The Undisputed in Disputed Heritage – Tracking, Assessing and Protecting Dissonant Heritage

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This paper is directly linked to Aneta Vasileva's text and is based on the analyses and findings of our work on the Conservation Management Plan (CMP) of Buzludzha, more specifically the "Cultural Significance Assessment" part, co-ordinated with EHouse Architects, ICOMOS Germany, ICOMOS Bulgaria, and the Buzludzha Project Foundation. The following lines are about three stories of analytical challenges and intense working discussions but also about three stories that ended with a consensus of the team. It was precisely this consensus that gave rise to the notion of non-controversy versus the dissonant nature of the heritage in question.

1. Dissonance as heritage value

The first story and the first message are that dissonance can be a cultural value. The arguments for this claim are rooted first and foremost in the evolution of the concept of cultural heritage itself and the path of dissonant heritage as part of cultural heritage.

Negative and dissonant in cultural heritage discourse

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed a real evolution of the concept of cultural heritage:[1]

- It included not only material but also immaterial resources (like traditions, customs, local cuisine, etc.); - Its territorial scope expanded and today we deal not only with separate buildings or sites but with entire areas such as historic cities, for example;
- The heritage concept included whole new types, such as cultural routes and cultural landscapes;
- In recent decades, heritage expanded its temporal scope as well to include even recent historic traces, such as the Berlin wall for example.

At the end of the turbulent 20th century there was already another, very curious tendency. The expansion of the cultural heritage concept went so far as to include even such types that come into conflict with the core „classical" idea of cultural heritage as an indisputable public good and a positive testimony to cultural achievements. The world realised that heritage can also have different negative forms. The traces of the atrocities and destruction of World War Two are such an example par excellence, kept as anti-achievements and warnings for the future. Exactly with this purpose, the Nazi Concentration Camp Auschwitz is protected at the highest level – it is inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The same goes for the half-destroyed exhibition building that was the only surviving structure in Hiroshima after the nuclear bomb explosion. It is also recognised as globally important and was made into a peace memorial. In support of the symbolic idea, it was decided to preserve and maintain the remains exactly as they were right after the explosion.

Both examples represent the dominant European cosmopolitan approach to memory[2] that has been prevalent in recent decades, attempting to create an overarching narrative of the past that strives for a shared sense of identity after the Second World War. As Shauna Robertson says, the cosmopolitan memory represents the past as a moral struggle between abstract ideals or systems (such as democracy versus dictatorship), reaching out to 'the others' as fellow human beings and sufferers of evil. This approach is often proposed as the best way to deal with a traumatic past, using storytelling and sites of remembrance to focus on 'recasting social memory as a peace strategy'.[3]

The Auschwitz Concentration Camp and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, alongside the Berlin Wall, mark a relatively new group in the cultural heritage concept – the group of traces with negative connotations, associated with indisputable human mistakes, which we want to preserve just as much as the ones of indisputable human achievements. These same traces were once controversial – the Wall, the Camp and the building in Hiroshima were all debated as unwanted reminders of a traumatic past that should be destroyed. Today, however, they are indisputably important documents of a negative past, and it is exactly their acknowledged indisputability that is the common thread linking this new group of ‚negatives' to the commonly accepted positive view of cultural heritage.

And then there is the emerging new group of dissonant heritage that is even more interesting because it is still at odds with the principal notion of cultural heritage.[4] This is a type of legacy that evokes not simply different but highly contradictory attitudes and can be compared to the mental stress one experiences when listening to musical disharmony, as explained by Tunbridge and Ashworth.[5] Today's post-colonial England gives the example of existing heritage (statues of slave traders, until recently revered as benefactors) that becomes controversial due to a change in public opinion about its significance. Completely different is the situation with the „fresh" traces of the recent 20th century, especially its second half. They are seriously questioned whether they should be recognised as cultural heritage at all, and as a result, they also come into dissonance. These

Fig. 1 Views of the Buzludzha complex on the way to the monument at the top

are mostly representatives of post-war architectural modernism, socialist realism and socialist monuments which are denounced as ugly, utopian, or totalitarian, and sometimes more than one of the three at a time. The latter is particularly characteristic of the former Eastern bloc countries, including Bulgaria with its socialist monuments, which are among the most vivid examples of controversial heritage in the country.

Dissonance as a new type of cultural value

Is it possible to regard dissonance as a new type of cultural value, specific of the times we live in now? Our answer is YES and we believe that such cultural heritage approach finds its grounds in three key sources:

First, the ICOMOS Declaration on Human Rights and Cultural Heritage, adopted on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration (Stockholm, 1998), underlines that "the right to cultural heritage is an integral part of human rights" and that part of this right to cultural heritage is "the right to better understand one's heritage and that of others".

Second, the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro, 2005) points out that Europe's common heritage consists both of "ideals, principles and values, derived from the experience gained through progress", but also of "past conflicts, which foster the development of a peaceful and stable society, founded on respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law".

Third come the principles of the agonistic memory approach which in contrast to the antagonistic and cosmopolitan modes, represents the past as a socio-political struggle for dominance in which 'the other' is seen as an adversary rather than an enemy.[6] Agonistic memory aims to bridge the divide between different viewpoints by allowing for the possibility of conflict without fixing the lines between friends and foes. It does not try to create a single overarching narrative of the past but instead acknowledges a variety of contrasting memories, allows multiple perspectives, and promotes a dialogue in open-ended terms without a binding aspiration for consensus.

Applying the principles of agonistic memory to heritage conservation, together with the messages of the key international heritage doctrines, transforms dissonance in heritage from an unwanted memory to be deleted into a valuable source of self-awareness and evolution advice. Preservation of cultural heritage is based on the perspective of future generations, for whom we are choosing what to preserve today. That is why it is a very responsible choice. And exactly from such a future perspective today's controversial sites acquire a particularly high cognitive value for those who will treat today as history tomorrow.

Significance assessment of dissonant heritage: the Buzludzha case study

The challenge we set ourselves in this case was not only to contextualise and bring out the dissonance of the monumental complex (see Aneta Vasileva's paper), but also to defend this specificity as a value asset through the standard national criteria for built heritage assessment. So far dissonance has been the biggest obstacle to a traditionally conflict-free narrative of cultural heritage and it is not present in the Bulgarian set of criteria for the assessment of cultural significance. Nevertheless, in our view it was important to apply the national criteria system to Buzludzha because at the time of the CMP work process the monument was in the process but did not yet have final protection status under the Bulgarian Cultural Heritage Act. The plan set out to assist this process by demonstrating that the site met the national requirements for cultural significance, including its controversy.

What did we do? We started with undisputed merits analysed within the conflict-free frame set by the national criteria, including cultural and scientific value (with indicators for architecture and construction value, historic, artistic, urban and cognitive value), innovation, social significance, and of course authenticity.

First of all, we examined the role of Buzludzha in the wider local context with high natural and cultural potential, as most of the existing cultural heritage sites there are of the highest national importance. These are for example the Thracian tombs, the Monument of Freedom on Shipka peak and the Shipka-Buzludzha National Park-Museum itself. In this context, Buzludzha takes the logical place of a next, most recent cultural-historical benchmark with spatial and visual relations to the others. It becomes a new layer, enriching the existing cultural heritage system.

Next, Buzludzha should not be regarded as a single architectural object but as a complex with its adjacent park,

specially built for the purpose. This is a memorial complex of high urbanistic and architectural value. It stands out with comprehensively conducted landscape and architectural treatment of the area, combining existing elements with newly designed ones. The intervention is laconic, gentle on the natural characteristics of the environment, with discreet but clearly distinguishable character. The monument is the architectural culmination of a successfully created scenario with great emotional impact, as was the project idea (Fig. 1).

The building itself has a very specific architectural image, influenced by both „lessons from the classics" (as the author himself claims) and modern architecture – clean forms, memorable large volumes, exposed concrete. Our historical and architectural analysis showed that it is extremely difficult to fit this building into any familiar definitions and typologies or to connect it with a single architectural style or trend. It is rather an exception to the degree of uniqueness for Bulgaria, both at the time of its creation and today.

Innovation is another undisputable feature of the monument. It represents a rare architectural phenomenon – a monument with a function. The specific rounded form is a direct consequence of the idea for a hall for solemn events. The monument was meant not only for memorial purposes with a strong emotional impact on the masses, but also aimed at their active engagement during the visit through specific political rituals performed in the building at local, regional, national, and high international levels. Also, for its time and given the difficult working conditions, the site demonstrates a high degree of complexity, quality of design and construction solutions. There are novelties registered as patents such as the new red shpritz carpet material for walls and stairs or the golden enamel produced for the first time in Bulgaria.

The next fundamental valuable feature of the entire complex is the high level of artistic synthesis applied comprehensively. All elements in the architectural and artistic system are semantically and aesthetically connected, creating a complete, highly influential whole, as the initial task actually demanded. The complex as we see it today is a result of a multidisciplinary effort, combining architecture, art, and landscape in one harmonious composition.

All undisputed valuable features of the Buzludzha complex prove undoubtedly that it deserves a place alongside the traditional conflict-free cultural heritage. Only in each of them, like a thin red line, that multi-layered dissonance creeps in, explained by Vasileva. So, it is absolutely obvious that the dissonance is deeply rooted even in the positive evaluations. This leads to the conclusion that Buzludzha is significant not in spite of, but because of its multi-layered story-telling dissonance.

Thus, dissonance came to the very front, even in a leading position in the cultural significance assessment of the site. How did that fact affect the assessment?

The history of the monument is divided into two major distinctly different periods – before and after 1989, the period of its non-functionality becoming as valuable for its complex assessment as the previous one with the active original function. This is because the two periods stand for two equally important pieces of cultural knowledge – knowledge about the consecutive eras of socialism and post-socialism in Bulgarian history. Both their extremes are sealed in the site and especially in the monument's image where the destruction has as much value as the original. In our view, this specific double coding gives high historical and cognitive significance to the monument as a double document (Fig. 2).

In this way, dissonance turns from an obstacle into a positive factor, increasing the cognitive potential, and thus also the present and future social significance of the complex. And social significance is one of the key assessment criteria for cultural heritage in Bulgaria. The controversy in Buzludzha provides material for reflection – important reflection that needs to be stimulated. Exactly with its inherent controversy the site becomes that valuable source of self-awareness and evolution advice, a tool for better understanding of our historical development with the whole palette of social contradictions and conflicts – just as ICOMOS advises in its Stockholm Declaration and also the Council of Europe in its Faro Framework Convention.

That is why the recognition of dissonance as a type of cultural value and including it in the assessment of cultural significance is, in our opinion, the key to the necessary public consensus for the successful preservation of the Buzludzha complex as cultural heritage.

2. Dissonance and authenticity

The Buzludzha case study showed that including dissonance as a value asset in the cultural significance assessment may affect the concept of authenticity and the approach for its conservation as well. This was our next challenge: introducing equal significance to the two different periods in the site's history reflected in the evaluation approach of its authenticity. The layer of the authentic pre-1989 structure became equally valuable as the authentic traces of its destruction (especially the deliberate actions to obliterate the mosaic head of the communist leader Todor Zhivkov). As with the Hiroshima memorial, it turns out that also in the Buzludzha monument cultural significance is revealed precisely through the state of ruin. This leads us to the next very interesting reflection: in order to highlight the composite cultural value of the monument we have to deliberately accept, even tolerate the destroyed authenticity of part of this same value – the one of the first period. This contradicts a fundamental principle in cultural heritage conservation – maximum preservation of authenticity, as stated in the Venice Charter and all subsequent international documents, including the Nara Document on Authenticity. The destruction of authenticity is generally unacceptable, as it has always been regarded as main evidence of the truthfulness of cultural heritage and the main focus for its preservation.[7] However, let us think for a moment how unacceptable the very idea of regarding Buzludzha monument as cultural heritage sounded years ago – just as unthinkable as the idea of protecting the Berlin Wall at the time of its fall (Fig. 3).

In this sense, the proposed approach to the conservation and exhibition of ruins should not be regarded as an extreme idea that rejects the basic rules of the authenticity approach, but rather as an outcome of the immense development of the concept of cultural heritage in general, which we summarised at the beginning. The approach attempts in particu-

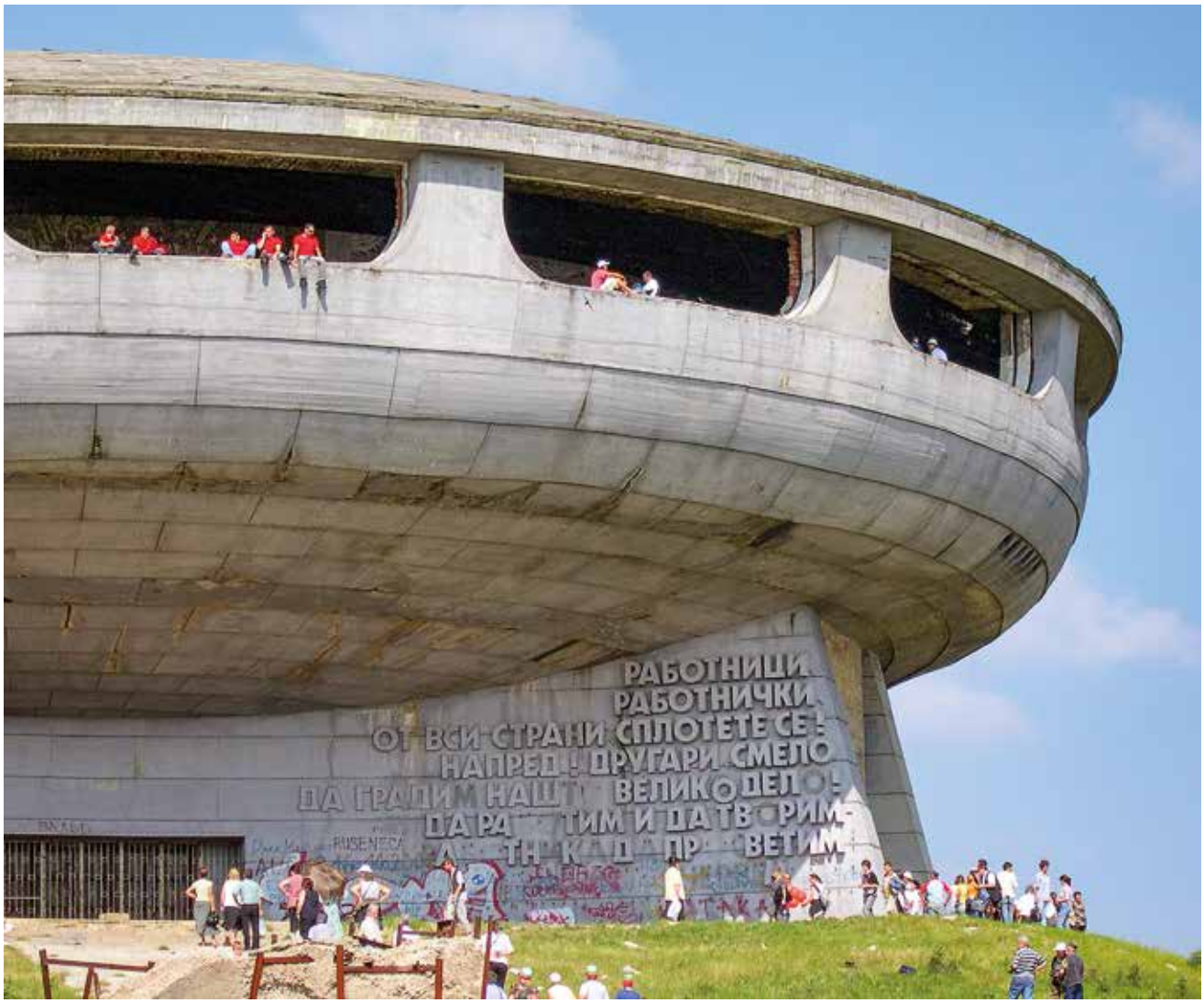

Fig. 2 Visitors at Buzludzha Monument

lar to develop both an adequate attitude and specific tools for conservation and interpretation of dissonant sites. If it is time to accept dissonant heritage as cultural heritage, we should also accept disturbed authenticity as permissible – of course, if this constitutes part of the value. It should be noted that in the Buzludzha case we are not talking about allowing further destruction, but only about preserving existing destroyed parts. These parts we should not aim to restore even if we have indisputable archive data (Fig. 4).

The question of authenticity and layering in the Buzludzha case becomes even more interesting and challenging if we look deeper into the periodisation of the monument's history. The second major period can be further divided into several sub-periods: The first – that of deliberate destruction, opposing and rejecting the luxurious glamour of the functional period. The second – that of gradual rethinking, represented by the popular graffiti sequence "Forget your past", its repainted version "Never forget your past" and the ironic "Enjoy Communism". And the third one, the current one – that of in-depth studies and multi-aspect analysis. It is also the time when a decision for the legal protection of the Buzludzha complex is being formulated.

There will probably be further periods. Despite its rigid concrete shell, the monument continues to evolve and provoke various modes of public perception, which makes the efforts of its preservation all the more intriguing.

3. Dissonance and the law

The question of what the legal protection of dissonant sites should look like is the focus of our third conclusion.

In Bulgaria the beginning was set by Daniela Korudzhieva and her important conclusion in 2015 that the Bulgarian Cultural Heritage Act does not recognise dissonance as an issue in the field of heritage conservation.[8] Accordingly, the law does not provide for working mechanisms or procedures to take into account and deal with the real, albeit potentially conflicting, public opinion. Korudzhieva made a proposal to introduce a special status for dissonant cultural heritage with corresponding special regimes and procedures.

Reflections were taken further by our proposal for a new form of legal protection called "preventive protection".[9]

Fig. 3 The missing mosaic head of Todor Zhivkov next to other communist leaders

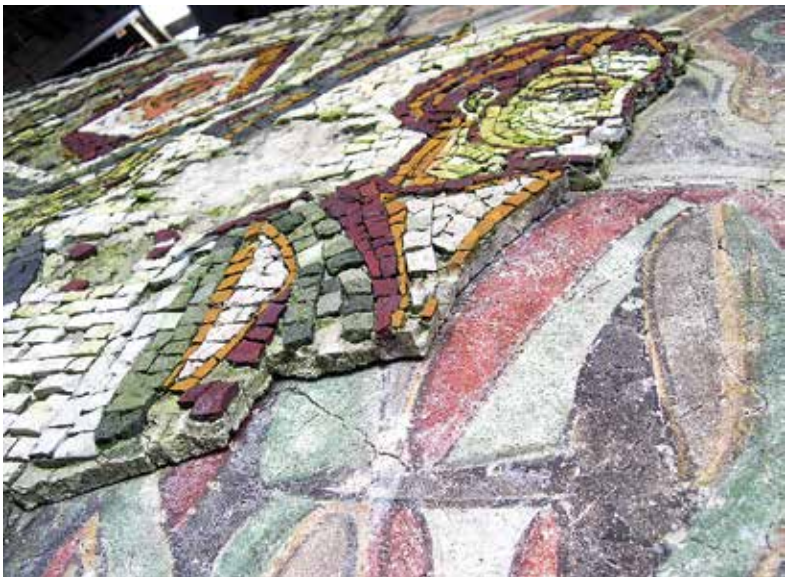

Fig. 4 Destroyed mosaic, revealing the preparatory drawing underneath

This is a temporary protection to be applied when a lack of public consensus on the cultural significance (presence of dissonance) prevents the application of standard listing procedures. Preventive protection treats a dissonant site as a potential (future) cultural value, which is subject to confirmation or rejection, unlike standard legal protection or listing where the cultural significance is unquestioned. In order to allow proper conditions for this choice to be made, preventive protection tries to preserve the current state of the site without further deterioration of the material fabric by imposing the temporary prohibition of any intervention. The aim is to gain time for debate, for rethinking and reaching a shared public position, which in turn can argue for or against permanent legal protection – something like a moratorium on the site until its dissonance is exhausted.

However, the work on the analysis and cultural significance assessment of the Buzludzha complex brought us to the conclusion that dissonance should not actually be exhausted. We should not seek to remove it or wait to overcome it, but on the contrary to preserve and manifest it in its integrity and diversity as an important part of the complex cultural significance of the site. Dissonant heritage is the perfect tool for that agonistic dialogue that does not seek reconciliation but accepts that conflicts are constitutive and constructive for democracy.[10] From this perspective, paraphrasing Leszek Koczanowicz[11], understanding, not consensus, is the point of desired convergence of different contradictory narratives and heritage perceptions. And to have a chance of understanding we need to keep the discussion going. To keep the discussion going, we need to have its object present.

Thus, gradually, through various stages in recent years, including the work on the Buzludzha case study, we have come to the view that dissonant heritage should be treated before the law in the same way as the other cultural heritage sites, both in terms of assessment and protection.

Let us hope that the evolutionary path of heritage theories will soon result in effective preservation of dissonant heritage. Because if we succeed, we have a chance to preserve the diversity of the post-socialist Bulgarian city and to enrich its identity, which in turn is a trump card in the context of the globalised world (as was the global trend until recently, before the refugee crisis in Europe and the Covid pandemic). We'll keep you posted.

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[1] Krestev, Heritage Perception, 2005.

[2] See Bull and Hansen, On Agonistic Memory, 2016.

[3] Robertson, Agonistic Memory, 2020.

[4] This is discussed in more detail in Aneta Vasileva's paper in this publication.

[5] Tunbridge and Ashworth, Dissonant Heritage, 1996, p. 27.

[6] See Bull, Agonistic Memory, 2016; 2020 cited in Robertson, 2020.

[7] Kandulkova, Authenticity, 2015 and The Original, 2021.

[8] Korudzhieva, Dissonant Heritage, 2016.

[9] Kaleva, Contested Heritage, 2019.

[10] Bull, Agonistic Memory, 2020.

[11] Koczanowicz, Beyond Dialogue and Antagonism, 2011.