatial and cultural values within the broader city landscape should be given equal priority. The only residential area in Sarajevo with the status of a protected monument is the residential colony Džidžikovac, built in 1948. Several twentieth-century buildings are also protected; however, despite considerable interest from citizens, there are no examples of effective protection and maintenance of these protected properties.

Over the past three decades, a significant number of neighbourhoods and their immediate surroundings have become targets for redevelopment by private investors, resulting in a deterioration of their residential and urban conditions. Large, inactive, and inactivated green spaces and neighbourhood pedestrian zones attracted profit-seeking private sector investors, who irreversibly converted them into commercial, residential, and administrative facilities. Through the private fragmentation of abandoned industrial zones, new residential complexes were created to compensate for the lack of public facilities by using the social infrastructure of existing settlements. This left the well-planned modernist neighbourhoods vulnerable and unprotected. However, due to their significant programmatic capacities, urban life's development has not yet been entirely threatened.

BREKA: A CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT

The planning of the Breka neighbourhood was entrusted to respected architects from the Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning⁴ – Bogdan Božović (1927–), Momir Hrisafović (1932–2020), and Hamdija Salihović (1928–2024) – who faced the challenge of designing a fully planned neighbourhood on a hillside traditionally given to individual housing, and steeped in the social and ambient values that comprise Sarajevo's rich residential culture. By sublimating their extensive knowledge and experience, these architects offered liveable housing with diverse typologies in a peaceful and green environment.(Fig.10.1)



Figure 10.1: The introverted character of Breka is shaped through the interplay of buildings, greenery, and topography. (Photo: Sloven Anzulović)

The construction of the hillside settlement was planned after the golden age of the city's development and on the eve of the XIV Winter Olympic Games, which were the most significant societal and sporting event in Yugoslavia at the time. Despite the country's economic stagnation and social crisis during the 1980s,⁵ building materials and technology were advanced and of high quality, which meant that elements such as sandwich walls with thermal and air layers were used for residential construction. Breka was built on the western slopes of the Koševo Valley, on former agricultural land, and it borders residential complexes and unregulated neighbourhoods with single-housing units.⁶ On its southwestern side, its boundary is defined by a busy road and a large hospital complex. The planned programmatic and functional contents were also intended to serve residents of neighbouring residential areas and hospital complex employees, which remains partially the case today.

Breka's fundamental concept was to create a harmonious and uncluttered composition of eleven four-storey residential rows and open spaces, which represent diverse places for socialising and meeting, as well as the exchange of ideas. The dominance of pedestrian zones and green spaces reinforces the separation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic along the street corridors, which contain individual underground garages.⁷ A further guideline in the neighbourhood's creation was its aesthetic and functional adaptation to the topography, as the architects themselves describe: "Further shaping of the buildings was guided by attempts to soften and seemingly lessen their rather voluminous outlines by lively modulation of masses and slanting roofs, thus adapting more fully to the architectural scale of neighbouring districts."⁸

Considerable attention was paid to the neighbourhood's visual identity through the choice of colour (yellow or red bricks for the façades, white or yellow for the roofs, brown wood for the window frames), shape (mansard roofs, the broken linear volume of the buildings, and their uniform height), and urban design elements (fenced-off pedestrian zones, and supporting walls). Various architectural details and elements were used to reduce uniformity and facilitate spatial orientation: the shape of the buildings' entrance spaces; window and balcony planters; balcony railings; and the size and type of windows. The diversity of housing types is another characteristic value of the neighbourhood. Each floor of the apartment buildings contains two or three apartments, which are either one-room, two-room, three-room or duplex; individual housing is contained within rows and terraced rows with large gardens; and apartments have one or two loggias. Most apartments have curved internal circulation, built-in wardrobes, and storage rooms. The larger apartments feature two bathrooms and a kitchen, with or without a dining room.

The three architects of diverse expression worked together to create a unique spatial entity by adopting a common urban concept.⁹ Each designed an approximately equal number of buildings, and all three had to consider the order of construction and the participation of three different construction companies when resolving specific details. Furthermore, the infrastructure works were expensive due to the varying soil types and terrain, ranging from mild to very steep. Such complications meant that the project underwent slight changes during its implementation, so that the first stage of realisation began in 1982 and the last ended in 1988.

FIRST SPECIFICITY: CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES

Breka's spatial concept is an example of architecture and urbanism that responds to the local heritage values. The original intention of the project was not to create a separate environment, but rather to integrate it into a more extensive and unique ambient whole, from both topographic and cultural perspectives. The neighbourhood's contours create a topography in which artificial and natural alternate and follow the morphological logic of the ambient unit to which it belongs. Through these elements, the architects wanted to adapt the socialist model of collective housing to the local context. The area's rich and still strongly present traditional urban and residential culture, developed on the matrices of the Ottoman city and adapted to local climatic conditions, was complementary to the harmonious, healthy, and liveable habitus to which modern society aspired. The need for its contemporary reinterpretation through an essential and comprehensible reading was justified and emphasised in the works of Dušan Grabrijan (1899–1952) and Juraj Neidhardt (1901–1979). In their versatile activities, they defined the vocabulary of the modern era, which is based on the knowledge of heritage. In this way, for example, the compositional principle of vertical and horizontal displacement of houses on slopes, which is implemented according to an unwritten customary law, is defined in contemporary terms as “the right to a view.”¹⁰

Breka's residential buildings are positioned in such a way that they provide adequate sunlight and unobstructed views of the neighbourhood's green spaces, the city panorama, and the surrounding mountains. Each resident has unique and picturesque views from their windows and balconies, which change with natural and seasonal conditions. This is especially reflected in the placement of loggias and windows at the corners of buildings, which add to the visual lightness of the structural volumes.

The diversity of expression and sensibility among Breka's architects meant that only Hamdija Salihović, with his rich architectural oeuvre, materialised the idea of architectural continuity and rejected folkloric and formalistic interpretations of heritage. Inevitably, however, Juraj Neidhardt's enduring, all-encompassing, and continuous activity¹¹ left an indelible impression on the thinking and actions of architects in Bosnia and Herzegovina by liberating their creative sensibility and directing it towards local values, essential human needs, and the evolution of

architectural ideas. An exciting shift in the development of new housing types was tested in the outskirts of Breka, in which Momir Hrisafović developed an atrium concept with individual three-storey houses in a double row (upper and lower). The resulting composition of regularly repeating residential volumes is known as a *carpet system*. The 24m² atrium separates the two residential units and becomes an intimate courtyard of the upper row. In the lower row, a garden is placed on a single-level cylindrical pedestal, filled with soil for trees and lush vegetation. Each house has a small front yard and a garage. The quality of the project is reflected not only in the houses' significant internal area but also in its desire to enable the continuity of garden culture and re-establish the lost connection between people and nature. Unfortunately, a significant number of residents have turned their gardens into paved terraces, and the cylindrical space has become an additional room.

Hamdija Salihović also developed the introverted character of housing integrated with greenery by creating terraced rows of family accommodation in the form of a vertical residential row of thirty-one houses. By placing regular vertical and horizontal rows of houses on an extremely steep hill and covering them with a sloping roof, he formed a composition that unobtrusively imitates the area's topography without endangering the surrounding buildings' access to views and sunlight. Entrance to the buildings through small courtyards is enabled by six vertical streets of unequal length, which give the impression of walking between houses with gardens – a recognisable characteristic of Sarajevo's traditional neighbourhoods. Salihović skilfully complements the heightened perception of memory in space through cantilevered architectural elements, thereby evoking the playfulness of the residential volume. These elements are associated with traditional *doksat*, an overhanging part of the façade with windows, usually on three sides. The introduction of these vertical pedestrian streets with stairs provides constantly changing views and illustrates the neighbourhood's more intimate side by encouraging its use as a meeting point and an area of direct social interaction. This creates a semi-public space, which allows direct entry to the houses by bypassing the main street. Here, the principle of spatial sequences inherited from Sarajevo's construction culture is evident. Juraj Neidhardt defines this spatial order as the principle *house-courtyard-garden*. Each house has a 36m² walled terrace that faces its neighbours, around which residential contents are developed, making the central point of family life an open-air space with extraordinary views of the city panorama. The Breka



Figure 10.2: The semi-public staircase-street that connects family houses and their small gardens is a reminiscence of traditional living. (Photo: Elsa Turkusic Juric)

neighbourhood concept, therefore, contextualises housing exclusively through associative elements that find their logical place at the level of housing units and ensembles. (Fig.10.2)

SECOND SPECIFICITY: INCOMPLETENESS AND TRANSFORMATION

Although the urban-architectural concept of Breka envisaged the construction of several public buildings, these were never actually built. Because the facilities were designed with the capacity and function to serve the surrounding areas, additionally, they were to be placed along the neighbourhood's central vertical axis. With this positioning, the architects aimed to maintain quiet areas between residential blocks and direct the frequent flow of pedestrians. Emphasising corridors of movement in this way, with a large number of smaller green areas, highlights the abandonment of the concept of a dominant and vast open space. Analysis of the blueprints for these buildings shows a preference for form, functionality, and programming in their design, with tendencies towards covering

open spaces, fragmenting their contents, and connecting them with other buildings. A one-storey Community Centre with an auditorium, square, and market was intended to be the neighbourhood's central point. The volume of the building was conceived as a stepped composition, ending with an accentuated mansard roof.

Today, informal playing fields occupy the space where residents from Breka and the surrounding neighbourhoods gather. The open space has become the heart of the neighbourhood, where residents of all generations meet throughout the day and year. Around it are the active public parterres of the surrounding buildings, which Jane Jacobs would describe as the "eyes" of the socially cohesive residential space.¹² In 2001, a mosque was built on a former field next to the basketball court. Its volume fits harmoniously into the ambience of the neighbourhood, but it is not sufficiently far from the residential buildings, and its fenced courtyard violates the concept of open public space.

A kindergarten was planned for a nearby elevation between two apartment buildings, but, today, this space is a green area with tall vegetation. At the lowest part of the neighbourhood, opposite the hospital complex and alongside the busy Asim Ferhatović Street, a small elongated two-storey department store with an underground garage was planned, which would have been connected to the rest of the neighbourhood via a footbridge behind the Community Centre. Only one garage floor was ever built; however, the flat roof is now an unused terrace with planters. In the immediate vicinity, on the green space that once protected the neighbourhood from the busy road, a petrol station and two residential buildings were erected, thereby further closing the settlement and interrupting its green pedestrian flow. The new residential buildings obstructed the views and access to sunlight of the existing apartment blocks, and burdened the neighbourhood with additional traffic. Although these buildings also offered new commercial facilities at street level, the fact that they disrupted the flow of movement meant that they failed to integrate aesthetically and functionally with the rest of the neighbourhood. In Breka's uppermost part, between two apartment blocks, a small single-storey shopping centre with a restaurant was planned, with footbridges to connect it to the nearby residential buildings. Today, this site is a green space.

Most of the actualised residential buildings had public ground floors that offered various catering, cultural, and commercial facilities until the beginning of the 1990s. Today, only half of these spaces are in operation,¹³

and include pharmacies, shops, offices, workshops, a public clinic, a café, private healthcare facilities, a tailor, hairdressers, a kindergarten, and a pet hotel. Additionally, an ongoing transformation of pedestrian areas into parking lots and roads is underway, which has made continuous and fluid movement impossible, especially for children and older people. From today's perspective, Breka's deviation from the original project in terms of its unrealised public facilities means that the neighbourhood has acquired an unexpected spatial quality. If these buildings were erected today, the space would be overcrowded and excessively reduced to corridor movement, lacking sufficient attractive public facilities to maintain it. The large green areas and open spaces are the lungs and wings of the neighbourhood because they are evenly distributed throughout. Significantly, when the additional new buildings were first planned, Breka's residents signed a petition to stop their construction, perhaps not only because the structures were not part of the neighbourhood's original concept but also because they were not in line with residents' needs. Furthermore, conversations with tenants revealed that most perceived the neighbourhood as complete in its current state, as very few were familiar with the additional public facilities that were part of the initial plan.

THIRD SPECIFICITY: A NETWORK OF INTERNAL VISTAS

Orchards and meadows once covered the hillside on which Breka was built. Today, the area is an ambient unit established through a balanced relationship between buildings and green space (with tall vegetation). The openness of the space and the intensive presence of greenery retain traces of the locality's origin: a gentle rural landscape. Its architects, however, were guided more by practicality than nostalgia in their conception of the new residential area, which takes full advantage of the benefits of living on a sunny elevation close to the city centre. This evaluation of Breka was achieved by its division into open and closed – built and unbuilt – spatial units. The residential environment obtained an entirely new character through its various zones, which were informally developed via the synergy of buildings and open areas, the latter of which included passageways; gardens; staircases and landings with benches; levelled terraces; and internal courtyards, some of which have an amphitheatre character. Such spaces conceal unrecognised or unused potentials, which could be used for different kinds of social integration.

The topography of the terrain, with a height difference of 40 metres between its lowest and highest points, enabled the creation of a network of diverse views that encompassed parts of the neighbourhood itself and beyond. Walking through Breka is, therefore, an exposure to a series of moving images, which are often unexpected and change according to the intensity of the light and the point of observation. This can be seen as the networking of the neighbourhood, where the relationship between the observer/user and the environment/ambience is in a constant state of flux. A building that dominates because of its height and colour in one part of Breka, therefore, becomes just one of the isohypses of artificial topography in another. Dynamism is further added by the ever-changing natural landscape, which has a different appearance in each of the four seasons because of the diversity of the area's flora, which includes fruit trees (apple, pear, mulberry, plum, walnut, and cherry); flowering shrubs; and trees (of which oak, linden, birch, and fir are predominant). This diversity and density of greenery also encourage the presence of various city birds. The open spaces, intended for social gatherings, also change according to the season: in the winter, the largest empty green slope becomes a favourite toboggan run for children.

However, a significant number of residents and visitors complain about the neighbourhood's visual monotony and poor spatial orientation. It is possible that most of these complainants are immune to the spatial richness of Breka's network of changing sights because it is experiential rather than tangible. The lack of cultural public content, spatial markers, visual communication, and larger and more diverse urban furniture contributes to the formation of such an impression. Observed as a system of broken-down elements, Breka could provide a neutral and stable backdrop for the development of diverse, smaller social activities and the design of a visual identification scheme, which would enhance the area's functional and aesthetic qualities.

EPILOGUE

In his consideration of the relationship between architecture and society within a general overview of modern European architecture and urban planning, Hans Ibelings points to the character of twentieth-century housing, in which design was given importance for the first time: "Despite the high level of government involvement, housing construction was rarely

if ever treated as a reflection of the state, but rather as a reflection of a society.”¹⁴

However, the analysis of Breka through its various segments highlighted the neglect of its residential culture. This neglect is evident because many of the neighbourhood’s spatial potentials have not been recognised, valued, or sufficiently used by residents. There are several aspects in which heritage values become apparent in Breka: as an example of modern urban planning of its time; its dialogue within the urban and cultural environment; the ambition it embodied to redevelop the mainstream housing of the time; and a recognisable visual identity that sets it apart from Sarajevo’s other, more anonymous, modernist neighbourhoods.

Breka’s fundamental elements originated in an introverted, organic, and site-based concept. It reveals links with other modernist neighbourhoods – the reduction of noise and air pollution, easy access to public facilities, and the dominance of pedestrians. The neighbourhood abandons the *tabula rasa* concept, according to which Sarajevo’s modernist residential areas had been built until that point. The neighbourhood’s identity as a visually and functionally defined ambient whole only developed over time as informal spatial zones within a network of diverse views were revived. This ever-changing system of open and closed spaces compensates for Breka’s lack of public facilities, and the large open areas where they would have been built have organically become places for meeting and socialising under the open sky and the neighbourhood’s watchful eyes. The diversity and abundance of greenery encourage biodiversity and harmonise children’s play with the natural environment. Ultimately, however, a question arises: Can the established spatial and aesthetic system of this neighbourhood support its most significant and contemporary legacy – the residential culture of a society of equality? This observation serves as a call to integrate the role of contemporary heritage practices into the process of enhancing Breka’s potential as a healthier and greener environment for its residents.

NOTES

- ¹ Elša Turkušić Jurić and Velid Jerlagić, “Recreating the Future: Modern Residential Neighbourhood and Existing Toponyms in Sarajevo,” in *Place Naming, Identities and Geography. Key Challenges in Geography*, ed. Gerry O’Reilly (Cham: Springer, 2023), 419.
- ² Vladimir Kulić, Maroje Mrduljaš, and Wholgang Thaler, *Modernism In-Between, the Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia*, (Jovis, 2012), 120–2.
- ³ At the time, economic efficiency in construction was typically compromised by the presence of multiple companies on the site, the reworking of projects to create smaller apartments, and interruptions to work because of a lack of funds. To overcome this, projects tended towards pre-fabricated or semi-prefabricated construction.
- ⁴ The Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning is part of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Sarajevo, where all three architects were professors. It had an excellent reputation in the building industry throughout the country.
- ⁵ Architect Ivan Štraus points out that the reasons behind this crisis (excessive borrowing by the state, internal political affairs, inflation, and the poor management of domestic industry) did not affect the quality of architectural production. Ivan Štraus, *Architecture of Yugoslavia 1945-1990* (GDF, 2013), 172.
- ⁶ The insufficient number of apartments and the slowness of the housing policy’s implementation caused uncontrolled construction on the city’s outskirts, which resulted in ensembles of individual houses without accompanying public facilities or adequate traffic infrastructure. This process occurred in parallel with centrally controlled planning and construction in most urban centres in former Yugoslavia. Kulić, Mrduljaš, and Thaler, *Modernism In-Between, the Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia*, 121.
- ⁷ Area: 16 ha, of which playgrounds and parks comprise 30 per cent; buildings 28.4 per cent; roads and parking lots 21.7 per cent; and pedestrian paths 20.09 per cent. The total number of apartments is 1050, and the total population is 3660. Bogdan Božović, “The Basic Principles of the Urbanistic Solution of Breka II District in Sarajevo,” *Arhitektura i Urbanizam* 94–5 (1984), 107.
- ⁸ Božović, “The Basic Principles of the Urbanistic Solution of Breka II District in Sarajevo,” 105.
- ⁹ Design principles such as brick façades, entrance canopies, and balcony railings were already applied in Hamdija Salihović’s earlier architectural project “Kovačići Residential and Commercial Complex” (1972–84). They would later be carefully elaborated in residential buildings in Breka, Koševsko Brdo (1974–8), and residential buildings in Grbavička and Kranjčevićeva streets.
- ¹⁰ Dušan Grabrijan and Juraj Neidhardt, *Architecture of Bosnia and the Way towards Modernity* (Državna založba Slovenije, 1957), 323–4.
- ¹¹ In his thematic and chronological review of the development of modern European architecture and the actions of its protagonists, Hans Ibelings attributes to Neidhardt a significant role in spreading a particular expression of modern expression in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hans Ibelings, *European Architecture since 1890* (SUN, 2011), 95.
- ¹² Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Vintage Books, 1992), 41–68.
- ¹³ There are several probable reasons for this, including: a lack of demand for certain services; financial non-viability; and insufficient parking facilities.
- ¹⁴ Ibelings, *European Architecture since 1890*, 53.

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