TOWARD A CONCRETE UTOPIA: ARCHITECTURE IN YUGOSLAVIA 1948–1980

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Arber Sadiku
Luka Skansi
Łukasz Stanek
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The Museum of Modern Art
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MEMORIAL AND ARCHITECTURE IN SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA

Upon receiving the project, Džamonja suggested that it was especially for his own purposes to investigate the possibility of constructing a memorial in Yugoslavia, a region that had been divided by the Iron Curtain. The site chosen was a unique opportunity for remembrance, as it was a place of great sociopolitical and historical significance. The project was to be both by the specificity of the location and by the specificity of the challenges that came, in large measure, from the regional anonymity of public sculptures in Yugoslavia. The aesthetic quality of the competition works was a key factor in the success of the project.

As a consequence, the project flowed into the field of interdisciplinary analysis, focusing on the liberation struggle and the role of socialist revolution in shaping the ideological order for the socialist society. The project aimed to legitimate the memory of all Yugoslav partisans and to create a public space that would serve as a reminder of the sacrifices made by the people of Yugoslavia.

The key innovation in the production of these works was the idea of a common Yugoslav identity and a shared narrative of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The project aimed to struggle with the conditions of the time and to experiment with new approaches to the construction of public spaces.

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MEMORIAL SCULPTURE AND ARCHITECTURE IN SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA

Upon receiving the prestigious Rembrandt Prize in 1977, sculptor Dušan Džamonja suggested that such international recognition for his art, and especially for his monument projects, was the result of auspicious circumstances in Yugoslavia, which, in his opinion, did not exist on either side of the Iron Curtain. Namely, the country’s sculptors and architects had been afforded a unique opportunity to cultivate and construct a culture of remembrance, as that ambition closely aligned with their fledgling nation’s sociopolitical interests in the postwar era. The sheer number of resulting monuments—and their unusual, often remote locations—may be explained both by the specificity of the Yugoslav war experience and by a demand that came, in large measure, directly from the people. A democratic system of anonymous public competitions bolstered the advancement of the memorial aesthetic quality. From the mid-1950s until the early 1980s, federal competitions were a hotbed of artistic networking and experimentation. As a consequence, contemporary sculptural and architectural thinking flowed into the field of monumental sculpture and resulted in innovative, interdisciplinary amalgamations of ideas.²

Strengthening the official narratives of the Yugoslav People’s Liberation Struggle and the Yugoslav socialist revolution (the first successful socialist revolution since the October Revolution of 1917) served not only to legitimate the now-dominant ideology but also to create a unifying symbolic order for the new society. Yugoslavia’s exit from the sphere of Soviet influence after 1948 further reinforced the need for collective consciousness about the massive—and largely self-reliant—antifascist resistance of all Yugoslav peoples. Yugoslavia had one of Europe’s highest casualty rates in World War II, and the tens of thousands of memorials strewed around the country were as much an expression of a grassroots need for sites of collective remembrance as they were the result of an organized politics of memory.³

Key innovative breakthroughs were generally tied to the highest level of production—that is, to the monuments that surpassed local significance and commemorated events that contributed to the construction of a common Yugoslav identity. The push to elevate these memorials’ aesthetic criteria was a reaction to the prior large-scale academic-realist production of the late 1940s and early 1950s, a short period that reflected the influence of Socialist Realist tendencies and an adaptation of local vernacular traditions. Numerous critical debates of this period directed young sculptors to search for their own, authentic artistic expressions and expose the lessons of mainstream European postwar modernism. Simultaneously, architects experimented with new commemorative practices in line with the modernist idea of a synthesis of the arts. Three architectural projects of the early 1950s served as reference points for future explorations. Bogdan Bogdanović’s Monument to the Jewish Victims of Fascism (1951–52) in Belgrade and Zdenko Kolacic and Zdenko Sila’s Monument to Vladimir Gortan (1953) in Beram, Croatia, were both bold modernist interpretations of the region’s traditional funerary typology, which incorporated folk or religious iconography. Meanwhile, Edvard Ravnikar’s Memorial Complex Kampor (1951–53), built on the site of the Kampor concentration camp on the Croatian island of Rab, stands out for its multifaceted, axial organization along an architectural promenade that links several functionally diverse elements (entry court, burial grounds, vaulted “museum”). This exceptional project reconciled iconographic and tectonic precedents of Ravnikar’s mentor Jože Plečnik.
with Le Corbusier’s principles of spatial organization into a new, synthetic expression, producing an early manifestation of regionalist modernism. Although new commissions to commemorate sites of mass killings or guerrilla warfare often focused on a central sculptural object, architects frequently played an important role in the monuments’ final resolution. This interdisciplinarity cross-fertilization between architecture and sculpture led to the development of new typologies, most clearly evident in hybrid designs that brought a pronounced sculptural quality to functional architectural objects, such as the Monument to the Ilinden Uprising in Krusevo, Macedonia (Iskra and Jordan Grabul, 1970–73) (see Portfolio, xxxi), or both the first (Igor Toš, 1970) and the realized project for the Monument to the Uprising of the People of Kordun and Banija on Petrova Gora, a mountain in Croatia (Vojin Bakić and Berislav Šerbian, 1979–81), which included a conference and exhibition space, a library, and a lookout. Memorial construction culminated in the 1960s and 1970s. Ambitious designs were realized with financial support from not only the state but also the system—self-managed enterprises and citizens who regularly participated with individual contributions and donations. Such hybrid patronage characterized the multiyear fundraising campaign for Vojin Bakić’s Monument to the Revolutionary Victory of the People of Slavonija in Kameneka, Croatia (1958–68), the largest abstract sculpture in Europe at the time. By inserting a thirty-meter-tall, curvilinear form sheathed in reflective stainless steel plates into a natural landscape, Bakić produced an expressive, almost surreal effect. Both the monument’s hilltop location and the technical requirements of its steel skeleton entailed close collaborations with architect Josip Seissel, landscape architects Silvane Seissel and Andela Rotkvić, and a team of engineers. This type of memorial design—an abstract form of imposing dimensions constructed using cutting-edge technologies—stemmed not from individual artistic exhibitionism but rather reflected the joint effort of experts to respond to thematic and contextual conditions. Most such monuments, built in remote locations, corresponded to the expansiveness of the surrounding landscape by means of oversized dimensions, new typologies, or the expressive use of form and material.

Some of the large-scale interventions of this kind preceded similar land art projects in the United States. Bogdan Bogdanović’s Jasenovac Memorial Site (1970–74) (see Portfolio, 111), built on the grounds of a fascist concentration camp in Croatia, emerges from the natural setting of the swampland. The architect’s intervention into the topography of the site of the Yugoslav territory’s greatest mass atrocity relies on the symbolism of natural elements (earth, water). Earth mounds mark the positions of the destroyed camp barracks, while a symbolic concrete flower establishes the central place of memory, contemplation, and redemption. Zdenko Kotliao’s Partisan Hospital Memorial Complex (1980–81) marks the locations of a secret wartime hospital and barracks on Mount Javornica near Drženica, Croatia. Here, instead of creating a space of mourning, the sculptural elements open up a space for dialogue with a new generation of visitors, who must attempt their own reconstruction of the historical events that once took place at this site.

Džamonja, for his part, activated a similarly dialogic experience by creating works intended to induce a psychosomatic effect. Examples include his Memorial Ossuary in Barletta, Italy (collaborating architect Hildegard Auf Franić, 1970); his Monument to the Revolution on Mount Kozara in Bosnia and Herzegovina (collaborating architect Marijana Hanžeković and construction engineer Miro Rak, 1970–72); and his unrealized Monument to the Victory and the Fallen Fighters at the Srijemsk Front (collaborating architect Krešo Kasić and construction engineer Miro Rak, 1974). The dark interior space inside the Kozara monument’s vertical cylinder causes discomfort, simulating to some degree the anxiety suffered by the besieged local population at the time of the 1942 Axis offensive. The horizontal, radially placed concrete blocks around the central vertical evoke the drama of the siege, thus enacting a sculptural allegory. In his designs for the Srijemsk Front monument, Džamonja pushed this tendency even further: an expansive field of vertical concrete blocks forms a grid of narrow slanted corridors meant to viscerally evoke the trenches in which the Partisans fought one of the last battles for the liberation of Yugoslavia. 


principles of spatial organization into a new, syndicating an early manifestation of realism modernism. New commissions to commemorate sites of mass warfare often focused on a central sculptural object, played an important role in the monument's final disciplinary cross-fertilization between architecture and development of new typologies, most clearly evident in the work of the People of Kordun and Banija on Petrova Croatia (Vojin Bakici and Berislav Srbetic, 1978-81). The reference exhibition space, a library, and a lookout construction culminated in the 1960s and 1970s. Realizations with financial support from prominent figures—self-managed enterprises and citizens who contribute to the project—provided additional contributions and donations. Such characterized the multiyear fundraising campaign for Vojin Bakici's Revolutionary Victory of the People of Slavonia (1958-68), the largest abstract sculpture in Europe at that time, a thirty-meter-tall, curvilinear form sheathed in metal plates into a natural landscape. Bakici produced an unreal effect. Both the monument's hilltop location, the sculptures of steel skeleton entailed close collaboration with architects and landscape architects Silvana Seissel, and a team of engineers. This type of memorial design of imposing dimensions constructed using cutting-edge technology was not from individual artistic exhibitionism but from an effort of expertise to respond to thematic intentions. Most such monuments, built in remote locations, were expansive, and the surrounding landscape by dimensions, new typologies, or the expressive use of the large-scale interventions of this kind preceded similar the United States. Bordan Bogdanovic's Jasenovac (1956-66) (see Portfolio, 111), built on the grounds of a fascist prison in Croatia, emerges from the natural setting of the hite's intervention into the toponymy of the site of the Jasenovac's greatest mass atrocity relies on the symbolism of earth, water, and fire. Earth mounds mark the positions of the barracks, while a symbolic concrete flower establishes the tree, contemplation, and redemption. Zdenko Kolaciu's memorial complex (1980-81) marks the locations of a school and barracks on Mount Jasenovac near Brezova, intended to represent a space of mourning, the sculptural space for dialogue with a new generation of visitors, who will reconstruct the historical events that once took place there for his part, activated a similarly dialogic experience of the past in the present.

Examples of Osuaary in Barletta, Italy (collaborating architect, 1970); his Monument to the Revolution on Mount Herzegovina (collaborating architect Marijan mistura, construction engineer Miro Rak, 1970-72); and his unrealized project for the Victory and the Fallen Fighters at the Symian Front monument, the Krasica monument, Drazonja. Bakaick pushed this tenaceous expansive field of vertical concrete blocks forming scattered corridors meant to visually evoke the trench systems fought one of the last battles for the liberation.

Fig. 6


Fig. 7


Fig. 8


Fig. 9

The creation of museums and monuments in Sarajevo led to the Memorial Park and Museum 21st October in Sarajevo; the Memorial Center in Kolašin, Montenegro; and a number of other sites in remote places. The idea of a synthesis of the arts was realized in its collaboration of sculptors, architects, and painters in the concrete building. The building’s form, texture, and elements of the landscape rise above the ossuary, alluding to the symbolic expression of the same theme, depending on the shifting position. For the past twenty-seven years, the situation of Yugoslavia has been gravely endangered by its destruction. If the principal importance of the memorial function and the newly urgent political memory of the antifascist struggle, it is that Yugoslavia’s socialist-era memorials anticipate the participatory strategies that would later be memorial sculpture and architecture. Thus, for historical reasons, renewed international attention is serving this consequential legacy.

Sanja Horvatinić

Translated from Croatian by Majda Mihalić.

The creation of museums and memorial centers throughout Yugoslavia further institutionalized this culture of commemoration. Although primarily situated in urbanized contexts (the Museum of Revolution in Sarajevo, the Memorial Center in Kolasi, Montenegro [see Portfolio, xv]), the Memorial Park and Museum 21st October in Krugujevac, Serbia), the need to memorialize key historical events in situ also resulted in the erection of such buildings in remote places. Architect Ranko Radović’s Battle of the Sušica Memorial Center is part of Tješnjevo memorial complex (Iosina and Herzegovina, 1968–74) (see Portfolio, xxxi), the place where the idea of a synthesis of the arts was realized in its fullest form through the collaboration of sculptors, architects, and painters. Constructed in unfinished concrete, the building’s form and texture evoke the region’s traditional wooden huts. A multifaceted rooftops rising directly from the ground conceals a surprisingly spacious and bright central space; the fresco cycle by Kristo Hegedušić displayed within emphasizes the sacred aura of the interior. The focal point of the entire complex is the monumental concrete sculpture rising above the ossuary on a hill, evoking the surrounding mountaintops with its symbolically expressive bipartite form. Its appearance changes dramatically, depending on the shifting position of the viewer.

For the past twenty-seven years, the memorial art of socialist Yugoslavia has been gravely endangered by systematic neglect and targeted destruction. If the principal importance of these sites lies in their commemorative function and in the newly urgent political project of preserving cultural memory of the antifascist struggle, it must nevertheless be noted that Yugoslavia’s socialist-era memorials anticipated, sometimes by decades, the participatory strategies that would later be celebrated in Western memorial sculpture and architecture. Thus, for political, cultural, and art historical reasons, renewed international attention should be given to preserving this consequential legacy.

Sanja Horvatinić

Translated from Croatian by Majda Mrkić

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5. The monument was blown up by explosives during the war in 1992, an act for which no one has been prosecuted.