

Contextualising Buzludzha: Dissonance, Rejection and Cultural Appropriation of Bulgarian Postwar Heritage¹

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Buzludzha is a special piece of architecture. It is a memorial, a sculpture and a building (Fig. 1). Therefore, it should be analysed both within the architectural context and within the context of the grand memorial construction efforts of late socialism in Bulgaria.

In 1975, a major shift in the cultural policies of the People's Republic of Bulgaria occurred. On July 1st, Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of Bulgarian communist party leader Todor Zhivkov, was elected as Chairman of the Committee for Art and Culture (CAC). The CAC served as the socialist equivalent of a ministry of culture and under Zhivkova emancipated from the general policies of the Eastern Bloc to form a specific line concentrated on rapid national cultural development, seeking to prove ancient cultural roots and both nationalising and deliberately internationalising Bulgarian culture to define an influential national identity in a global context.

This was the period when socialist monuments started to intervene more in their surroundings and in space in general – regardless of whether they were urban or suburban

monuments. The late 1970s and the 1980s were the period when the largest monuments in Bulgarian history were constructed. The importance of architecture rose drastically. These new socialist memorials were often placed outside the city centre, beyond the usual intimacy of the small sculptural monuments, and reached the scale of fully grown architectural-sculptural ensembles.

The process had also been stimulated by several important anniversaries which were enthusiastically celebrated by socialist Bulgaria at the time and which were key for the national self-identification at the time – the centenary of the April Uprising against the rule of the Ottoman empire (1976), the 800th anniversary of the Uprising of Assen and Petar against the rule of the Byzantine Empire (1985), and, of course, the 90th anniversary of the Bulgarian Communist Party or of the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party founded at the 1891 Buzludzha Congress, which conveniently coincided with the 1300th anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state in 1981 (Figs. 2a and 2b).



Fig. 1 Memorial House of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Buzludzha peak, postcard from the 1980s

All the monuments and memorials of this sub-period are total spatial gestures and function as highly visible architectural and urban elements. They all undoubtedly predefined what contemporary Bulgarian public spaces look like to this day. And they all suffered from the changing moods of public reception and evaluation in the turbulent years of early post-socialism.

After 1989, political power and cultural priorities changed, which necessitated a reassessment of all public spaces of socialism, including the monuments. Visible transformations took place in all ideologically charged public spaces – they were domesticated, desacralised, vandalised, and sprayed with graffiti. The Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov, the first communist leader of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, was even demolished in 1999 as an act of public demonstration of new power, and so on. All those places became arenas of the clash of memories, irreconcilable culture wars and neglect. This is the post-socialist context within which we find Buzludzha around 2019 when the Getty Foundation included it in the 2019 Keeping It Modern initiative.

Contested heritage

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 “right to heritage”.² 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”³ (or “contested heritage”) claims its presence.

Contested heritage is presumably accompanied by a conflict (or many conflicts overlapping and creating chaos in definitions). In this case, we usually have one or all of the following circumstances:

- Different assessment of cultural values;
- Problems defining its social significance (especially when confronted with wide public disagreement);
- Refusal to accept as heritage (that is refusal to accept it as an indisputable good);
- Refusal to accept as “worth existing” at all, let alone “worth preserving”.⁴

A lack of objectivity when assessing this type of heritage is one of its main companions. This means that even if subjected to the standard criteria for heritage assessment and passing the test of value definition and need for conservation, the underlying conflicts nullify all these normally powerful tools for objectification. Experts tend to define this heritage in many ways – as “dark”, “inconvenient”, “shameful”, but still as heritage. Its preservation is important, difficult, hard to explain, easy to mislead and is impossible without active public discussion and serious interdisciplinary efforts.

The heritage of Nazism is contested heritage par excellence; yet to focus on that heritage only would be to simplify matters. Of course, all regimes which have committed crimes against humanity have managed to produce

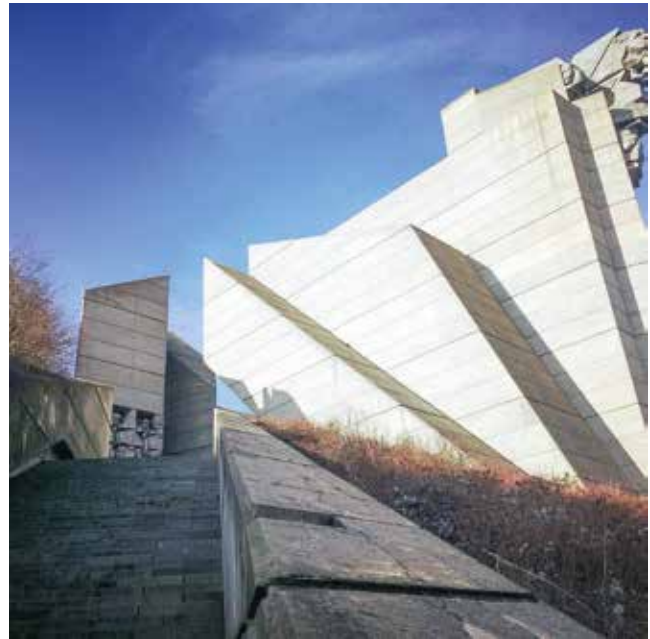


Fig. 2a Monument “Founders of the Bulgarian State”, Shumen 1981, overview



Fig. 2b Monument “Founders of the Bulgarian State”, Shumen 1981, mosaics

dissonant heritage – labour camps, totalitarian monuments, fascist stadiums, Stalinist boulevards and skyscrapers, etc. For example, political contestation is almost always connected to problems of memory and issues of self-identification. Therefore, the cultural aspect here is powerful and inescapable. We also have socially and economically contested heritage. This undoubtedly includes all the utopian efforts of modernism – post-war housing projects, prefabs, microraisons, banlieue. In this case architectural contestation is closely linked to contemporary economic interests – new and cheaper construction, appe-



Fig. 3 Buzludzha Monument today

tites for increased density and thus profits, privatisation of large public areas and social housing terrains, free market-based solutions to housing crises. We can also find aesthetically contested heritage which for one reason or another has been labelled as “ugly”. This category varies depending on the cultural climate of different historical periods and has over time included or excluded pre-modern architectural traditions, the architectural eclecticism of the bourgeoisie, the aspirations of modernism, and the egalitarian efforts of post-war art and architecture. The never-ending story of appreciation of brutalism and society’s love/hate relationship with bare concrete, combined with the necessity for energy-efficient buildings and sustainable construction, points the path to another, still vague but imminent type of contested heritage – the ecologically controversial.

Beyond pure examples, a contested object is very often associated with more than one and often with all three basic groups. It can be politically burdened and subject to contemporary populism. It may be expensive and hard to maintain, may be in various stages of decay and self-destruction, and may be habitually labelled “ugly”.

In a post-1989 world, from the perspective of a post-socialist European country, the quickest and easiest example of such a complex contested architectural heritage that comes to mind in Bulgaria is the legacy of the great construction efforts of the former socialist People’s Republic. The most

striking and notorious example is the Memorial House of the Bulgarian Communist Party on Mount Buzludzha.

Buzludzha as contested heritage: meanings and associations

The ideological burden

“The Memorial House on Mount Buzludzha must be regarded as a national sanctuary. It is designed to develop unwavering faith in the victory of communism” reads Protocol 10 of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party (7 February 1976). Ideology is clearly discernible and fundamental for all levels of the Memorial House – its chosen location, its visual and functional characteristics. The site was deliberately chosen for its rich and multi-layered historical symbolism, legitimising the Party and its history as the final and concluding stage of a millennial Bulgaria. Only the Party has the right to the peak – both in history and on the mountain.

Leading architect Georgi Stoilov (3 April 1929–14 December 2022) masterfully accomplished the task of building a national sanctuary – overshadowing all preceding monuments, including the Shipka Monument to Freedom nearby, which had always been a beacon of Bulgarian national pride. Buzludzha owes much to its scale and its symbolic power is



Fig. 4 Buzludzha Monument today, as seen from Shipka Memorial

immense. The huge concrete composition, cut out like a logo against its natural background is visible from afar and has become a symbol of its era (Fig. 4). When one gets closer, the masterfully orchestrated synthesis of the arts tells a rich story which gradually unfolds to complete the overall impression.

Public reaction

Of course, public reaction before 1989 was ecstatic. People were waiting in line to enter the newly built Memorial House and for more than a year after its inauguration it had been open daily all the year round. Buzludzha was a collective effort, the pride of the nation. In total, more than 6,000 people contributed to the creation of the Buzludzha monument. This included engineers, artists, designers, sculptors, a large number of volunteer labourers and soldiers from the construction corps under general Delcho Delchev (Fig. 5). Therefore, it was an immense honour and once-in-a-lifetime experience to be among the “chosen” to attend an official party ceremony there.

Strong symbols usually end up with strong nicknames. Buzludzha makes no exception. Still during construction and even more afterwards the monument was aesthetically charged, and workers started calling it “The Saucer”. Afterwards the building was called many names, “the flying saucer of Buzludzha” being the most popular of all.

Politically contested

Buzludzha is a complex architectural object which includes all basic groups of contested heritage mentioned before. First of all, it is undoubtedly politically contested. The building is indeed a symbol of its era, with all its controversies. It has been regularly evaluated as a product of a failed regime, an inconvenient, though unpleasantly indestructible sign of the past.

The heavy ideological burden of the Memorial House is the main reason for its fate after 1989. The negative public attitude towards the failed political system was most naturally demonstrated first by decay and then by devastation of its most opulent icon. Mass public opinion in those early years of the transition period and long afterwards was distinctly emotional, playing with the totalitarian paradigm and balancing between soc nostalgia and soc hate. Whenever a shift in attitude towards this recent period of our history has been available, it has always been combined with a shift in the evaluation of its heritage. Thus, Buzludzha monument – as a symbol of the era – becomes double-coded: both good and bad and distinctly dissonant (Fig. 6).

Another issue of contestation is the identity problem of the Bulgarian socialist party, successor of the Communist party. The party wants this building back from the state as legal property (Buzludzha changed its ownership in 1990). But the socialists are also torn between their aspiration for



Fig. 5 Construction works, photographed by Artin Azinyan, source: Regional Museum of History, Stara Zagora



Fig. 6 Buzludzha Monument today

the memorial and their fear that this will link them to an inconvenient past that contradicts their modern European left ideas.

Socially and economically contested

Then we can add the social and economic issues of contestations which are directly linked to Buzludzha's double-staged existence – a short-lived period of opulence and a prolonged period of dereliction.

Buzludzha is a symbol of left collectivism, goes the story. Like in the early days of socialism, it was only natural for a monument dedicated to an anniversary of the communist party to be the result of collective, even volunteer work. Each summer young volunteers from the region did visit and help the military construction units on Buzludzha peak. It was a monument from the people to the people. Was it really? (Fig. 7).

In 2013 Nedyalka Vasileva wrote: “Georgi Stoilov claims that the money came entirely from donations, turning the building site into a nationwide enterprise. The stamps exist, though minutes and government decrees reveal official funding given”.⁵ Indeed, in 1973 the Buzludzha project was estimated to cost just under nine million levs in total and the sum was approved as state expense by the Council of Ministers. In 1978 it was already clear that the building would be much more expensive. It was estimated to cost 20 million Bulgarian levs for construction and landscaping. And the stamps and the volunteers' work were never enough. Without substantial state funding this “collective effort” would never have borne fruit, metaphorically speaking.

After 1989 it proved far too expensive to maintain – as most grand socialist structures appear to be in the post-socialist, fragmented, neoliberal market economy. Abandoned, looted, devastated, the structure quickly deteriorated and remained just an empty shell of its former glory, robbed of its former function and purpose.

Aesthetically contested

And finally, we end up with the aesthetic contestation. Buzludzha has often been defined as “ugly”, thus disguising a political accusation – of it being totalitarian – with an aesthetic definition. In other words, the building belongs to a certain period and symbolises a certain ideology. At a certain moment both the period and its ideology were rejected. This immediately transformed the building from a “national sanctuary” of immense grandeur into an aesthetically unacceptable remnant of an uncomfortable past.

The form was the first to be attacked. It has always provoked commentaries anyway. Stoilov, very much in the spirit of the cultural policies of the late 1970s, explained the circular shape as being inspired by the Thracian tombs (situated in the valley below the peak). In various articles and interviews before 1989 he attributed the impressive spherical body to the harsh natural location and the importance of a visible and clear symbol. “A monument must be laconic, sculptural, to make a strong impression; in other words – to



Fig. 7 Children in front of Buzludzha Monument, 1980s, archive photo, source: Bulgarian News Agency (BTA)



Fig. 8 Buzludzha as photographed by Nikola Mihov, 2012

be a symbol”, he used to say.⁶ True to the socialist-realist paradigm and the cultural fashions of Lyudmila Zhivkova’s era, Stoilov named as his sources of inspiration Bulgarian vernacular traditions, the ancient roots of the country and classical Antiquity – mentioning the UNESCO-listed Thracian tomb in nearby Kazanlak, the Pantheon in Rome, the domes of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence. 30 years later, however, he changed the narrative, referring to influences from the space age.

Stoilov has long been unofficially accused of plagiarism for Buzludzha – whether the form is truly unique, inspired or directly copied from Oscar Niemeyer, from Frank Lloyd Wright and his Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin (1961), from the Bulgarian architect Eroslav Stankov and his building for the National Circus in Sofia, or from the Soviet “flying saucers”, e.g. the Kazan Circus (1967). It should be noted that such accusations appeared in the non-professional media and intensified after 2000 along with the growing international popularity of the monument and the post-socialist ousting of Stoilov himself.

Nobody dared question the “ancient” symbolism and “unique” architectural achievement of Buzludzha in the 1980s. It seems irrelevant even today. The question is not whether Buzludzha is unique as form or architecture, but why it has managed to achieve such ever-lasting power of expression, still providing a unique experience – a combination of dramatic natural setting, grand construction efforts and huge architectural ego.

(Never) Forget Your Past

This famous graffito (Fig. 8) could be seen at the entrance of the Buzludzha Monument until the mid-2010s. It was used for the cover of a photobook with the same title by the Bulgarian photographer Nikola Mihov⁷ and is one of the most

telling images of the monument today. It marked the beginning of its world fame with more and more urbex tourists coming to visit and photograph the abandoned structure.

In July 2019, Bulgaria’s most famous building was given international recognition as a threatened heritage site. The Getty Foundation included it in the 2019 Keeping It Modern list intended to support conservation of modern architecture. Buzludzha was awarded a grant of 185,000 USD for a conservation management plan to be prepared by an international team. In 2020, it received a second grant (of 60,000 USD) for the protection of the vast interior mosaics which have been considered at great risk of being destroyed by the elements.

There is something else. When suddenly one international organisation officially recognised the architectural and artistic value of one of the most contested buildings in Bulgaria regularly labelled as totalitarian, local debates somehow quietened down. No one wanted to destroy Buzludzha anymore, nobody called the Americans “bloody communists”. It turns out that when the evaluation of their own heritage comes from the outside, well packaged as a “foreign product”, Eastern Europeans readily come to terms with their own past, even the contested one, and even allow for multiple interpretations.

Cultural heritage needs public consensus to be preserved successfully. Therefore, institutional preservation considers opposite opinions as an obstacle to nurturing an impartial public attitude, neutral acceptance and justification as an “indisputable universal good”. Contested heritage, however, is strongly disputable – it is politically, economically, socially, even aesthetically contested. It is like no other. But there lies its prime cultural value.

That’s the advantage of sites like Buzludzha – they can tell many stories. And embracing contestation might be the most natural and probably also the most successful way to effectively preserve them.

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Credits

- Figs. 1, 5, 7: ATRIUM Archive
 Figs. 2a, 2b, 3, 4, 6: photo A. Vasileva
 Fig. 8: N. Mihov

¹ This paper is based on the research I have done as a member of the Bulgarian team responsible for the “History and Context” part of the Getty Foundation’s “Keeping It Modern”-funded conservation and management plan (CMP) for the Buzludzha Monument. Strongly revised for publication, this paper is based on the findings and analyses done together with Emilia Kaleva and co-ordinated with EHouse Architects, ICOMOS Germany, ICOMOS Bulgaria, and the Buzludzha Project Foundation during the work on the CMP.

² SILVERMAN/FAIRCHAILD RUGGLES, *Cultural Heritage*, 2007.

³ TUNBRIDGE/ASHWORTH, *Dissonant Heritage*, 1996.

⁴ PETROVA-KORUDZIEVA, *Use and Management*, 2015.

⁵ VASILEVA, *Instability of Monuments*, 2013.

⁶ *Arhitektura* (10) 1981.

⁷ MIHOV, *Forget Your Past*, 2012.