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MODERNIST LANDSCAPES AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: MEMORIAL SITES BY BOGDAN BOGDANOVIĆ

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Abstract

This study addressed the active role of landscapes as cultural, symbolical and social spaces. The process of modernization of natural landscapes has not always involved intensive construction works and urbanization. Pertinent to this, present study examines the transformation of landscapes from the sociological and cultural perspective and takes into account that landscapes represent spaces of everyday life, socio-cultural constructions, and mental and subjective presentations of the surroundings. Modernization of natural and rural landscapes by thought-out shaping, careful selection of materials and the use of universal symbols can be observed in memorial sites that were designed by Yugoslav architect Bogdan Bogdanović. During 1950`s he has developed original concepts of design and landscape preservation in the process of urbanization, and has generated a powerful and integrated landscape identity. Bogdanović expressed a strong belief that architecture has to be in accord with the landscape and that it has to grow within the natural context not affecting the natural surroundings. Bogdanović's monuments and compositions have shapes of different origin. However, there is a common aspiration towards organic integration into the landscape, evocation of the local spirit of the place, and emitting specific symbolism. Using semiotic functions, we can understand how Bogdanović gave cultural, historic, political and urban meaning to the space. This paper tackles the ongoing transformation of modernist landscapes in socialist Yugoslavia, focusing on ideological perspective and bringing to surface multiple layers of cultural identity.

Key words: landscape, cultural identity, semiotic functions, memorial site, socialism Yugoslavia

Introduction

Sociological and cultural explorations of the space that were initiated in the second half of the 20th century, opened the questions of the ambient and identity of location, scenographic value of landscape surroundings, and the importance of urbanistic details. Studies of visual imaginary of urban space which promoted the importance of orientation, visualization and reading of the urban tissue, started to emerge following the first critical analyses of negative impacts of functionalistic settlements. Semiotic researches, including the works of Françoise Choay, Kevin Lynch, Christian *Norberg-Schulz*, Aldo Rossi and others, contributed significantly to the understanding and perception of the urban space as physical interpretation of temporal transformation of social context. These researches pointed out the issue of semiotic functions of architectural space that reveal spatial, cultural, historical, economical, political, visual and urban meanings. Architectural and urbanistic forms are viewed as

system of cultural communication that includes constant and variable codes which are derived from functions and programs, locations and social values, and materials and structures.

Yugoslav architect Bogdan Bogdanović explored the mythology and semiology of the city from the perspective of essential manifestation of urban space. In the 1950s, he developed original concepts of design landscape preservation in the process of urbanization. Bogdanović generated powerful and integrated identity of landscape in memorial architecture which brought him a world fame. Bogdanović's memorials expressed a strong belief that the architecture has to be in accord with the landscape and that it has to grow within the natural context not affecting the natural surroundings. His approach demonstrates a tendency to develop architecture in the local context that has specific cultural, historic and climate features. Such semantic approach to the surroundings provided an excellent perception of the space and established universal (subconscious) human motifs. The current study examines the multifaceted and ideological character of cultural identities that were established through projections in semantic space. The paper discusses the system of signs that makes semiotic structure of urban space and the impact of the system on the human perception of the surroundings.

The semiotic function of the space

The principles of semiotics, which were developed in linguistics in the early 20th century, generated a concept that all sign systems have the structure that is built on the model of structuralization of verbal signs. The interconnection of all forms of communication allowed semiology to traverse the narrow limits of linguistics and philosophy and to become an interdisciplinary science that examines signs within artistic creation. In architecture, semantic method was applied to examine historical continuity of growth and development of different cities in order to elucidate the relations and laws of the formation of urban space. The identity of the city is built upon the values of different micro-ambient units that deliver symbolic messages, character and distinctiveness of urban morphology, topographic specificity, and native landscape qualities. Using linguistic methods, Françoise Choay examined urban space and understood the city as a nonverbal system that is built of elements which label and make structures that are connected with the structures in other systems of cultural connotation (Choay, 1965 pp.20). Choay used semiotics as a methodological apparatus that analyses the city through relation of information that can be defined and quantified (Choay, 1965).

Visual properties of physical structure and the idea of the importance of the original identity of the space (known as 'the image of of the city'), were defined by Kevin Lynch in his book *The Image of the City*, 1960. Lynch pointed out a hypothesis that the image of the surroundings can be analyzed through three different components: identity, structure and meaning. The identity of macro-ambient is based on uniqueness and distinctiveness from other ambients, whereas the image of the city is defined by the meaning of the whole and the elements. According to Lynch, the image of the city is developed through all our sensations that are involved in the generation of impressions and observations. This approach to the analysis of urban environment brought into attention themes of revalorization of the city within historic, urban and socio-cultural context. The importance of the analysis of city through the spatial and temporal continuity is also reflected in the movement of 'urbarchitecture' that was promoted by Aldo Rossi. In his book *The Architecture of the City* (Rossi, 1966), Rossi examined the continuity of urban tissue in different historic, social and production relations and the process of perpetual transformation and renovation, and pointed out the lasting principles of architecture and the city. Rossi tried to define historical problems and methods of urban research by showing the relations between local factors and structures of urban systems and by establishing the key factors that impact the city in a constant and universal fashion.

Christian *Norberg-Schulz* analyzed the phenomenology of architecture and focused on the themes of intention and meaning in architecture and theory of existential space. In his book *Existence, Space and Architecture* (1971), *Norberg-Schulz* started the analysis from Piaget's 'operating schemes' that can be defined as typical reaction to a certain situation and that are formed during mental developed of a person (*Norberg-Schulz*, 1971). He noted that the spatial schemes are made of elements that show a certain level of constancy. They involve universal elements of structure – archetypes and socio-culturally conditioned structures, as personal idiosyncrasies. This viewpoint leads to a conclusion that existential space of the human represents a 'psychological concept', one of structural components of human orientation, which takes shape in architectural space.

The symbology of the city – Methodological approach of Bogdan Bogdanović

We should remember that numerous information cycles can be found within the frames of urbanistic 'physical' structures. For example, the architecture itself represents one such subsystem. I speak about the language of architecture, symbology of its forms and style. (Bogdanović, 1976 pp.31)

From the mid-1950s, Bogdan Bogdanović addressed the problem of 'small urbanism' (Bogdanović, 1958). In many of his articles, Bogdanović criticised functionalist city planning because it apparently disrupted the basic concepts of a natural and reasonable organisation of living. He focused on the understanding of urban and spatial context as symbolic and cultural landscape. Bogdanović was inspired to search for the origins of urbanism by the work of Lewis Mumford, and particularly by Mumford's book *The City in History* (1961), which looked at the complex system of phenomena that define the formation and development of city. In his studies of the history of the city, Bogdanović attempted to discover cultural and historic reminiscences and accompanying mythologemes about the genesis of the first cities. His research of the identity of the city pointed out the importance of 'spirit of the location', i.e. that *genius loci* is 'related with the ground, territory, a certain quantum of energy potential, which in addition shows a certain conciseness, certain feeling of continuity' (Bogdanović, 1976 pp.18).

In his book *Urbanistic Mythologemes* (1966), Bogdanović opened the theme of urban culture. His position was that city as the ground of urban culture represents the meeting point that brings together mythology and truth. The concept of the city as a symbolic cultural form can be derived from the dialectics of this interrelationship. Bogdanović placed the city into the context of archaic thinking and compared the concept of the city with the general perception of the world that ancient human had. The contribution of Bogdanović's theoretic study to culturology through explanations of the development of the city is comparable to the impact of Henri Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution* (1970). Bogdanović's study may be considered as a prolegomena of Lefebvre's study (Ilić, 1990 pp.164), although Lefebvre focused on ideological character of urban culture, whereas Bogdanović addressed the ontogenetic parameters of urban culture – mythologemes and morphology.

In his book *Urbs & Logos* (1976), Bogdanović searched for the essence of the symbol in space, relying on the analysis of figurative expression of imaginative perception of this concept, and connecting the terms *logos* and *symbolon*. Bogdanović analyzed the historic development of the city through evolution of mythological thinking, mythical images and symbols, and the meaning of the symbols and symbolic analysis. He developed a method of 'symbolic sections' to define the main questions for the interpretation of symbolic notions of urban forms that are present in the city history (Bogdanović, 1976 pp.31). The method is based on model-myth which is used to analyze the symbology of the city. It is complementary with some principles that were developed by Ernst Cassirer in his studies of mythical conciseness in cultural context (Ilić, 1990 pp.158). Cassirer comprehended culture as

product and self-realization of the spirit and pointed out that through culture human actualize and develop, overcome the old and develop new forms of symbolization (Cassirer, 2000 pp.51).

The shaping of cultural identity of the site through memorial monuments

Bogdanović designed over twenty monuments to the victims of fascism in numerous Yugoslav cities and regions. He established and defined basic elements of a completely new approach to the design of memorials that found inspiration in archaic symbology. On an international conference of students of architecture that was held in 1949 in London, Bogdanović became familiar with English landscape architecture which had an enormous influence on his concept of memorial monuments (Bogdanović, 1949). Many of Bogdanović's monuments can be included in Land Art. This term emerged in late 1960s and referred to the art that leaves museums and galleries and designs monumental projects in open space. Bruno Zevi stressed out spatial form of Bogdanović's monuments, naming them 'choral monuments', and noted similarities with some Japanese monuments of that period. Bogdanović always took into account spatial aspects and the entire scenographic setup when choosing the position of his monuments. His compositions deliver cryptic messages about anthropological and cultural past through his views of mythology, signs and fantasy, and show a universal character. Bogdanović's works contain shapes of very different origins. However, all shapes 'communicate with the landscape, remind of artistic culture of that site, and emit a certain symbolic (Manević, 2002 pp.32).

The symbology of Bogdanović's monuments is preoccupied with beginnings of the city and architecture, which are connected with 'primordial archaic' (Bogdanović, 1966 pp. 204). In the development of the concept for the Monument to Jewish Victims of Fascism at the Belgrade's Sephardic Jewish Cemetery (1952), Bogdanović used the forms of tumulus, modified megalite elements, which appear to include ancient Greek and Crete influences (Fig.1). The monument is composed of two symmetric, parabolic stone wings that are separated by narrow funnel-shaped space, which implicates a dramatic monumentality. A large number of details, including aligned stones and applications made of wrought iron that were inspired by old Hebrew symbols, reflect refined visual culture and sensibility, stylistic unity, and a deep understanding of the use and concordance of the materials (Protić, 1964 pp. 263). Multiple meanings represent the key characteristics of Bogdanović's semiological approach which allows different interpretations of signs. The memorial complex is composed of three main parts: the access path, two monumental slabs, and the altar. The access path with two low walls was partially made of the remains of stone facades of buildings that were ruined during the war, which refers to symbolic post-war renewal of life (Вуковић, 2008 pp.394).



Figure 1. Monument to Jewish Victims of Fascism at the Belgrade's Sephardic Jewish Cemetery (1952)

In Jasenovac Memorial Site (1959-1966), Bogdanović used the symbolic lotus flower to reflect the hope in life and future (Fig. 2). The sites of demolished buildings in ex-concentration camp are marked by hills (tumuli) and hollows (craters). The 'Stone Flower' is placed on a hill in the center of this landscape composition. The path that leads to the Flower was built from wooden cross ties form the railroad which was used to bring the victims into the camp (Вуковић, 2008 pp.399). Bogdanović used the symbol of fire (of revolution) in the Necropolis at Sremska Mitrovica (1959-1960), to promote humanity and freedom of thought. The Necropolis is formed of several grassy conical burial hills with brass flames on the top. The design creates the unity of the human and the nature. Bogdanović shaped the nature by rippling Srem plain and by complementing the burial hills with sculptural elements.



Figure 2. Jasenovac Memorial Site (1959-1966)

Bogdanović frequently used associations with Neolithic culture. In his project Symbolic Necropolis (Monument to the Revolution) in Leskovac (1964-1971), Bogdanović placed 42 stone cenotaphs of different height that are similar to Neolithic megaliths and that represent cult objects (Fig. 3). The reminiscences of Neolithic culture are present in some other Bogdanović's designs, such as 'Neolithic flowers' in the Monument to Fallen Soldiers of the Revolution (1973-1975) (Вуковић, 2008 pp.412).



Figure 3. Symbolic Necropolis (Monument to the Revolution) in Leskovac (1964-1971)

Conclusions

Bogdanović's perception of semiotics and symbology of the city reflects influences of different theories of interpretation of urbanistic plans that were proposed by Choay, Lynch, *Norberg-Schulz*, Rossi and others. Bogdanović applied semiotic methodology of connecting the sign and the signed in numerous memorials that represent vivid artistic and symbolic manifestations, spaces that contain hidden potentials for acceptance and unification with the surroundings which are revealed in time by the visitor. Typographic organization of the landscape represents the central characteristic of Bogdanović's monuments. Important features of such avant-garde approach are contained in inventive compositions of architectural elements that reflect the artistic tradition of the site (Manević, 1972 pp.31). His memorials append to archaic and classical postulates through architecture, dimensions, plastic expression, urbanism, graphics, precise engineering, color, greenery, and imagination (Milićević-Nikolić, 1966 pp.7). Bogdanović's monumental architecture is abstract and free of political symbols that delivers timeless universal values through rich expressions and symbolical multifaceted approach. Through the use of archeology, Bogdanović intended to represent a common anthropological meta-history, which represents the foundation of different social groups and eras. Mindful shaping of the landscape, careful selection of building materials, and the application of universal symbols, contribute to the strong and integrative identity that Bogdanović's monuments provide to the surroundings. His monumental architecture of surrealist utopia is considered as the architecture of poetry. Bogdanović's work is included in curricula of many faculties around the world. Unfortunately, many of his monuments are today in a very bad shape and its immense cultural value is handed over to the process of decay.

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