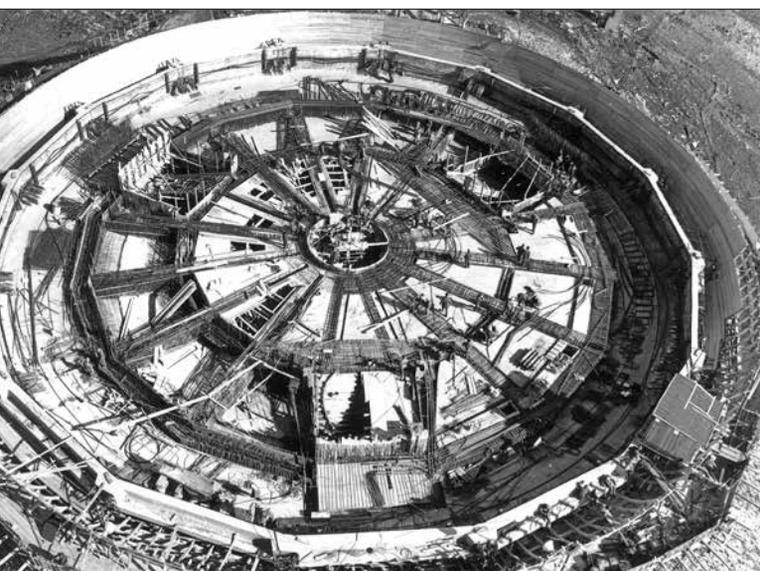


BULGARIA

Buzludzha: Forbidden History of a Neglected Masterpiece

Buzludzha monument is an architectural masterpiece, an outstanding engineering achievement and an admirable example of monumental art. Despite this, it is an abandoned, neglected and crumbling site for historical and political reasons. Buzludzha was built in 1981 on a mountain peak in Bulgaria to praise the glory of the Bulgarian communist party. The extraordinary structure had a very short life of just eight years until the end of the socialist regime in Bulgaria in 1989. Soon after the political changes Buzludzha was abandoned to its fate and to the hands of looters, to vandalism and severe weather conditions. Today



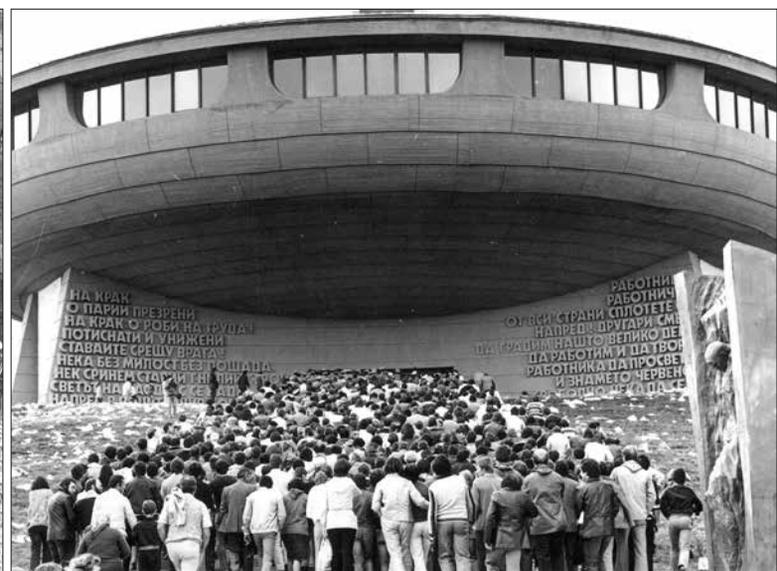
The Buzludzha monument during construction (photo Bedros Azinian)

the glamour has turned into decay, but the building still attracts attention with its dramatic history; it thrills with its architecture beyond gravity and astonishes visitors with the remains of colourful mosaics inside. Although the monument was built with a past ideology in mind, it is part of the Bulgarian history – an artifact with immense potential to become a sight of world significance.

Context

Similar is the destiny of several hundred other monuments built during the socialist era in Bulgaria. Every city and every small village has traces from the period, e.g. sculptures, memorials and

signs about local or national historical figures and events connected to the socialist ideas. Some of them have been destroyed, others displaced or abandoned, but the majority still stand as stone witnesses to a period difficult to evaluate. Thus, its legacy has not yet been assessed. None of the monuments built during the socialist period in Bulgaria (1944–1989) are listed; therefore, officially they are not protected as heritage. This silent inaction allows the weather and looters to destroy the monuments “naturally”. If prompt action is not taken, there may soon be nothing left to preserve. It would be a significant architectural, historical and cultural loss to allow the destruction of sites such as Buzludzha, the “1300 Years Bulgaria” Monument in Sofia, the Monument to “Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship” in Varna, and many more. However, the problem concerning such contempo-



The monument shortly after its opening in 1981 (photo Bedros Azinian)

rary heritage is not only Bulgarian but European. The post-socialist countries have the potential to reveal unique architectural achievements. Buzludzha, as one of these masterpieces, could easily turn into a powerful example for the reassessment and hopefully for the preservation of other sites often described as dark heritage.

Historical background

Buzludzha is located on a mountain peak at an altitude of 1432 m. It sits in the very heart of Bulgaria, the Balkan Range. This site received historical significance in 1868, when the last fight of the revolutionary formation, the organised resistance against the Ottoman yoke led by Hadzhi Dimitar, took place. The event and



View of the Buzludzha monument from afar (photo Nicola Miller)

battle site were symbolic for the liberation of Bulgaria. Knowingly, at the exact place the socialist-democratic party was founded in 1891 as successor to the revolutionaries. Furthermore, guerrilla movement members were killed there in 1944. Accordingly, to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the party's foundation, the House-Monument of Buzludzha was built.¹

Construction and utilisation

Architect Georgi Stoilov's project won the announced architectural competition and construction work started in 1974. The mountain peak was reduced by nine metres and 15 000 cubic metres of rock were dug off for the laying of the foundation of the monument. 70 000 tons of concrete, 3 000 tons of reinforced steel and 40 tons of gilded glass were used in the process. Qualified military forces, craftsmen, engineers, technicians and volunteers worked in three shifts; labouring was continuous day and night. A total of 6000 people worked for eight years, dedicated to the common objective. Buzludzha was the life's work of the best artists, engineers and architects in the country. The project was financed by public donations, because it was a national cause. On 23 August 1981 the monument was inaugurated during an official celebration.²

During the eight years of use, the building was visited by between two and three million people, which equates to more than 1000 people per day. The monument was built to be a pantheon of socialism and was used for the political education of all social groups and for ritual political events such as obtaining party membership.

The building lies secluded on the mountain peak and its 60-metre-wide spherical body symbolises a wreath, as if laid out on the mountain top in recognition of the described historical events, whereas the 70-metre-high pylon represents a waving flag with the world's biggest illuminated pentagrams, which had to be seen from as far away as north of the Danube and south from the Aegean Sea. With its clearly defined architectural shapes, advanced

light system, unique acoustics and more than 1000 m² of storytelling mosaic panels the building was a synthesis of architectural and monumental art on the highest level.³ The building was a huge engineering achievement with its 60 m free-spanning steel roof and its main body overhanging 20 m and supported by only three main anchorage points. The materials used in the construction were fair-faced concrete, white marble for floor and walls, granite plates on the staircases, and red velvet adorning the walls – all combined with the impressive architectural shapes contributed to the strong visual and emotional impact of the monument.

Present condition

After the collapse of the communist social model in 1989, the new government neglected to look after this most significant symbol of a previous ideology. In 1992, the Monumental House Buzludzha was nationalised under the Totalitarian Organisations' Property Confiscation Law and then closed. The last employees were made redundant and the doors were locked. Now unprotected, a number of thefts were recorded and vandalism soon started. Some incidents were politically motivated and born out of hatred towards communism, others were opportunistic and commercially motivated as metals were collected and sold off as scrap, and thirdly, some people merely enjoyed the act of destruction for the sake of it. This sustained neglect has brought the building to its present condition – an abandoned and half-destroyed monument of a past time. A lot, but thankfully not all is lost. The monument's supporting structure appears to be stable and the majority of the mosaic panels are still in place. The white marble of the ritual hall's floor remains as well as the marble on the walls of the staircases. Luxury was replaced by ruin, but the frame of the monument is still there. It has preserved its impact, its overall impressive and inspiring appearance. This is due to its shapes, proportions, scale, light concept, its location and position.

Buzludzha was included in an international ranking of the 33 most beautiful abandoned places in the world by BuzzFeed,

which gives it high popularity abroad. This ranking has been viewed by almost five million people so far. Many of them travel to Bulgaria from the other side of the world to see this beautiful ruin. Foreigners often describe the monument as the best thing to see in Bulgaria. This is the reason why Buzludzha received a Certificate of Excellence for 2015 by tripadvisor – the biggest internet site for tourism in the world. Hundreds of people visit it every day, however, its massive tourism potential is ignored. The doors have now been welded shut to prevent access into the building, because it is considered dangerous to visitors, but they always find a way to enter it. Meanwhile the cracks in the concrete are deepening, the roof is crumbling and the mosaic stones are falling off. Every day and particularly every winter, there is a new challenge for the monument, because through the leaky roof and missing windows wind, rain and frost continue to destroy the building's unique architecture.

Future function

What should be the future of the biggest and most impressive modern monument in Bulgaria? Just a ruin? Abandoned symbol of the socialist regime and of the transition to democracy? Multifunctional concert hall? Restaurant and night club? Luxurious five-star-hotel? Museum of communism?

In any case, Buzludzha needs a new function in order to be preserved; a new use that unites the different views within society about the idea that historical and cultural monuments must be preserved. I developed the conceptual design “Buzludzha – memory of time” as my master thesis in architecture at the Technical University Berlin. It suggests the usage as a monument of national historical memory, where Bulgarian history will be presented clearly and emotionally, methodically corresponding to and complimenting the atmosphere of the existing architecture. The building will not just serve as a frame, but in fact will be the most important and influential exhibit. Part of the concept is a multifunctional hall that will be used as a forum for history and art. The circles around it will represent different historical periods of the country. A panoramic glass elevator will give the visitor the opportunity to explore the open deck at the top of the 70-metre-high pylon, revealing breathtaking views of the Balkan Range.

The concept proposes a conservation of the monument in its present condition and only minimal architectural intervention. A complete restoration of Buzludzha would not only be much more expensive, but would be communicating the wrong message. The glamour was created to glorify a regime, but both the glamour and the regime are no longer with us today. Conservation instead of restoration of the building will allow to simultaneously save the monument, but leave the traces of time and its connotations open to every visitor who can interpret it, according to his/her own understanding of the period.

Preservation initiative “Buzludzha project”

Although this idea has attracted understanding and support by institutions and Bulgarians, its implementation appears to be very difficult. Buzludzha does not have the status of cultural value as it is not listed in the national monument lists. Only monuments with such status can be managed by the Ministry of Culture and receive funds for their preservation. Ownership is another difficult

topic, as Buzludzha is managed by a regional governor who does not have any budget for such purposes. The other institutions do not take responsibility for the problem as they do not own the building. There are three options for Buzludzha: governmental involvement, business involvement or donations.

The initiative to preserve Buzludzha started as my master thesis and developed into a cause of the “Buzludzha Project” Foundation, established with the purpose to preserve the monument and transform it into an active cultural site. Our newly founded NGO offers solutions, organises exhibitions and round tables, looks for support and tries to depoliticise this difficult topic. Last year numerous exhibitions, presenting the past, present and possible future of Buzludzha were shown in the capital city of Sofia, but also in the towns near Buzludzha in order to inform about the plight of the monument and to search for support on a local level. The majority of the elderly and middle-aged citizens have personal memories of the period when Buzludzha was used and actively want its preservation, whereas the younger generation view it as a bizarre and inspiring structure. They too are enthusiastic about this initiative. This leaves us all with the hope that not everything is lost and preservation of the monument is just a matter of time, but time is the worst enemy of the building and national and international awareness and prompt actions are needed to save Buzludzha.

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For further information: www.buzludzha-project.com

Footnotes

- ¹ Todorov S., Marinov M., “National Park Buzludzha”, [in original “Национален парк Бузлуджа”], Kazanlak 2009.
- ² “Horizont” journal, Interview with Delcho Delchev (the construction supervisor of Buzludzha), [in original “Хоризонт”], 1981.
- ³ “Monumental House on the peak Buzludzha” [in original: Дом-памятник на връх Бузлуджа], Sofia 1984.

Reconstructions of Cultural Heritage Sites Based on Conjecture

Declaration

of the Bulgarian National Committee (BNC) of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)

Regarding: The present practice in Bulgaria of reconstructions of cultural heritage sites based on conjecture.

The Bulgarian National Committee of ICOMOS (consisting of 152 members – Bulgarian experts and institutions in the field of immovable cultural heritage preservation, members of ICOMOS International) categorically opposes the growing practice of creating conjectural reconstructions of Bulgarian cultural heritage sites that have survived to the present in the form of ruins. As there is no credible information about what these sites originally looked like, their reconstruction based solely on conjecture constitutes an inadmissible falsification of the original.

In this connection, the BNC of ICOMOS declares the following:

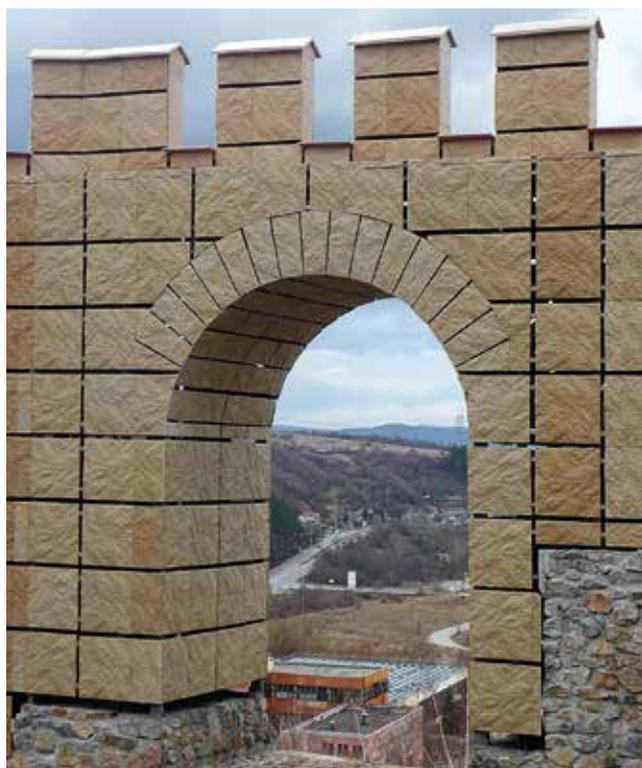
– The practice of reconstruction based on conjecture is in deep contradiction with the principles and ethics of scientific restoration laid down in a series of international documents: The International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter of 1964), accord-

ing to which restoration is based on 'respect for the original' and must 'stop at the point where conjecture begins'; The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994); the Convention on Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), ratified by Bulgaria, and the Operational Guidelines for its implementation, Paragraph 86 of which stipulates: 'Reconstruction is acceptable only on the basis of complete and detailed documentation and to no extent on conjecture.'

- This practice of reconstructions based on conjecture leads to irreversible damage to the authenticity of cultural heritage sites, which constitutes their irrevocable quality and their value as unique historical testimony. Any damage to the authenticity of cultural heritage sites is damage to their very original and to the traces of their historical development. Hence, this is also a violation of the Bulgarian Cultural Heritage Act which requires 'maximum preservation of the authenticity' of cultural heritage sites.
- The decisions on reconstruction projects are made in a non-transparent manner, without being subjected to professional and public debate.
- The funding of these reconstructions is done through European funds even though it is at variance with the fundamental European and world principles of cultural heritage preservation.
- The drafting of the funding programmes, the selection of projects to be funded, their commissioning and implementation are usually carried out without the participation of experts in the field of scientific restoration.



Ongoing reconstruction at Krakra fortress, Pernik



Ongoing reconstruction at Krakra fortress, Pernik



Reconstructions at Trapesiza

– *The allocation of significant EU funds for false reconstructions (approximately BGN 80 million according to data from the Ministry of Culture) is in stark contrast with the insignificant funds provided by the State for the preservation of authentic cultural heritage sites which are in a critical condition (BGN 500 000 according to data from the Ministry of Culture). This drastically distorts the national policy on cultural heritage preservation.*

All this has destructive consequences for Bulgaria's cultural heritage and especially for archaeological sites, as it impairs their cultural value and unique specificity.

Considering this, the BNC of ICOMOS:

1. *Appeals to the central and local government authorities to terminate the practice of reconstructions of Bulgarian cultural heritage sites based on conjecture, which is incompatible with the contemporary restoration science.*
2. *Proposes that decisions at all phases of programming and projects on immovable cultural heritage reconstruction be made in a transparent manner and after professional and public debates, with the participation of competent experts in cultural heritage preservation. In this respect the BNC of ICOMOS is available to provide all possible support.*
3. *Insists on explicit relevant amendments to the Public Procurement Act, the Cultural Heritage Act and other laws, in order to guarantee the preservation of cultural heritage according to the established international principles and standards, and to ensure conditions for the competition-based selection of the most suitable projects.*

This Declaration was adopted by the General Assembly of the Bulgarian National Committee of ICOMOS on 6 June 2014.

*Mr Rosen Plevneliev
President of the Republic of Bulgaria*

*The Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria
The National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria*

*Our Ref: GA/GJ/66
Paris, 8 April 2015*

**Subject:
Endangered cultural heritage in Bulgaria**

Your Excellencies,

During its most recent meeting held in Paris on 9–10 March 2015, the international ICOMOS Board was officially informed by the Bulgarian National Committee of ICOMOS about worrying trends in current policy approaches to conservation and restoration of cultural heritage in Bulgaria that have already substantially and visibly endangered a number of cultural monuments in the country. ICOMOS is also deeply concerned that these policy approaches may result in adverse effects on the Bulgarian cultural properties inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

ICOMOS understands that these changes in policy approaches have been motivated by an effort to support regional development in the country by increasing cultural tourism. While policies benefiting local communities are welcome, the cases presented in the report submitted to the ICOMOS Board make it immediately clear that this process has stimulated a widespread trend of large-scale conjecture-based reconstructions on top of the ruins of archaeo-



Reconstructions at Trapesiza

logical sites in Bulgaria. Rather than enhancing the significance of the monuments involved, the large-scale replacement of missing original materials and forms is destroying the authentic spirit of these monuments and sites. By substituting original structures, these new constructions actually falsify history and cause an irreversible loss of authenticity. In addition, they may render any further scientific research impossible.

Such reconstructions go against internationally accepted scientific approaches to conservation and violate the principles of the Venice Charter, Nara Document of Authenticity as well as the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (paragraph 86), to which Bulgaria is a signatory.

Being deeply convinced that a sustainable policy in the field of heritage protection should be based on internationally acknowledged and broadly established principles of conservation, ICOMOS appeals to the Bulgarian State to urgently undertake effective actions in order to:

- 1. Put an immediate halt to the on-going conjecture-based reconstructions in the country and ensure appropriate scientific assessment of their effects in order to guarantee that all future conservation and restoration works in Bulgaria follow accepted principles and ethics of scientific conservation, as defined in the Venice Charter and other ICOMOS and inter-*

national doctrinal documents (World Heritage Operational Guidelines, § 86 in particular);

- 2. Guarantee expert involvement in national procedures for calls for tender under the EU Operational Programmes to ensure that internationally acknowledged scientific principles of conservation are applied in all projects in order to minimize risks that heritage authenticity and cultural values are destroyed;*
- 3. Establish, with the comprehensive expert assistance of ICOMOS Bulgaria and all of ICOMOS more generally, a continuous training programme in the field of heritage conservation aimed at building relevant capacity within local authorities for addressing issues related to heritage protection and cultural tourism.*

ICOMOS assures all cultural authorities in Bulgaria of our willingness to help and advise. As a first step in this direction, ICOMOS is ready to contribute to this process by organizing an on-site mission to Bulgaria in support of a scientific assessment of the implementation of internationally accepted conservation principles to the cultural heritage of Bulgaria.

*Yours sincerely
Gustavo Araoz
President*