

EUROPA NOSTRA

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and

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PARTISAN CEMETERY MONUMENT IN MOSTAR: APPEAL FOR INSCRIPTION ON THE EUROPA NOSTRA LIST

In the architecture and art of ex-Yugoslavia, the monuments to the victims of the People's Liberation War stand out. Through their extraordinary artistic language, they remind us of the dignity of human life and death. They are powerful markers of the once-common state's public open space. Their unique architectural and artistic design has placed them on a field of timelessness which is not constrained by geographic and cultural borders, age, race, or political views. They were built and designed by Yugoslav architects and sculptors of the highest profile, such as Bogdan Bogdanović, Edvard Ravnikar, Vojin Bakić, Dušan Džamonja and many others. Instead of regime's symbolism, their creations, while respecting and understanding the spatial context, combined the present and the past, mysticism and cosmology, elements of ancient necropolises, local ethnography, and spatial poetics.

The monuments are predominantly designed as sculptural-architectural structures, abstract architectural sculptures. Many were constructed in concrete, which was elevated to the status of noble material by virtue of shaping and finishing. They are sited in authentic spatial situations and historical settings, designed as a commemorative path. Every monument tells a story connected with the events and victims which and whom they are a memorial to.

Monuments are also political art. But in regard to the works presented, this neither diminishes nor increases their artistic value. They reflect something else: they are an uncompromising tribute to humanity, to reverence towards the victims, conveyed by means of the authors' individual artistic expression.

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia into individual independent states in 1991, it seems that the need for respecting the remembrance expressed by its memorials is waning. As a result, the present state of repair of the monuments and their treatment varies depending on the region. In some places, the past and the strivings of the previous generations are held in respectful memory while elsewhere, the monuments have been abandoned, left to ruin, or even desecrated. Due to their abstract nature, they may be used for very different purposes, such as shooting TV advertisements and music videos, or as fashion runways. Such use of monuments by individuals who have no appreciation or knowledge of the past and therefore cannot respect it represents misuse as well as contempt for the dignity of the victims and their memory.

Unfortunately, the Partisan Cemetery monument in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, also suffered the fate of abandonment, abuse and destruction in 1965. It is an exceptional work by the Serbian architect Bogdan Bogdanović, the first winner of the Piranesi International Prize in 1989, who dedicated his work to necropolises and dignity of death. The Mostar monument reflects the progressive, and still-contemporary creative language of its artist, which transcends the superficiality of the quest for the different, the exotic, the picturesque, and the unknown. With its exceptional unique design and location, the monument is an important part of European cultural heritage: it is a tie to the past, a reminder of the dignity of human life and death. It is the dignity of memory.

Modelled after examples from the Antiquity, the cemetery is designed in terraces cut into the hill slope. The massive support walls are lined with stone and engraved with ornamental symbols and the names of approximately 800 Partisans killed in action. A further couple of hundred unidentified bodies were put to rest in the communal tomb. The city of the dead is designed to duplicate the city of the living with streets, squares, bridges, towers, and city gates. The ritual path rises in symmetrical meanders across four wide terraces

towards the upper terrace featuring a rear wall with a symbolic well and a carved cosmological design reminiscent of Pre-Columbian rituals in Central America. The water from the well-used to flow down to the bottom of the monument following the complex's axis. The well no longer works. The monument was subject to several instances of destructive vandalism and subsequent renovation. We were warned before our visit of visitors repeatedly being threatened and attacked by nationalist extremists. This was not our experience, but we were appalled by the contrast between the dilapidation, the quiet beauty of the monument, and the unbridled tourist occupation of the nearby city with the bridge, its beauty having been reduced to a picturesque mercantile backdrop.

Bogdanović: »This was a monument to Yugoslav solidarity. It was dedicated to the Mostar battalion. What was most touching to me was that the soldiers were practically children. Their names: Muslim, Serbian, Croatian. It reminded me of the Children's Crusades. A huge percentage were killed. These are cenotaphs, symbolic graves. Some remains were buried here, but not very many. The memorial is badly defaced, but it couldn't be demolished-it is caved into the hill, so it's indestructible.«¹

With the inclusion of the Partisan Cemetery in Mostar on the EUROPA NOSTRA list of the most endangered cultural and natural heritage, the monument would also be internationally evaluated as an important and outstanding part of European cultural heritage and identity. We believe that this would encourage a positive attitude of local community and their leadership towards their own cultural and architectural heritage. It would raise the value of the monument above current political views and thus prevent further destruction of the monument.

Enrollment in the EUROPE NOSTRA list would at the same time encourage a mature, sober and respectful assessment of the artistic and architectural value of the monument and draw attention to its cultural and contemplative significance, and thus lend support to the maintenance and preservation of the memorial area and cultural heritage. And to preserve the dignified memory of the people who gave their lives for freedom during the Second World War.

Maja Ivanič, director of DESSA gallery

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and



curators of the exhibition *Architecture. Sculpture. Remembrance. The Art of Monuments of Yugoslavia 1945–1991*

Boštjan Bugarič, Kristina Dešman, Maja Ivanič, Špela Kuhar, Eva Mavsar, Špela Nardoni Kovač, Damjana Zaviršek Hudnik

https://www.desa.si/exhibitions/2020_architecture_sculpture_remembrance

¹ *Bogdanović by Bogdanović: Yugoslav Memorials through the Eyes of Their Architect*. Edited by Vladimir Kulić and Wolfgang Thaler. With text by Bogdan Bogdanović, Vladimir Kulić, Martino Stierli, MoMA Publications, 2018; prevod citata M. D.