

The Best Examples of the Architectural Heritage of Socialism in Bulgaria

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I am going to present three examples of architectural heritage from socialist Bulgaria (1945–1989) which are different in scale, typology and time of creation. These are three remarkable pieces of evidence of urban planning, urban ensemble and monumental architecture.

DIMITROVGRAD – the first socialist town in “New Bulgaria”, 1952–56

In 1947, with a decision of the Bulgarian Council of Ministers a completely new town was built from scratch. The first

general urban plan of the town was designed in 1947–48 by architect L. Tonev. It made use of the latest pattern of the time, consisting of a central core and satellite residential areas.

By 1950 the situation in the country had changed completely, the plan was cancelled and a second plan was developed by a team, led by architect P. Tashev. It captured the spirit of “Socialist Realism”. The average density of occupation and the number of storeys of the buildings were increased; the urban development followed the main roads and was strictly monumental. The main compositional pattern of the city is designed on two mutually perpendicular

*Fig. 1: Dimitrovgrad, general plan by Petar Tashev, 1951, N/A Municipality of Dimitrovgrad
Abb. 1: Dimitrovgrad, Generalplan von Petar Tashev, 1951*





Fig. 2: Sofia, Largo ensemble, interior of Council of Ministers, 2011
Abb. 2: Sofia, Largo-Ensemble, Inneres des Ministerrats, 2011

axes north-south and east-west. It also applied the concept of micro-regions which were extensively used in the Soviet Union at the time.

The establishment of a brand new city, Dimitrovgrad, followed the example of many newly industrialised centres in the USSR (Magnitogorsk, Traktorstroy, etc) and reflected the centre/periphery attitudes (USSR–Eastern Europe). Analogies of Dimitrovgrad in Eastern Europe can also be found in Nova Huta (Poland), Nova Dubnitsa (Slovakia) Kazinbartsika (Hungary), and Eisenhüttenstadt (Germany). A common feature of these new settlements built at the dawn of Socialism is the characteristic ornamental plan with a focus on the urban core. It is also possible to draw parallels with possibly the most famous city in the world created with no history: Brazilia by Lucio Costa.

What is unique and crucial in the Dimitrovgrad phenomenon:

- A synthesis of two consecutive urban concepts advanced for their time – modern and Soc-Realism;
- An overall urban structure that is historically monochrome, but extremely valuable as a document of the numerous and authentically preserved urban elements: major urban ensembles, block structure of the residential areas, the ratio between residential and green areas, participation of nature in the city, scale, silhouette;
- Landscape art – once again remarkable for the application of the “socialist classics” style in park design. The parks are inextricably linked to the whole urban organism.

- Industrial heritage – the primary cause for the new city and the first major industrial areas in Bulgaria.
- Monumental arts – preserved original murals (sgraffiti) and various forms of combining monumental and decorative arts are exemplary of the “socialist city” of the 1950s to 1970s.
- Historically unique architectural and social phenomenon: A brand new city was built with all its basic social functions. This completely new urban environment with heavy industry and large residential and recreational areas actually created brand new citizens.

Another unique fact about Dimitrovgrad is that the city was built holus-bolus by voluntary brigades common in the early years of Socialism in Bulgaria. Their symbol and “voice” was poet foreman Penio Penev. The south park was named after him as a tribute and there one can read his poetry, chiseled in stones which is unique for Bulgaria. The memory of the foreman and the poetry that praises the momentum of the time are additional levels of cultural heritage that distinguish Dimitrovgrad as a multi-layer site of high cultural and historic value.

The LARGO – the most emblematic architectural ensemble in Sofia, 1956

The ensemble is the result of a general urban plan that went through a complex process beginning with a contest



Fig. 3: Sofia, Largo ensemble, archive view
Abb. 3: Sofia, Largo-Ensemble, ältere Ansicht

launched in 1944 right after the bombing of Sofia (members of the jury were architect Shchusev and architect Baranov from the USSR). The next contest was set up in 1947 for the reconstruction of the central urban core – no winning project was selected. An official version was prepared by architect Mitov and Prof. Tashev (the author of the second plan of Dimitrovgrad). This plan set up the foundations for the future central ensemble. The final draft of the Largo was made in 1951 by Tashev and Grekov.

The ensemble consists of three main six-storey blocks – two rectangular and one trapezoidal – surrounding the rectangular space open to the west, where, according to the original plan, the House of Soviets was to be built. This prestigious space is where two main boulevards join to highlight the focus of the Party House. The scheme is extremely simple – a highly stressed longitudinal axis directed east-west, reinforced by almost mirror-symmetrical facades of the two ministries. The Largo is a major urban ensemble and public and administrative centre of the capital since 1956 until today. It consists of the Party House (now the National Assembly building), the Ministry of Electrification (now the Presidency), the Ministry of Heavy Industry (now the Council of Ministers building), the Central Department Store, the Luxury Hotel (now the Balkan Sheraton Hotel).

The ensemble had high typological value as a new type of space in the historical core of Sofia and it also introduced a new building typology for Bulgaria – Party Headquarters. Although it brought a completely different scale, alien to the

existing historically developed urban environment and did not connect naturally with it, the ensemble gradually became the true image of the city centre.

The separate buildings were made by different architectural teams, a result of collective work under strong and determining Soviet influence. A complete urban-planning, architectural and artistic unity was achieved – fully in line with the aesthetic demand of the era for a “complete work of art”. The central space is symmetrically framed by well balanced facades, culminating in the dominant Party Headquarters. Individual elements were implemented in the dominant style of the sub-period of Stalinist “Socialist Realism” under the slogan “national in form, socialist in content”. Transformed elements of national architectural and artistic heritage are present mostly in the exterior and interior of the Council of Ministers with links from the architectural appearance of the Rila Monastery (the largest Eastern Orthodox complex in Bulgaria dating back to the 10th century, recognized now as WH), and some fragments of the monastic churches in Preslav (the capital of the First Bulgarian Empire in the 9th and 10th centuries). The eclectic symbiosis of neoclassical forms, monumental scale and symbolic pathos is emblematic for the architectural paradigm of the period.

Scale and architecture of the Largo are modest compared with other examples of “Socialist Realism” in Europe, but in Bulgaria it is the largest intervention in the urban heart of the historic city. Objectively speaking, to date this is the most serious attempt to create a large set of prestigious gov-



Fig. 4: Buzludzha monument, architect Georgi Stoilov, view from 2011
Abb. 4: Buzludzha-Denkmal, Architekt Georgi Stoilov, Ansicht von 2011

ernment buildings, decorated in a single style. For its time, the site is impressive in terms of building a mega project of enormous size, massive planning and major construction in the centre of the city.

Along with the characteristics defining Largo as a typical example of Soc-Realism in Bulgarian architecture and urbanism, the ensemble has also additional features that increase its complex cultural and historical value.

Here, as in Dimitrovgrad, urban planning and architecture reflect the relation of centre/periphery with the characteristic changes dictated by the local context. A specific feature of this relation is that the newly introduced totalitarian model never found its full implementation in Bulgaria (according to original plans). Thus the drastic plans for the reconstruction of the city core remained incomplete. The churches and the royal palace (despite their unacceptable symbolism) were preserved as well as the historic structure with its traditional spatial relations. So, the geometrically uptight ensemble of the Largo actually (almost appropriately!) fits into the rich historic environment and its structural benchmarks. The city's main boulevards are a modern transformation of the Roman main areas – *cardo maximus* and *decumanus maximus* and the Roman Forum of the city founded in the 1st century. In connection with the construction of the buildings of the Largo extensive archaeological research was carried out: part of the findings were destroyed, but an important part of them preserved and integrated into its core – the east gate of *Serdica* (2nd century), the *St. George rotunda* (4th century),

the medieval church of *St. Petka* (11th century). In this vein, the ensemble, with its own architecture and urban planning is the next layer and genetically related stage in the rich layers of the historical centre of the city.

BUZLUDZHA – Memorial of the Bulgarian Communist Party, 1981

It is the largest monument in Bulgaria, built as a memorial and celebration of the Bulgarian Communist Party commemorating the anniversary of its establishment (1891–1981). Not accidentally, during the same year another anniversary was celebrated – the 1300th anniversary of Bulgaria (681–1981). The choice of location was not random – the mountain area is tied to important events in the history of the country and the history of the party. This fact further reinforces the symbolism of the monument. Through it the regime intertwined state and political history and praised itself as a natural apotheosis in the destiny of Bulgaria.

The monument is a dynamic combination of two parts – a horizontal body with a festival hall (60 m in diameter), symbolizing a wreath placed on top and a vertical pylon (70 m in height), symbolizing a waving communist flag.

Here at the largest scale in the country a synthesis of architecture and monumental arts was created. The wall of the hall was decorated with mosaic pieces with a total area of over 1,000 square metres.



Fig. 5a: Buzludzha monument – authentic interior, postcard

Abb. 5a: Buzludzha-Denkmal – Inneres im unversehrten Zustand, Postkarte

Fig. 5b: Buzludzha monument – current condition of the interior, 2012

Abb. 5b: Buzludzha-Denkmal – aktueller Zustand des Inneren, 2012

The Memorial on peak Buzludzha is a unique site, not only for Bulgaria. Some of its outstanding features are:

- Ideology – The party built a monument for its own praise. A monument or memorial is traditionally erected in memory of a particular person/group of persons because of their historical contribution or in honour of an important historical event. The Buzludzha monument however was erected in honour of ideology. It carries not only the memorial importance but actively targets and exercises the emotional and political impact on the masses. In this sense it is a unique memorial for Bulgaria – a new type created by and for the regime itself.
- Rare typology – a monument with a function;
- A high synthesis between architecture and monumental art decoration;
- A document of historical processes – the heavy ideological burden of the monument that is the cause of its fate

after the fall of the dictatorship. It was not just completely abandoned but also deliberately plundered, devastated and exposed to the direct influence of the aggressive mountain climate. The current state is a direct reflection of the public reaction to the rejected regime and it has turned into a double document – for past and current public processes in the country.

- A unique architectural image, influenced both by the “lessons of the classics” (author arch. G. Stoilov says: “using observations from the Roman Pantheon dome of Brunelleschi, the dome of St. Sofia and the domes of Pier Luigi Nervi”) and modern architecture (clean shapes, architectural concrete, memorable large volumes reminiscent of Oscar Niemeyer’s work). The uniqueness here is supported by the selection of the site (which has the aforementioned ideological and historical reasons) – a beautiful mountain area in the geographical centre of the country, highlighting even more categorically the monumental image. It has become an icon of socialist architecture in Bulgaria.

In fact, the examples are connected in pairs. Dimitrovgrad and the Largo are examples of the application of Socialist Realism in Bulgaria, the principal difference being that the city was built from scratch on the open field and the ensemble was embedded in the historic heart of the capital. The other pair is formed by the Largo and Buzludzha – the ensemble is the physical location from which the party governed the country, and the monument is the ideological centre for both worship and demonstration of guiding political ideas.

What is common for all three sites is that they owe their existence to the fact that Bulgaria was a socialist country between the end of World War II and the end of the 1980s.

Zusammenfassung

Spitzenbeispiele für das architektonische Erbe des Sozialismus in Bulgarien

In Bulgarien dauerte die sozialistische Epoche etwa 45 Jahre oder fast ein halbes Jahrhundert. Dieser lange Abschnitt aktiver Bautätigkeit hat ein umfangreiches und vielfältiges architektonisches Erbe hinterlassen. Der Beitrag konzentriert sich auf drei wichtige Beispiele aus dieser Zeit, die geeignet sind, als Welterbevorschläge diskutiert zu werden. Eine Siedlung – Dimitrowgrad – wurde als „ideale sozialistische Stadt“ und von Freiwilligen in den frühen 1950er Jahren erbaut. Ein städtisches Ensemble, das Largo, errichtet seit den fünfziger Jahren, bleibt der bedeutendste Versuch eines repräsentativen Komplexes im Zentrum der Hauptstadt Sofia. Das Denkmal der bulgarischen kommunistischen Partei auf dem Berg Buzludzha, entworfen in den 1970er Jahren und eröffnet 1981, ist das größte Denkmal im Land und eine Ikone der sozialistischen Architektur und Konstruktion in Bulgarien. Im Beitrag werden darüber hinaus die Bedrohungen und Gefährdungen der Anlagen analysiert sowie Konservierungsfragen für die drei Beispiele vorgestellt.