Spatializing Conflicted Memories:

post-socialist memorial architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina

More than two decades after the end of the last war, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a deeply divided country. Outside of urban centres where life seems to have moved away from the nationalist narratives of the 1990s, there are parallel lives of its citizens taking place in separate groups formed on the basis of inextricably intertwined ethnicities and religions. The constantly smouldering conflict of these groups hampers economic progress and benefits populist political parties, which through the construction of biased memorial architecture continuously emphasize differences and divisions, wisely exploiting the fears and prejudices of one group of people towards another and using it for their political agenda. This pattern of behaviour is present equally in the ruling parties of all three conflicting ethnic bodies, and is measurable through the analysis of post-socialist monuments in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

According to a research led by “UDIK Association for social research and communications” completed in 2016, more than 2,100 monuments were erected on the territory of multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina after the last war (1992-1995). The vast majority of them - 98% - are dedicated exclusively to single ethno-religious group, although the victims in many places were of multiple origins and orientations, or atheists. In this way, further ethnic cleansing of less urban areas across the country is encouraged, as well as mutual animosity based on tampered collective memory. New monuments were most often erected in the years of political elections, as a legitimate campaign weapon ubiquitous in public space. This function is reflected in their aesthetics, as they are often designed by politically chosen authors and without architectural competitions. These objects predominantly take the form of ethnic or religious symbols, leaving no room for individual interpretation nor moving away from formalism in architecture. The purpose of memorial architecture - to provide space for contemplation, reflection, healing, or to shape (authentic) collective memory - is lost here.

The aesthetic framework of Bosnia and Herzegovina's collective memory is characterized by the mechanisms of stylistic appropriation, such as reinterpretation of military symbols into ethno-national ones (a tank surrounded by Bosniak lily flowers, near Jajce), by the abuse of scales and proportions to establish dominance (the giant Croatian cross in half-Muslim city of Mostar), or stylization and purification of realistic representations to legally avoid explicit referencing (a bust in the form of a silhouette of Serbian war criminal, in Bijeljina). The aesthetics of post-socialist monuments is contrasted with the visual language of its predecessors, the monuments of socialist Yugoslavia, characterized, among other things, by a departure from realism after exiting the sphere of Soviet influence.

Observing these easily readable objects in their social and geographical context, as well as the complex process of their creation, it is clear that an entire architectural typology has become only a means of fabricating second-hand memories, reworked for present political needs. Memories of ones are deliberately pitted against memories of others, and before any attempt of correcting these idealized or invented official narrations, silencing has to be undone.

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