

“Unity, Creativity, Beauty” – Decline and Survival of Socialist Memorial Sites in Bulgaria

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Introduction

Cultural heritage is generally accepted as a universal good which is indispensable for the development of human civilisation and is connected to primary values and indisputable human rights. The overall framework of science research and international regulation implies a collective notion of cultural heritage as key achievements of human civilisation, outstandingly important to be passed on to future generations. Hence, the internationally accepted priority action policy towards cultural heritage is its conservation, with the state-of-the-art conservation results having become a criterion for recognising a country’s development.¹

Yet there are cultural areas where we have failed to reach mutual understanding on their “universal value”. On the contrary – neutral acceptance is non-existent and social unrest prevails. These are the areas where conflicts arise and the so-called “dissonant heritage” (or “contested heritage”) claims its presence. The term “dissonance” was first introduced into cultural theory by sociologists John E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth.² Comparing it with musical theory where tension is created when two tones are not in harmony, they argue that “interpretation of heritage is considered dissonant when different groups attribute different stories to a certain object or landscape”.³ In the post-1989 world, from the point of view of a post-totalitarian, post-socialist European country, the quickest and easiest example of contested architectural heritage to come to mind in our society is the legacy of the grand construction efforts of the former socialist People’s Republic of Bulgaria. Socialist monuments and socialist architecture as a whole are “dissonant heritage” par excellence that causes social tension and conflicts instead of common understanding as a seamless cultural layer for everybody.

On another level, in the Eastern Bloc, 20th century modernism seems an equally dissonant heritage, especially if regarded from the present neo-conservative stance. We are witnessing the re-emergence of a strong anti-modernity trend today which rejects all achievements of the 20th century (stressing exclusively its failures) and affects the perception of modern architectural heritage as such, putting it slowly, but surely in the position of dissonant heritage. This trend is a result of a more global intellectual debate on why our contemporary society has abandoned the vision of progress and modernisation and heads back to regression and anti-modernity.⁴

It must be underlined that the modern architecture of post-war Bulgaria is in fact the socialist architecture of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria. Having said that and keeping

in mind the above stated conflicts, it is clear that today in Bulgaria we can hardly speak of conservation and restoration of modern works of art and memorials as deliberate safeguarding measures resulting from a corresponding conservation policy. On the contrary – examples of destruction and neglect are prevailing. However, we can speak of sporadic, informal actions and initiatives that illustrate the slow process of re-thinking the Bulgarian socialist built legacy. One such exception to the general rule is the monument “Banner of Peace” on the outskirts of Sofia, which will be our case study in this presentation.

The Assembly

In 1975 one major shift in the cultural policies of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria occurred. As Chairman of the Arts and Culture Committee Lyudmila Zhivkova was elected, daughter of Todor Zhivkov, the long-time Chairman of the State Council and Leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party, in other words the de facto ruler of socialist Bulgaria. The Arts and Culture Committee served as the socialist equivalent of a Ministry of Culture and under Zhivkova’s rule concentrated on rapid cultural development, celebrating a number of anniversaries to prove our ancient cultural roots, and on deliberately exporting Bulgarian culture to define a national identity in a global context.

On 21 December 1976, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 1979 as the International Year of the Child. Bulgaria supported that decision and Lyudmila Zhivkova initiated the preparation for the first International Children’s Assembly “Banner of Peace” to be held in Bulgaria. The leadership of the assembly was realised by an International Initiative Committee and by an Organising Committee, both headed by Zhivkova. In 1979, the First International Children’s Assembly “Banner of Peace” took place in Sofia, which brought together 2500 children from 77 countries. The proclaimed aim was to “unite the creative ambitions of children around the ideal of peace, creativity and excellence” under the motto “Unity, Creativity, Beauty”. Children from various countries were gathered to play and create together and to get to know each other’s culture.

The First World Children’s Parliament was held at the National Assembly in Sofia, where a “Letter-Appeal” was adopted by the children participating in the International Children’s Assembly “Banner of Peace”, who addressed the children of the world. At the 34th Session of the UN General

Assembly the “Letter-Appeal” was distributed as an official document among the member countries.

The preparation of this First Children’s Assembly also included the construction of a specially designed monument – “Banner of Peace” – which was inaugurated on the last day of the assembly, 25 August 1979, by the then Director-General of UNESCO Amadou Mahtar M’Bow (Fig. 1).

The monument⁵

The composition is radially symmetrical, set in an entirely natural environment. The vertical body of the monument dominates the surrounding park and the view against the background of Vitosha Mountain. The vertical volume consists of four identical concrete elements, 37 metres high, oriented in the four world directions. It was built in just 30 days using additives that accelerate the hardening of concrete for the first time in the history of Bulgarian monumental art. The image is inspired by the graphics of a children’s play, but actually recreates the motif of a bell tower. The bell is one of three key symbolic elements used in the monument. It represents the call for peace, while the other two – the sphere and the spiral – stand for the planet Earth, the Universe, eternity and the continual evolution of life. The imaginary sphere is carved in the upper end of the vertical elements and in its space in spiral progression seven bells are placed. They have seven different musical tones, representing the seven continents. In the midst of the pylons there are 18 “singing” bells, which perform as a glockenspiel (Figs. 2 and 3).

The monument “Banner of Peace” is probably the first Bulgarian example of a symbiosis between architecture and sculpture within one abstract form. Neither architecture nor sculptural imagery prevail. The sculptural component goes beyond particular objects and plays with form-making and organising architectural elements in a complicated, yet playful and dynamic way.⁶

The vertical part of the monument is surrounded by two concrete semi-circles that are fitted with the “bells of the nations”. Originally the bells were donated by UNESCO member states and some of them are of extreme value. For example, the oldest bell comes from Nepal, dating from the 9th century and taken from the temple Pashupatinah in Kathmandu. All bells are located at equal distances from the centres of the two semicircles symbolising equality among nations.

The space around the monument was transformed into a unique park, “The International Peace Park”, with more than 70,000 plants sent from different countries. An architectural facility was additionally designed as a “spiritual centre” for the creative development of children, which however was never built.

By the end of 1989 four International Children’s Assemblies had been held in Sofia, but then fell out of fashion with the change of political priorities after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Fig. 4).

Unique and/or contested

In 2004, the monument was listed as cultural heritage with the argument that this was the only monument in the world



Fig. 1: Banner of Peace monument in Sofia, postcard, circa 1979 (project ATRIUM archive)



Fig. 2: Banner of Peace monument in Sofia, general view circa 1980 (project ATRIUM archive)

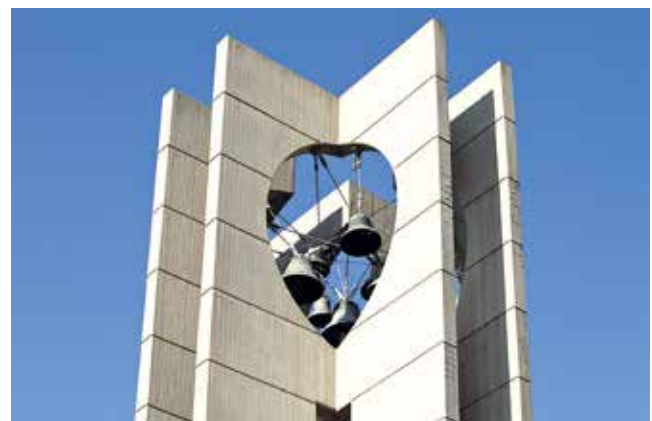


Fig. 3: Banner of Peace monument in Sofia, detail of the main bells (Nikola Mihov for project ATRIUM)



Fig. 4: The bells at the semi-circles, archive view (project ATRIUM archive)



Fig. 5: Children Assembly event at the monument (project ATRIUM archive)

built to symbolise the ideas of UN and UNICEF for the protection of peace and children's rights (Fig. 5).⁷

The idea of the monument being the centre for the organisation of International Children's Assembly "Banner of Peace" events led to the creation of a new type of artistic facility, rich in symbolism, which replaced the old ideological images and strategies of the Bulgarian communist project. The artistic image of the monumental ensemble is a rare fusion of architecture, fine arts and music, intertwined in a complex aesthetic integrity to such extent that activists promoting the monument nowadays describe it as "the biggest percussion instrument in Europe" (Figs. 6–8).⁸

On the other hand, none of this would have happened if the mastermind behind the International Children's Assembly had not been the daughter of the Bulgarian state leader himself. In the context of her ideological upgrade of Bulgarian cultural politics the monument Banner of Peace actually demonstrates the power of Lyudmila Zhivkova's sub-period in Bulgarian cultural history. The monument is ideologically related to the monuments built to celebrate the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state and to the attempts for ideological legitimation of the power of the Bulgarian Communist Party through historicising Bulgarian culture. In fact, in the "Banner of Peace" the totalitarian regime established a new system of aesthetic expression and ideological suggestion.⁹

Decline and survival after 1989

After Lyudmila Zhivkova's death in 1981, the interest in the Children's Assembly and in the monument gradually faded. After the political changes in 1989, the Children's International Movement "Banner of Peace" was closed and the monument was completely abandoned. With the discontinuation of the Assembly the monument lost its function as an open forum for children's creativity. Over time, some of the bells were stolen or damaged (Fig. 9).

The year 1996 was critical for the monument as it turned out to be a lucrative part of the terrains designated for land-restitution after 1989. The Minister of Culture issued an order that the terrain should be cleared and prepared for restitution, the monument dismantled, and the bells put into storage. The residents of the nearby Mladost district went in front of the bulldozers as they considered the place as their favourite park for Sunday outings and family walks. Strong civil protests, which received broad media coverage, saved the monument at the time. However, the park was greatly reduced – two thirds of its original area were nonetheless restituted and covered with buildings.

In 2004 the monument and the park around it were listed as a group monument of culture. Thus, the site became the first and only post-war structure in Bulgaria to be listed as cultural heritage. The historical and artistic value of the monument were highlighted, as well as the immediate threat of demolition. However, this legal protection was highly controversial at the time. The spirit of the then active *Law on cultural monuments and museums* suggested a 50-year

distance between the creation and the listing as a monument of culture, which was accepted as a rule of common sense. Yet the listing of the “Banner of Peace” was never promoted as a forerunner for a new approach towards time distance when evaluating cultural heritage. The legal protection was primarily used as an administrative tool to limit further attacks on the land.

In June 2010 the monument was partially renovated and reopened at an official ceremony organized by the “Lyud-

mila Zhivkova-Banner of Peace” foundation. The steel construction and the cords of the bells were restored with donations, thus improving the structure of the monument and its compliance with all technical standards. Bell locking mechanisms were mounted and a permanent guard was installed. The proximity of the monument to the south-east residential areas of Sofia and the surrounding park continues to make it an attractive place for recreation which is frequently visited on weekends.



Fig. 6: The vertical body of the monument (Nikola Mihov for project ATRIUM)



Fig. 7: The vertical body of the monument from the inside (Nikola Mihov for project ATRIUM)



Fig. 8: The surrounding semi-circles with the bells of the nations (Nikola Mihov for project ATRIUM)



Fig. 9: Current condition of the monument sign with gunshot traces (Nikola Mihov for ATRIUM)

In 2011 the monument was included in an international project called ATRIUM (Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the 20th Century in Urban Management).¹⁰ The project itself was a valuable attempt for a distanced reflection about the historical and cultural identity of South-Eastern Europe. The aim was to suggest a thematic cultural route, based on this young and unexplored heritage. Between 2011 and 2013 a number of activities created a system of cultural and historical sites in 11 countries in the region and was certified in 2014 as a cultural route of the Council of Europe.¹¹ It recognised that the proposed system is of international significance and promotes cultural exchange. On the other hand, the heritage in question was bound to “benefit” from the integrated approach offered by the concept of cultural routes, a cultural tourism phenomenon in the 20th century that achieves conservation and socialisation by linking sites in a dynamic system capable of constant development and enrichment.

A key initiative related to the ATRIUM project in Bulgaria was the implementation of a “Concert with a monument event” in 2013. The event gathered a lot of people from different generations around the monument. The main target were the children for whom various workshops with instruments revealed the beauty of music. With the sound of music and animated by young people, the site proved that from an abandoned place it can be successfully transformed into a contemporary creative field oriented to children. The current



potential of the complex was revealed by taking up again the idea of a musical monument. An inclusion in a supranational system, such as the example of the European Cultural Routes system, had a positive effect by adding a wider context. Especially in the case of the “Banner of Peace” monument, such popularisation helped its recognition as an object of cultural heritage and stimulated its preservation as such (Figs. 10 and 11).

Obviously, the ATRIUM initiative had a positive impact because it was followed by a series of activities in the same direction. Most notably, since 2016 a non-governmental civic organisation called “Save Sofia” has been working actively for the renovation of the monument and its adjacent park, as well as for popularising the complex as part of the cultural life and tourist sights of Sofia. With municipally funded projects Save Sofia have managed to do improvements such as sandblasting of part of the concrete semi-circles, restoration of the artistic lighting, placing information boards in the park, new signs for the bells, organisation of a “Kambanite tour”¹², and others (Fig. 12).

Conclusion

The late 1970s in socialist Bulgaria were a period when children were subjected to special interests, reaching far beyond the usual leftist children-oriented elements of the political ideology. Maybe it is precisely the connection to the always-positive children’s theme that saves the “Banner of Peace” monument from being openly dissonant, unlike the rest of the socialist monuments in Bulgaria. Nowadays, nobody defines this monument as “totalitarian”, despite all the facts in its history that link it to the regime no less than the others.

As a result of the various activities in the last five years, more and more people start to know and appreciate the place, which not only raises interest, but also intolerance to vandalism and paves the way to its successful reintegration. So, the “Banner of Peace” monument is on its way to successfully overcoming the usual stigma of a “socialist monument”. Ironically, the once silently received legal protection as cultural heritage more as a shield against the threat of destruction than as a real appreciation, is now a real tool for legitimacy and approval in the opinion of the general public.

Fig. 10: “Concert with a monument” event (project ATRIUM/Transformatoti archive)



Fig. 11: Musical workshops for children at the "Concert with a monument" event (project ATRIUM/ Transformatoti archive)



Fig. 12: Cleaning of the concrete semi-circles with bells, before and after sandblasting and labelling (Save Sofia archive)

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¹ International documents such as ICOMOS International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter 1964), UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972) and Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (2005) support the uncontested idea that cultural heritage is an indisputable good, a positive resource for societies. The constantly increasing UNESCO World Heritage List proves the continuously growing interest in boosting the international status of a country through cultural heritage.

² TUNBRIDGE, Ashworth, 1996, p. 27.

³ In Bulgaria the topic of dissonant heritage was first addressed by culturologist Daniela Petrova-Korudzhieva, based on Tunbridge and Ashworth. On dissonant architectural heritage see also VASILEVA, *Contested Heritage*, 2018 and KALEVA, *Contested Heritage*, 2018.

⁴ The debate itself has been triggered lately by a project called "Die große Regression: Eine internationale Debatte über die geistige Situation der Zeit"/"The Great Regression. An International Debate" launched in 2017 and a book with the same title that followed shortly afterwards, published simultaneously in 14 different lan-

guages and containing essays from 15 renowned authors, academics, publicists and global intellectuals, discussing the “current state of global turbulence”. For more on the concept of “regressive modernization” see NACHTWEY, *Die Abstiegs-gesellschaft*, 2016.

- ⁵ Artists: sculptor Krum Damyanov, architect Georgi Gechev, engineer Anton Maleev. Further description is based on the case study about the monument by Olga Doreva for ATRIUM project (see DOREVA, *Banner of Peace Monument Case Study*, 2011).
- ⁶ ZLATANOV, *Monument Ensembles*, 2015.

⁷ Declaration letter of the National Institute of Monuments of Culture, 84/6.02.2004.

⁸ According to Save Sofia (Spasi Sofia) at <http://spasisofia.org/en/projects/kambanite-monument>

⁹ Doreva, 2011, p. 18

¹⁰ Official web site of the project: <http://www.atrium-see.eu/>

¹¹ Official web site of the cultural route: <http://www.atrium-route.eu/>

¹² Another widely known name of the monument is Kambanite (The Bells). A guided sightseeing tour of the monument, held several times in 2017 and 2018.