

The “Uncomfortable” Significance of Socialist Heritage in Postwar Croatia: the Ambivalence of Socialist Aestheticism

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Yugoslav Socialism wanted to show the world its openness and readiness to officially incorporate contemporary tendencies in art, by insisting on new art that signified a break with the political regime and announced new aesthetics. Therefore, many postwar memorials were built devoid of any symbols of Communism or other ideologies, and refresh-

ingly different from the monumental, figurative vocabulary of Socialist Realism. They were designed by famous artists (Dušan Džamonja, Vojin Bakić, Bogdan Bogdanović) and possessed a strong communicative and educational value attracting millions of visitors every year. What contributes to their authenticity is the fact that unlike most revolutio-

Fig. 1: Dudik Memorial Park, 1978–80, design: Bogdan Bogdanović
Abb. 1: Dudik Gedenkpark, 1978–80, Entwurf: Bogdan Bogdanović

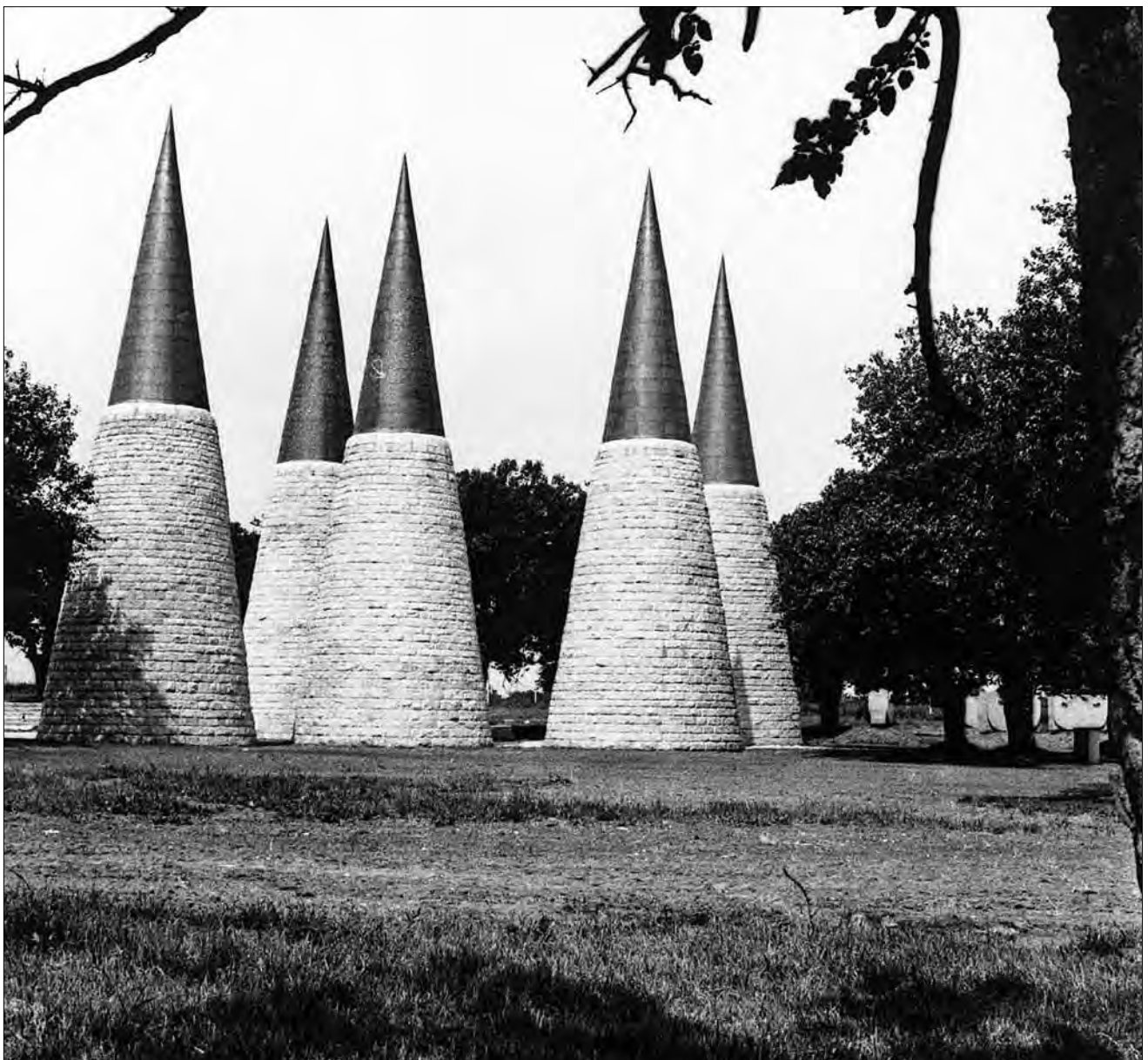




Fig. 2: Stone Flower, Jasenovac, 1966, design: Bogdan Bogdanović
Abb. 2: Steinblume, Jasenovac, 1966, Entwurf: Bogdan Bogdanović

nary memorials that are exclusively significant because of their respective historical and symbolic value, these memorials possess outstanding artistic value. Many of them are placed in pristine rural settings, enveloped by green space and adjacent to cemeteries for the war dead or to concen-

tration camps, as a unifying marker of shared national loss and grief, irrespective of ethnic affiliations. From the many modern building materials, designers often used reinforced concrete as the one most favoured for its strength and flexibility. Some of the monuments seem to appear as made of

an organic or crystalline origin enlarged to huge proportions while transcending the impersonality of the majority of socialist monuments in the form of aspiring lyrical arabesques. They were designed to convey a powerful visual impact in order to show the confidence and strength of the Socialist Republic.

After the collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, most of the postwar monuments were completely abandoned and neglected while their historic and symbolic meanings were suppressed and obliterated, thus trying also to erase the collective memory of the post-World War II period as an explicit manifestation of the former political system and ideology. During the period between 1990 and 2000 almost half of the total number of postwar memorials were destroyed. However, during the recent decade a slow process of monument renovation started, but so far only around 100 monuments have been restored, i. e. 3% out of the total number.

Our proposal for a serial and transnational nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List includes the most representative surviving examples that are outstanding architectural markers of postwar socialist heritage in Croatia.

The most representative example of postwar heritage is the work of the most famous ex-Yugoslav architect Bogdan Bogdanović whose numerous unique memorial sites have al-

ways been developed out of the topography and landscape as places of thinking, recalling and contemplation. The Stone Flower (the architect's interpretation of a melancholic lotus flower) built in 1966 and located in the memorial park Jasenovac (at the former site of a concentration camp during World War II) is a metaphor of life and imperishability (fig. 2). In 2007, this memorial park was awarded the "Premio Carlo Scarpa" (international prize for landscape architecture). Unfortunately, during the 1991–95 war the buildings of the Memorial Museum and Memorial Site were devastated and the entire museum inventory disappeared. The return of the museum and archive inventory to Jasenovac Memorial Site in 2001 led to a restoration of museum activities. Today, Jasenovac Memorial Site (with the Memorial Museum and the Education Centre) is a place which opens up to new communicative and educational activities contributing to its revitalisation.

Dudik Memorial Park near Vukovar (1978–80), another outstanding example of a postwar memorial designed by architect Bogdan Bogdanović, is shaped in the form of five large cones, covered by stone and copper plates (fig. 1). Bogdanović received the Piranesi Award in 1989 for this contemporary architectural achievement. During the 1991–95 war, this monument was partially damaged, and the

Fig. 3: Monument at Petrova Gora, 1982, design: Vojin Bakić

Abb. 3: Denkmal im Peters-Gebirge, 1982, Entwurf: Vojin Bakić



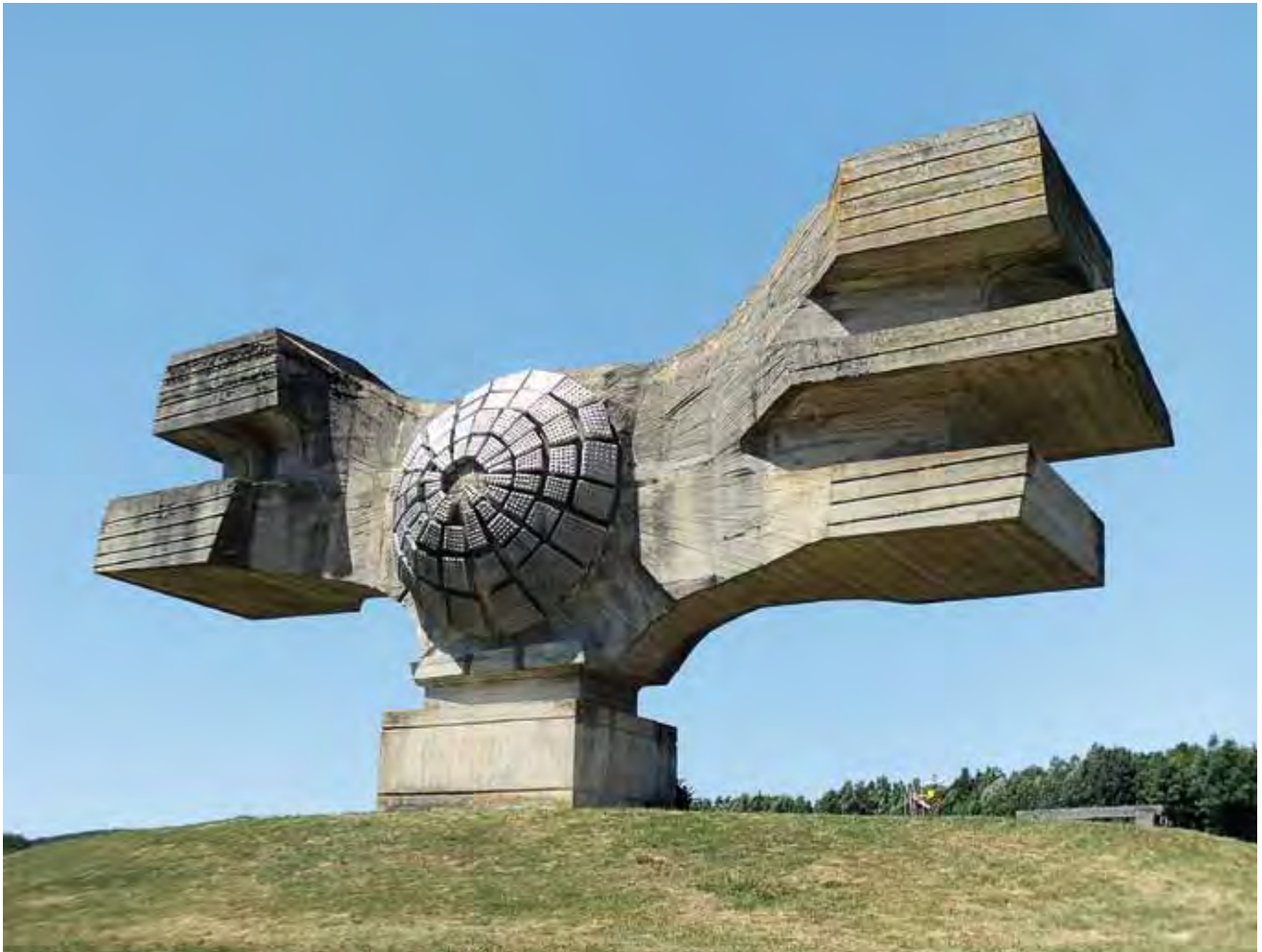


Fig. 4: Monument to the Revolution, design: Dušan Džamonja, Podgarić/Berek, 1967, photo: 2011
Abb. 4: Denkmal für die Revolution, Entwurf: Dušan Džamonja, Podgarić/Berek, 1967, Foto: 2011

Ministry of Culture is currently undertaking the project of its restoration and rehabilitation.

The Monument at Petrova Gora (1982) significant for its artistic and memorial-commemorative value is the work of artist Vojin Bakić. It is one of the most important postwar memorials in the country. The monument is an architectural/sculptural work made of stainless steel. Its interior used to be home to the Museum of the Revolution, an ethnographic collection, exhibition spaces, to a library and multimedia hall (fig. 3). The monument partially survived the iconoclastic storm of the 1990s, but its slow devastation has been ongoing during the last two decades with continuous removal of stainless steel plates composing its façade. This has accelerated its decay and rapid degradation. Supported by the Ministry of Culture, a restoration and rehabilitation of this monument started in 2004 along with artistic and activist activities in order to revitalize this site. This approach is based on the decision that what has happened to the monument should not be regarded only as an infrastructural problem. Instead, one should look at the question of revitalization through works of art in public spaces.

The Monument to the Revolution (1967) designed by modernist sculptor Dušan Đamonja was built on the site of the World War II partisan hospital in Podgarić which had

been the centre of the antifascist uprising in northern Croatia (fig. 4). The author conceived the monument as an architectural sculpture made of reinforced concrete, an example of abstract art. The relationship of its volumes indicate a dynamic movement of masses symbolising the wings of freedom and victory. The monument is quite well preserved in its integrity though badly maintained in the last decades, with layers of patina on its exterior.

Though these memorials are listed in the National Register of Monuments in Croatia, they have been devastated, vandalised, neglected and badly maintained for several decades. However, regardless of their degree of devastation and neglect, their condition proves that their authenticity has been preserved. Some of the key issues and challenges identified for their revitalization include: poor current condition of the memorials caused by destruction, vandalism and finally by a lack of maintenance. All together along with a lack of knowledge of conservation methodology for the new materials have made the conservation approach more difficult. This is additionally aggravated by the major dilemma of how to reconcile conservation issues with practical and economic needs. Due to the financial limitations it would be illusory to expect their ongoing and future preservation. The Ministry of Culture can only provide funds for the primary

phase of monument repair; therefore their successful future rehabilitation and revitalization also depends on the enthusiasm of activist groups and non-governmental sources.

Furthermore, although many of them are still of stunning beauty and preserved in their integrity, these obsolete monuments risk losing their symbolic significance. The indifference and ignorance towards these monuments were the result of their decontextualization; therefore it is obvious that their context has changed and that new values need to be attributed in order to transform and restore their original meaning. The question we are facing today is not only how to restore but also how to revitalise this type of legacy for future generations. Furthermore, one of the “hidden” obstacles for the revitalisation of these monuments resides in the exclusive perception of their artistic significance, which devalues the whole range of values present at these memorial sites. Such an approach makes future management plans more complex since there is a danger of over-aesthetisation as an elitist mode that could very likely exclude the involvement of the entire local community.

Each monument should be opened up to social activities attracting not only tourists and nostalgic ex-communists but the entire community. Finally, these monuments are not only the markers of some remote past, but also the bearers of universal values important today as well. A new living context for these monuments can be achieved with social and artistic actions that will attract a broader public, including the local community, as a key factor that is of crucial importance to support their sustainability.

This study calls for a worldwide protection of this part of Croatian postwar socialist heritage. This means to recognize and acknowledge its status as a “unique cultural and artistic asset” within the global heritage context. The underlying concept defined in this study relies on the idea of “identity” as something belonging to collective history, and on the urgency of raising public awareness of this postwar memorial heritage as a product of a unique historical moment.

Zusammenfassung

Die „unbequeme“ Bedeutung des sozialistischen Erbes im Nachkriegs-Kroatien: die Ambivalenz des sozialistischen Ästhetizismus

Der sozialistische Realismus im früheren Jugoslawien war von kurzer Dauer wegen des Bruchs mit Stalin im Jahre 1948. Der jugoslawische Sozialismus wollte der Welt seine Offenheit und Bereitwilligkeit, offiziell zeitgenössische Strömungen der Kunst zu integrieren, beweisen, indem er auf einer neuen Kunst bestand, die einen Bruch mit dem

politischen Regime bedeutete und eine neue Ästhetik ankündigte. Deshalb wurden viele der antifaschistischen Monumente ohne jegliche Symbole des Kommunismus oder anderer Ideologien errichtet; auch waren sie erfrischend anders als das monumentale, figurative Vokabular des sozialistischen Realismus. Sie wurden von berühmten Bildhauern (Dušan Džamonja, Vojin Bakić) und Architekten (Bogdan Bogdanović) entworfen und besaßen einen starken künstlerischen, kommunikativen und pädagogischen Wert, der Millionen von Besuchern jedes Jahr anzog.

Nach dem Zusammenbruch von Jugoslawien in den frühen 1990er Jahren wurden diese Denkmäler vollständig aufgegeben und ihre symbolische Bedeutung unterdrückt und ausgelöscht. Formen des öffentlichen Gedenkens gegenüber dem Erbe aus der Zeit nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg änderten sich drastisch. Die neue Art, sich öffentlich mit den alten Denkmälern auseinanderzusetzen, bestand darin, sie zu deideologisieren, so dass man so auch versuchte, die kollektive Erinnerung an die Epoche nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg als Ausdruck des früheren politischen Systems und seiner Ideologie zu löschen. Während der Jahre zwischen 1990 und 2000 wurde fast die Hälfte aller antifaschistischen Denkmäler zerstört. Allerdings hat im letzten Jahrzehnt ein allmählicher Prozess der Renovierung antifaschistischer Monumente begonnen, wobei aber nur etwa 100 Denkmäler restauriert worden sind, d. h. 3 % des Gesamtbestands. Die bestehende Inventarliste antifaschistischer Denkmäler wurde ohne klar definierte Kriterien der Bewertung erstellt, und viele dieser Denkmäler sind immer noch nicht auf der Denkmalliste. Hinzu kommt, dass es ein wesentliches Hindernis für den Schutz dieser Monumente gibt, das darin begründet liegt, dass die Bedeutung ausschließlich auf künstlerischen Werten beruht. Dies entwertet die ganze Bandbreite von Werten, die sich an diesen Gedenkortern findet. Offenkundig gibt es keine einheitliche Vorgehensweise beim Schutz des antifaschistischen Erbes, so dass unterschiedliche Auffassungen zu dieser Angelegenheit geschichtet werden müssen. Obwohl viele dieser Denkmäler noch von umwerfender Schönheit sind, riskieren sie, da sie obsolet geworden sind, den Verlust ihrer symbolischen Bedeutung. Es ist offenkundig, dass ihr Kontext sich verändert hat und neue Werte zugeschrieben werden müssen, um ihre ursprüngliche Bedeutung umzuwandeln und wiederherzustellen. Die Frage, der wir uns heute stellen müssen, ist nicht nur, wie man das antifaschistische Erbe wiederherstellen, sondern auch für zukünftige Generationen revitalisieren kann. Diese Monumente sind nicht nur Hinweise auf eine weit zurückliegende Vergangenheit, sondern auch Träger universeller Werte, die heute noch von Bedeutung sind. Ein neuer lebendiger Kontext für diese Monumente kann mit sozialen und künstlerischen Aktionen erzielt werden, die sowohl eine breite Öffentlichkeit anziehen als auch die örtliche Gemeinde mit einbezieht.