

Dissonant Post-World War II Heritage in the Urban Context of Bulgaria: Space, Time and Building a Culture of Public Debate

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Culture, dissonant heritage and public urban space

At the beginning of the 21st century, the cultural dimensions of development are increasingly becoming the focus of social attention.¹ Culture, regarded as society's capacity for self-reflection and behaviour under changing historical conditions, influences the ways of life and interaction in the city; it leaves both visible and invisible impacts on the material urban structures. In today's democratic societies, urban culture, equally sensitive to development challenges and the preservation of values, evolves through continuous debate. Cultural heritage is an important factor in this debate as it materialises the memories of the past, adding wisdom to the pragmatic considerations about the future. The Namur Declaration of 2015² asserts that cultural heritage is a key component of the European identity, "a unique resource, fragile, non-renewable and non-relocatable". The role of cultural heritage for achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals is explicitly acknowledged in Goal 11, sub-target 11.4.² The ICOMOS Quality Principles document asserts that "[u]sing cultural assets in respectful ways safeguards their meanings, values and inspiration for local communities and future generations".³ The continually evolving urban public space – enabling and sheltering public life, changing while keeping traces of the past – is today broadly acknowledged as part of the living cultural heritage to be respected and preserved. The concept of dissonant cultural heritage, introduced in the late 20th century,⁴ is today widely used in the debate on the public policy challenges posed by conflicting memories of the past and their material traces in public space,⁵ as well as in the call for necessary people-centred approaches to cultural heritage.⁶ The societal transition in Eastern Europe in the late 20th century brought the need for self-reflection on memories and identities while making choices for the future. Preservation versus demolition clashes concerning urban heritage of the socialist period are still going on in countries of South-East Europe, also often fuelled by political and economic considerations.

Post-World War II dissonant heritage in Sofia city centre

The city of Sofia preserves the memory of numerous transformations in multiple historic layers (Fig. 1). Within the seven decades between the late 1940s and the early 2020s, the city centre experienced fast spatial changes twice – im-



Fig. 1 Sofia city centre, view of the early 21st century

portant historic layers were demolished and new ones added in the urban fabric because of societal transformations.

In the course of the post-World War II recovery of the historic city centre in the mid-20th century socialist urban planning took the opportunity to change the utilitarian functions but also the overall spatial structure of the core city area. The planning interventions retained the two historic urban axes inherited from the ancient Roman city, but added symbols of the new ideology in the restructured public space. The west-east city axis with an existing north-east/south-east bifurcation was strongly emphasised; a couple of ancient buildings were integrated into the new urban structures but several quarters from the early 20th century were destroyed in favour of a new symmetric urban composition, with the Communist Party headquarters as a central visual landmark at the point of bifurcation. New cultural functions – the National Art Gallery and the National Ethnographic Museum – were attributed to the building of the former royal palace and the large green area of the previously gated palace garden was opened to the public. The accomplishment of the north-south urban axis, linking Sofia's central railway station to the city centre and then going south to a panoramic view of the Vitosha mountain, was left in the post-war period as a task for the future. The task was accomplished nine years before the end of the socialist period through a large-scale urban intervention in the late 1970s, meant to celebrate the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian State in 1981.

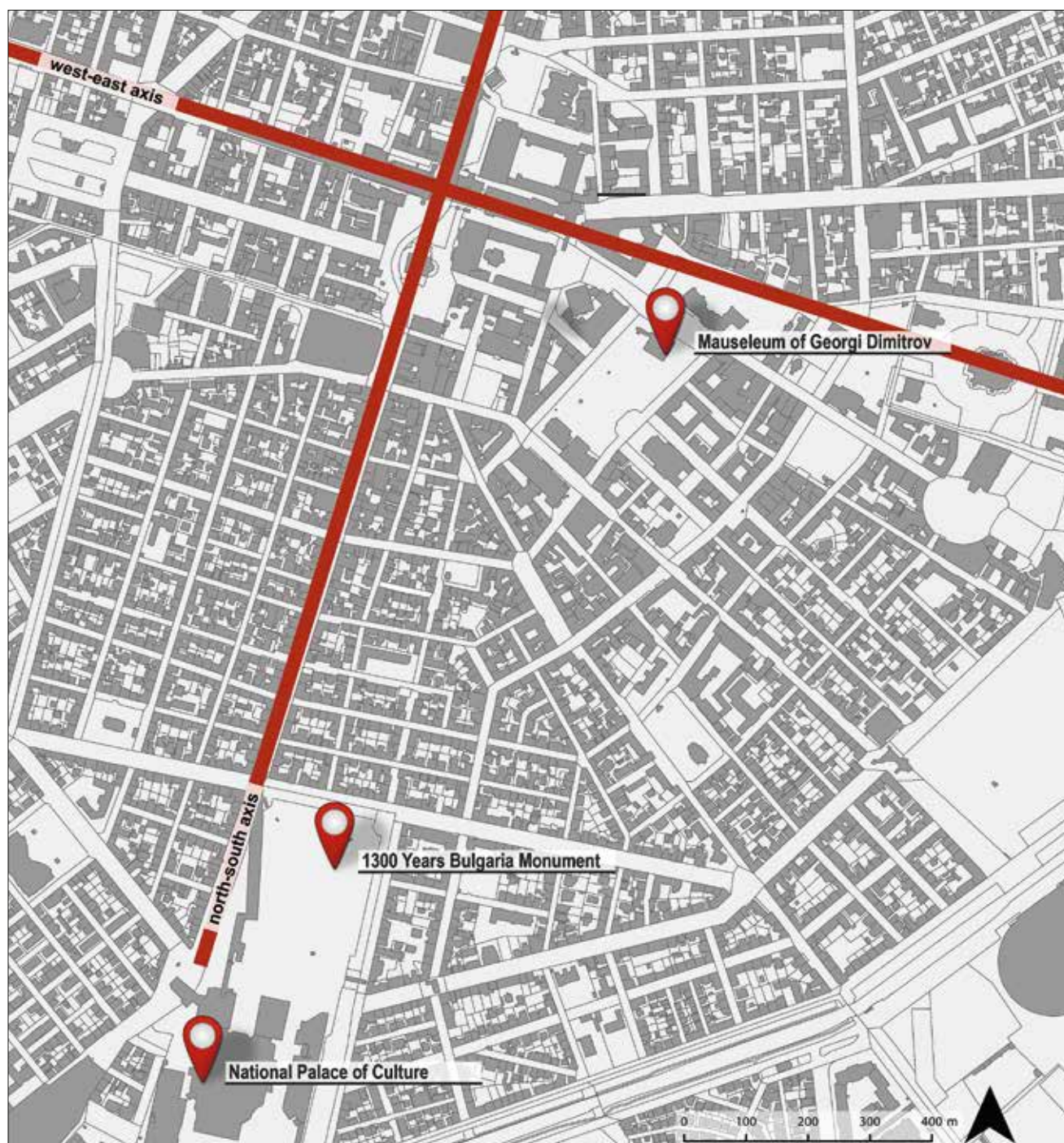


Fig. 2. Sofia city centre, main urban axes

The societal transformation initiated in 1990 provoked a new questioning of the values of the past and the search for a new development paradigm. The undertaken urban changes were motivated by political as well as economic reasons. Efforts to reclaim and ‘desacralise’ public urban space were accompanied by the creation of public green areas and the demolition of late 19th/early 20th century heritage to enable intensive new high-rise development. Growing public concern about the cultural consequences of losing layers of urban memory motivated citizens’ initiatives and expert organisations to campaign for protection of public green spaces and monuments from the early 20th century. Post-World-

War-II monuments, however, evoked strongly polarised opinions and emotions in society.

Heated political clashes in the early 1990s addressed two key monuments in the centre of Sofia – the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov and the 1300-years-Bulgaria Monument, the first built at the very beginning of the socialist period, and the second at its very end (Fig. 2). Despite the voices insisting on public debate about their future, both monuments were demolished within 18 years – the mausoleum in 1999 and the 1300-years-Bulgaria Monument in 2017. A look at the historic context of their appearance and the efforts made after 1990 to reinterpret their importance for urban memory



Fig. 3 Sofia central city square with mausoleum, 1960s

could provide some understanding of the deficiencies of the evolving urban culture, but also of the existing potential for an effective debate on the urban value of post-World War-II dissonant heritage before a cultural layer of modern urban history is irretrievably lost.

The Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov, designed by the prominent Bulgarian architect Georgi Ovcharov and built in only six days in 1949 after the death of Bulgarian Communist Party leader Georgi Dimitrov, was erected on a site opposite the former royal palace (Fig. 3) as a key element of the central ritual site for the party-led mass rallies during national celebrations in the period of socialism. The building was additionally reinforced and decorated with unique mosaics in the 1970s. After it was abandoned in 1990, several initiatives and civil society organisations tried to raise public awareness about possible steps to ‘desacralise’ and reuse the building, while preserving the historic memory of place. Architects and art designers shared creative ideas on reinterpreting the dissonant monument and art events were organised in the square until the late 1990s. The mausoleum was, however, demolished in 1999, nine years after the start of the political changes. Sofia municipality undertook several attempts afterwards to utilise the empty urban space for festivities, bazaars, and art exhibitions, yet with no meaningful cultural message. Currently, a car park occupies part of the square, and a huge abstract human figure rises on the site (Fig. 4).

In November 2018, the municipality announced the intention to organise an international competition for turning

the underground premises of the demolished mausoleum into a gallery for contemporary art. Critical comments from citizens and experts pointed out that neither a holistic concept for the urban space in the heart of the city nor considerations of the cultural and spatial context were mentioned; also, no competition brief was announced until late 2021.

The 1300-years-Bulgaria Monument was designed, alongside the National Palace of Culture and the surrounding open public space, as part of a large-scale urban complex, a work of synthesis between architecture, landscape architecture, and monumental sculpture. The complex was estimated to be the largest and most ambitious urban renewal intervention of the socialist period (Figs. 5 and 6). It was realised within a couple of years in place of a public garden, abandoned military barracks with memorial walls dedicated to the soldiers killed in the wars of the early 20th century, and several empty plots south of the city centre. The multifunctional congress-and-concert building was located at the end of the main compositional axis of a public area of greenery and fountains and framed by the Vitosha mountain to the south. The huge monument at the beginning of the axis symbolised Bulgaria’s development along a steep historic path (Fig. 7). After the changes in 1990, the public space around the monument became vibrant and full of public life (Fig. 8); yet the low quality of the stone cladding, the total lack of maintenance and the tolerated vandalism on the site resulted in a considerable deterioration and misuse of the monument in the early 21st century (Fig. 9).

In the meantime, heritage experts undertook international action to protect the monument. The complex was listed as one of the Bulgarian sites on the European cultural routes of totalitarian heritage of the 20th century by the ATRIUM project.⁷ A heritage alert to the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on 20th century heritage (ISC20C) claimed that the monument with its entire urban environment was part of the cultural memory of Sofia. The French-Bulgarian Trace project⁸ initiated public and expert debate on its historic value in 2008. An online student competition for urban and architectural design ideas about the future of the monument and the surrounding park area was organised in 2012.⁹ Experts and citizens posted their positions and arguments in personal blogs and virtual media. In its official declaration ICOMOS Bulgaria drew the institutions' attention to the profound destructive consequences of erasing historic memory and insisted on a transparent public discussion, respect for expert opinion and strict compliance with the national legal provisions.¹⁰ In 2017, the remnants of the ruined monument were finally removed after on-site protests and official declarations by several national unions of creative professionals opposing the act. A statue reminiscent of an earlier period and expected to be broadly acceptable for the public replaced the demolished monument (Fig. 10).

Dissonant heritage as an opportunity for building a culture of debate

The synthesis of architecture and monumental arts was largely promoted by the socialist state as an artistic instrument for ideological influence. Urban planning and design strongly emphasised the importance of these complexes in public space. The artistic value of this heritage was never fully estimated as the expert analyses were largely influenced by ideological considerations in the socialist period and after that the rejection of socialism dominated the public and professional discourse.¹¹ An official recommendation after 1990 that universities should refrain from entering the political debate also hampered critical academic reflection on the role of post-World War II dissonant monumental complexes in the life of society and their value as urban heritage. A diploma project by Emilia Kaleva and two PhD theses by Emilia Kaleva and Aneta Vasileva, defended at the Faculty of Architecture at UACEG, and one, by Mitko Zlatanov, at the Academy of Arts in Sofia were among several successful attempts of a younger generation to engage in the debate through academic education and research. A couple of course and diploma projects, developed within the programme of urbanism at UACEG and addressing issues of socialist and post-socialist urban development, regrettably remained unpublished and unknown to a broader professional community. The Trace project seminar¹² in October 2008 enabled an exchange of professional positions and arguments on Bulgarian dissonant heritage from socialism. It also provided an opportunity for a team of five students, 23–24 years old, from the MSc programme in Urbanism at UACEG, to share their perceptions about life under socialism, their appreciation of the ongoing societal changes, and their ideas about the future action of the 1300-years-Bulgarian



Fig. 4. Art installation, former site of the mausoleum, 2021



Fig. 5 National Palace of Culture complex, Sofia, 1978

monument in a five-minute video presentation.¹³ Thus, a message from a younger generation with no personal experience of socialism entered the debate. The students' video started with an explicit statement that the team members did not recommend the demolition of the monument but wished to provoke reflection on its possible futures in line with people's changing lifestyles, demands and expectations. The students described their perception of 'the communist past' as "one epoch, one power, one idea", in contrast to a new world of "creativity, spontaneity, initiative, performance, music, games, etc." The team perceived the monument itself and the public place around it as "isolated, static and degraded", lacking "vitality, socialisation, dynamics and tolerance". Several collages illustrated the authors' hints about re-integrating the monument aimed at transforming the place into a lively and attractive one, responsive to contemporary lifestyles and needs. The students were largely criticised by the experienced participants in the forum – for 'preserving the socialist monument', on the one hand, and for 'abusing' it, on the other. The audience was provoked by the images in the collages and scarcely sensitive to the shared perceptions. Thus, a chance to discuss with future urban planning experts from a younger generation their perceptions of the cultural messages of dissonant heritage was, regrettably, missed.



Fig.6 The National Palace of Culture complex in the urban environment of Sofia, late 1990s

The online student competition about architectural and urban design ideas for re-interpreting the 1300-years-Bulgaria monument was another important step towards encouraging young people to join in the debate on dissonant heritage. A critical analysis of the conceptual design proposals submitted for the competition would be a relevant starting point for understanding the next generations' points of view on the legacy of the past.

The broad public accessibility of objective information about facts and events but also of diverse memories from the previous historic period is essential for public debate. It needs to be complemented by expert analyses on the artistic value of the monuments but also on the cultural value of dissonance for the continuity of societal development. Relevant knowledge about the ongoing regional and global processes for re-conceptualising dissonant heritage in the life of today's societies is also important to enter the educational process. The enhanced opportunities to share and spread ideas in virtual space already largely contributes to the publicity of personal and collective positions on dis-



Fig. 7 1300-years-Bulgaria Monument, mid-1980s



Fig. 8 1300-years-Bulgaria monument, adjacent public space, late 1990s

sonant cultural heritage. People from different generations stand for preserving dissonant heritage as part of urban memory but also for the democratic value of public debate; they insist on respecting intellectual rights and on listening to expert arguments. The experience from the recent three decades however has proved that traces of debate and action in virtual space are often inaccessible or irreversibly lost for a future audience.

Conclusion

It seems that the debate on dissonant heritage and its meaning for the city still has a long way to go in Bulgarian society. Filling in the existing information and interpretation gaps alongside building capacity for self-reflection and developing a culture of debate are, however, issues of pressing priority today. Encouraging the debate could be expected to enable a more mature understanding of the past but could also be a step towards enhancing the transformative capacity of Bulgarian cities in a way that respects and preserves their spatial and cultural identity. The multidisciplinary international expert dialogue on dissonant heritage already proved to be immensely important in supporting, yet not substituting a broad national, regional, and local process. Younger generations need to be trusted and continually encouraged to take their responsibility as experts and citizens in the reflection and collective action to defend cultural and democratic values. The inter-generational dialogue built upon mutual respect and empathy appears to be crucial for the communication on values and principles, tested in practice but also continually questioned and re-confirmed through debate.



Fig. 9 Ruined 1300-years-Bulgaria monument, 2013



Fig. 10 Site of the demolished 1300-years-Bulgaria monument, replaced and marked by a lion monument to commemorate fallen soldiers of the military division barracks formerly stationed at this site, spring 2021

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Credits

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¹ UNESCO, *Culture: Urban future*, 2016.
² Namur Declaration, 2015, Section 1, item 2.
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⁹ TRACE project (2007–2010).

¹⁰ Transformatori Association, *Architectural competition*, 2012.
¹¹ ICOMOS Bulgaria, *Position*, 2017.
¹² ZLATANOV, 2015, p. 18.
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