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Abstract Forms/Explicit Intent: Modernist Monuments of Socialist Yugoslavia in Service of the State

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Abstract Forms/Explicit Intent: Modernist Monuments of Socialist Yugoslavia in Service
of the State

by

AARON KAGAN PUTT

Under the Direction of Susan Richmond, PhD

ABSTRACT

Although the monuments of former Yugoslavia seem to eschew many of the aesthetic characteristics of traditional monumental architecture, appearing as unique examples of modernist abstraction, they were an integral part of a larger ideological strategy of Yugoslav state authorities. As such, the modernist aesthetic of the state-sponsored memorial architecture of post-World War II Yugoslavia was not incidental or the result of passive support for the modernist preferences of artists and architects. It must have been a deliberate choice by the state to communicate official narratives to both the citizens of Yugoslavia and the wider international community.

INDEX WORDS: Modernism, Yugoslavia, Monuments, Memorials, Architecture, Utopia,
Socialism

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AARON KAGAN PUTT

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May 2019

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, David and Jill Putt. Thank you for your steadfast support and for encouraging me to pursue my interests, and allowing me to find my own path and. I love you both.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The monumental remnants of former post-World War II Yugoslavia are scattered throughout the Balkan region, currently comprised of six separate republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia. Often located outside of large cities and within rural communities or national parks, these abstract modernist structures—known regionally as *spomeniks*—were erected to commemorate the victories and atrocities which occurred during the Second World War, specifically honoring the Partisan revolutionary soldiers and the victims of fascism.¹ However, as much as they served as memorial sites, they also fulfilled a number of other functions beyond commemoration. In this essay, I will examine the historic and political circumstances in which these structures were erected and how these memorial sites operated and were used at the time of their construction. I will look at the intended function of these symbolic structures, specifically focusing on the ways in which the use of post-WWII modernist commemorative architecture satisfied many of the practical and ideological desires of the Socialist Yugoslav government. I will discuss their roles as memorial sites as well as their use as “ideological apparatuses”² of the state, deployed conscientiously, in an effort to give symbolic form to official state narratives, both within and beyond the borders of Yugoslavia.

¹ The Partisans (also called the National Liberation Army) were the communist resistance fighters who fought against the Fascist Axis powers during WWII. Josef Broz Tito (the leader of Yugoslavia after WWII, until his death in 1980) was a Partisan fighter.

² Beti Žerovc, "Can the High Modernism of Yugoslav Monuments Be Viewed as a Trojan Horse of Capitalism in Socialism?," in *Shifting Sites: Territories in Space*, ed. University of Applied Arts Vienna (Austria Nov 10, 2018).

2 THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTATION

The historic circumstances which preceded and immediately followed World War II are essential to understanding the unique conditions that led to the use of modernism as the state-sanctioned architectural aesthetic of Yugoslavia. The territory of Yugoslavia was historically fragmented. Situated between the Austrian/Hungarian and Ottoman/Turkish empires, the Balkan region long served as a bridge between distinct (and often opposing) cultures and civilizations.³ The Kingdom of Yugoslavia, established after World War I as part of the Treaty of Versailles, brought together former territories of the Austro-Hungarian empire and unified a population of various religious and ethnic affiliations. The region was again divided against itself during World War II with the Axis Invasion. A portion of the population fought alongside the Axis forces and the Ustaše fascists as part of the Independent State of Croatia—a Nazi puppet state founded after the Nazi invasion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941. Others fought with the Partisan communist resistance fighters, alongside the Allied forces. Following WWII, the region was reunited with the establishment of the Federal People's Republic, which subsequently became the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. This unified a large part of the Balkan peninsula, with the constituent Yugoslav states attaining statehood, some for the first time in recent history.⁴

³ Vladimir Kulić, "Architecture and Ideology in Socialist Yugoslavia," in *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, ed. Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić (Zagreb, Croatia: UHA/CCA, 2012), 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

The casualty rates from World War II in Yugoslavia were some of the highest in Europe. This meant that there was a significant “grassroots need for sites of collective remembrance.”⁵ Following the Second World War and continuing into the 1990’s many vernacular monuments were erected by local populations to memorialize events of the war, as well as to honor the revolution. As the architect Robert Burghardt and historian Gal Kirn have noted, these often appeared as “simple memorial plaques, which mainly listed the death of local villagers, while the larger and most important memorial sites, the ones that we name ‘socialist modernist’ sites were built from the 1960s until the beginning of 1980s.”⁶ These later “socialist modernist” state-sanctioned memorials sites were intended to fulfill the sincere need of Yugoslav citizens to memorialize the traumatic events of WWII, while also promoting national unification. However, representing these many national identities as part of a larger Yugoslav identity proved difficult.⁷

Uniting Yugoslavia’s complex makeup of religious groups and ethnicities, “some of which had been engaged in bitter conflict during World War II,” was essential as the architectural historians Martino Stierli and Vladimir Kulić describe. The leaders of Socialist Yugoslavia, therefore, “sought to acknowledge the various identities of its

⁵ Sanja Horvatinčić, "Memorial Sculpture and Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia," in *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948-1980*, ed. Martino Stierli, et al. (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art 2018), 105.

⁶ Robert Burghardt and Gal Kirn, "Yugoslavian Partisan Memorials: The Aesthetic Form of the Revolution as a Form of Unfinished Modernism?," in *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, ed. Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić (Zagreb, Croatia: UHA/CCA, 2012), 86.

⁷ Kulić, "Architecture and Ideology in Socialist Yugoslavia," 60.

constituent groups. Architecture became one of the most visible bearers of the process.”⁸ Modernism was an expedient means to bring together these distinct groups, while also meeting the multiple needs of the Yugoslav state.

As an architectural aesthetic, it had been “present in the region since the turn of the twentieth century.”⁹ While it was not yet widespread (and also, not yet a symbol of past authority), it was therefore recognizable. Practically, it was also ideal, as the building materials favored by modernism were cost effective, and the visual language of abstraction made it readily adaptable throughout the region. The exceptionally diverse combination of identities and sometimes competing historical narratives within the territories of the newly formed, post-WWII Yugoslavia meant that privileging one fixed cultural/historical narrative over another would have been problematic, if at all possible. Conveniently, the abstract aesthetic of modernism allowed the newly united, Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia to speak to the complex ethnic and religious composition of the region, while also signaling and reaffirming state-sanctioned messages equating modernism with modernity, progress, prosperity, and freedom of expression. These memorial sites and the chosen aesthetic aspired to speak to a multiplicity of identities and historical circumstances and, therefore, sought to avoid overt nationalistic themes.

The abstract language of these monuments, labeled “socialist modernist” by some historians, was employed to reconcile the remarkably heterogeneous combination

⁸ Martino Stierli and Vladimir Kulić, "Introduction," in *Toward a Concrete Utopia : Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948-1980*, ed. Martino Stierli and Vladimir Kulić (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art 2018), 8.

⁹ Ibid.

of ethnic, religious and nationalist identities in Yugoslavia. The visual typology of the monuments worked to dispense with specific “symbols of ideologies, war heroes, or religions.”¹⁰ As Burghardt and Kirn suggest, abstraction became “the most obvious strategy of representing universalism.”¹¹ The creation of a universal symbolic language was a core ambition of modernists artists and architects generally. Explicit symbols were abstracted and combined. In some cases, local symbolic traditions were referenced in the Yugoslav monuments, but remained open-ended enough to allow for a diversity of interpretations. According to the historian of cultural memory Vjeron Pavlaković, “the network of memorial complexes dedicated to the Partisan victory of the Second World War were imbued with shared meanings of the common struggle against fascist occupiers and domestic collaborators.”¹²

As well as representing the universalizing goals of modernism, the aesthetic implementation of modernism was part of a wider strategy for fashioning visual signifiers of the new Socialist Yugoslavia. Underlying the construction of these forms was the desire to give recognizable symbolic expression to the political narrative of a forthcoming socialist utopia. These *spomeniks*, as they are known in Serbo-Croatian, were to be a symbolic representation of the socialist aspirations of an “egalitarian society based on the ideals of working-class emancipation, unalienated work and the

¹⁰ Arna Mačkić, "Mortal Cities Forgotten Monuments,"

<https://www.failedarchitecture.com/mortal-cities-and-forgotten-monuments/>.

¹¹ Burghardt and Kirn, "Yugoslavian Partisan Memorials: The Aesthetic Form of the Revolution as a Form of Unfinished Modernism?," 91.

¹² Vjeron Pavlaković, "Symbolic Nation-Building and Collective Identities in Post-Yugoslav States," *Croatian Political Science Review* 51, no. 5 (2014): 11.

withering away of the state.”¹³ Modernist abstraction was to reflect “the new socialist future on the horizon of socialist man’s expectations. It gave a marginal nation proof of belonging to the ‘modern world.’”¹⁴ The modernist rejection of ornament was also convenient, as it could be viewed as a denunciation of opulence and a critique of materialist bourgeoisie values. As the art historian Nevenka Stankovic reflects, “While Western postwar art reflected existential angst, art in Yugoslavia conveyed postwar optimism stemming from the idea of unlimited progress provided by Communism.”¹⁵ Modernism was intended to be a symbol of that progress.

In many ways the distinctive modernist aesthetic of these sites seems designed less to commemorate and document specific people or events of the past and, instead, appear more interested in signaling towards a future of modernity and Socialist prosperity. The clean and “rational” sculpted forms represented a break with an unpredictable, provincial past and a move towards modernity. The Balkan region had long been seen as unsophisticated by the West and, in some ways, served as Western Europe’s “Orient.”¹⁶ Modernism thus became a “trope for progress.”¹⁷ Modernism and its association with modernization also worked to represent the country as forward-looking and advanced, and no longer part of an underdeveloped past.

¹³ Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić, *Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism (Zagreb, Croatia: UHA/CCA, 2012), 7.

¹⁴ Nevenka Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (2006): 152.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Beti Žerovc, "Toward a Concrete Utopia: Learning from Yugoslavia | Moma Live," ed. MoMA (USA Dec 3, 2018).

¹⁷ Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," 152.

The post-WWII monuments played a substantial role in this symbolic effort. They were well-funded and used to further populate the public sphere with visual signifiers of the new Socialist Yugoslavia. The state used large award prizes to attract many of the top architects of the time. It is important to note that the selection of art and the money dedicated to monument construction was, in part, a democratic process. It was not only the state that was funding these projects, but also “self-managed enterprises and citizens who regularly participated with individual contributions and donations,”¹⁸ suggesting the extent to which cultural elites were aligned with the aesthetic priorities of the state, and vice versa. The combination of considerable funding and the prominent architects this attracted increased the status and legitimacy of these modernist monuments, as well as the ingenuity of their designs and construction. “From the Mid-1950s until the early 1980s, federal competitions were a hotbed of artistic networking and experimentation,” according to the Croatian art historian, Sanja Horvatinčić. “As a consequence, contemporary sculptural and architectural thinking flowed into the field of monumental sculpture and resulted in innovative, interdisciplinary amalgamations of ideas,” which further increased quality and attracted better artists.¹⁹ This meant that, as Beti Žerovc, a Slovenian art historian notes:

Over time, a highly esteemed group of monument design professionals carved out a largely autonomous field of operations, which, among others, they regulated through a great number of monument competitions with strong

¹⁸ Sanja Horvatinčić, "Memorial Sculpture and Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia," in *Toward a Concrete Utopia : Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948-1980* ed. Vladimir Kuli Martino Stierli (2018), 106.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

committees of experts, debates, and monetary awards. The awards, in particular, encouraged innovative and very contemporary designs and fostered a new generation of highly skilled ambitious creators.²⁰

This resulted in monumental structures which were experimental, yet of a high quality, both in terms of materials and artistic ambition. Importantly, “the creation of museums and memorial centers throughout Yugoslavia further institutionalized this culture of commemoration.”²¹ It helped that “most of the leading architects subscribed to the modernist ethical mission of improving society through architecture, and some were of openly leftist orientation.”²² The Socialist Party of Yugoslavia took advantage of the exceptional alignment of aesthetic preferences between artists, state officials, and cultural elites.

The application of modernism in Yugoslavia differed with architects and designers employing modernism in various ways, and drawing from “a variety of modern and premodern [aesthetic] traditions.”²³ Most artists, architects, and designers favored austere geometric forms and subscribed to the utopic aspiration that art and architecture could be deployed as a force to unite this previously fractured region. Formally, most of the monuments of Socialist Yugoslavia appear to reproduce modernism’s interests in simple forms, rationality and lack of ornament. They often forwent the descriptive function of conventional memorial sites and appeared, especially

²⁰ Žerovc, "Can the High Modernism of Yugoslav Monuments Be Viewed as a Trojan Horse of Capitalism in Socialism?."

²¹ Horvatinčić, "Memorial Sculpture and Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia," 111.

²² Mrduljaš and Kulić, *Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, 9.

²³ Kulić, "Architecture and Ideology in Socialist Yugoslavia," 60.

to the outsider, as abstract sculptures. Formally complex and daring in their engineering, they used a combination of geometric, organic and jagged shapes, constructed from materials privileged by modernist architects—reinforced concrete, steel panels, and occasionally glass. Horvatinčić notes that the aesthetic complexity of these forms is related to the increased artistic exchange between artists and architects. The “Interdisciplinary 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.”²⁴ These modernist monuments, according to the art historian Vladana Putnik, “were mostly marked by a metaphoric presentation and geometrical simplification of symbols. The sculptures ceased to be anthropomorphic and became more ‘free-formed.’”²⁵ They eschew specific representational allusions to past events, as well as previous historical symbols of power, and favor a “revolutionary” typology which appears as: stars, flowers, wings, flames, torches, fists, all rendered in bold abstract forms, some sites also referencing and incorporating local folk traditions and motifs into their designs.²⁶ Much of their formal energy appears devoted to giving form to a fantastical future. They attempted to communicate a vision of the future, which defied the atrocities of the past, and signaled positive future potential. In their imaginative configurations and ambitious forms, the monuments constructed during the socialist period of Yugoslavia point “towards a past

²⁴ Horvatinčić, "Memorial Sculpture and Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia," 106.

²⁵ Vladana Putnik, "Second World War Monuments in Yugoslavia as Witnesses of the Past and the Future," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 14, no. 3 (2016): 207.

²⁶ Burghardt and Kirn, "Yugoslavian Partisan Memorials: The Aesthetic Form of the Revolution as a Form of Unfinished Modernism?," 86.

that had more future than the present” and the possibility of building a socialist utopic vision of the world.²⁷

Memorial sites built by architects such as Dušan Džamonja, Bogdan Bogdanović, Miodrag Živković engaged with the surrounding landscape, forming large memorial parks for the monuments. For many of these designers, says Putnik, “the goal was to create secular spaces, designed to offer a spiritual experience, without introducing a religious dimension.”²⁸ Bogdan Bogdanović’s, “Stone Flower” monument built from 1959-66, was constructed on the site of the Jasenovac concentration and extermination camp, operated by the Ustaše (Croatian Fascists, part of the Nazi puppet state) (figure 1). Bogdanović used the swampland setting as an element of commemoration, altering the topography of the landscape (figure 2). Horvatinčić describes that the Jasenovac memorial site “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.”²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Putnik, "Second World War Monuments in Yugoslavia as Witnesses of the Past and the Future," 207.

²⁹ Horvatinčić, "Memorial Sculpture and Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia," 106.



Figure 1. *The Flower* Monument, Jasenovac, Croatia

The “Stone Flower” monument, a 24-meter-tall concrete flower sculpture, is located on the site of the Jasenovac forced labor and extermination camp. The monument also contains a crypt at its base, housing the remains of those who died at the camp. Completed in 1966 and designed by Bogdan Bogdanović. Photo by Aaron Putt.



Figure 2. View of the “Stone Flower” monument with bronze site plan. Designed by Bogdan Bogdanović. Photo by Aaron Putt.

Bogdanović is one of Yugoslavia's most prominent and widely-recognized modernist architects in the region. His memorials frequently utilize the landscape as an aesthetic element, incorporating local regional motifs, and sampling from "folk or religious iconography,"³⁰ as well as elements inspired by his surrealist background.³¹ Many of his memorial sites employ geometric and archetypal forms favored by modernist architects, while also drawing from a personal symbolic lexicon. The works of Bogdanović exemplify the extent to which "architects experimented with new commemorative practices in line with the modernist idea of a synthesis of the arts."³² Other examples are the Sutjeska Monument, designed by the sculptor Miodrag Zivkovic (figure 3) and the Sutjeska Memorial Center, designed by Dorde Zlokovic (figure 4). These structures, along with the altered landscape, are part of the Tjentiste memorial complex. The architectural design of the Sutjeska Memorial Center references local vernacular architecture, as "the building's form and texture evoke the region's traditional wooden huts."³³

³⁰ Ibid., 105.

³¹ Bogdanovic, Bogdan, Vladimir Kulic, and Museum of Modern Art (New York N.Y.). *Bogdanovic by Bogdanovic: Yugoslav Memorials through the Eyes of Their Architect*. 2018.

³² Horvatinčić, "Memorial Sculpture and Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia," 105.

³³ Ibid., 111.



Figure 3. *Battle of Sutjeska Memorial Monument*, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Part of the Tjentište memorial complex, this monument also functions as a crypt, with the remains of the 3301 Partisan soldiers who died in the fighting at Sutjeska buried beneath. Completed in 1971 and designed by Miodrag Živković. Photo by Aaron Putt.



Figure 4. Sutjeska Memorial Center, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Also part of the Tjentište Memorial Complex. Completed in 1971 and designed by Dorde Zlokovic. Photo by Aaron Putt.

Designers such as Dušan Džamonja created monuments which were less utopic and more somber, “intended to induce a psychosomatic effect.”³⁴ The *Monument to the Revolution* (located in Kozara national park, Bosnia and Herzegovina), a slatted, spiral concrete cylinder, with rows of vertical forms and reflective steel plates on their surfaces, can be seen as alluding to billowing smoke on the landscape (figure 5). According to Džamonja, the concrete tower uses positives and negative forms to represent “the antagonism between life and death and between life and heroism. To strengthen the sacred character of the symbol, I built the vertical structure with concrete and steel layers, so that the steel layers can reflect the sun, unveiling the light.”³⁵ Squeezing between the concrete slabs in the interior of the form, the viewer looks out, as if peering through a claustrophobic jail cell (figure 6). According to Horvatinčić, 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.”³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 106.

³⁵ Donald Niebyl, "Spomenik Database," www.spomenikdatabase.com.

³⁶ Horvatinčić, "Memorial Sculpture and Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia," 106.



Figure 5. *Monument to the Revolution*, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Located in Kozara national park. Designed by Dušan Džamonja and completed in 1972. Photo by Aaron Putt.



Figure 6. View from the interior space of the *Monument to the Revolution*. Kozara national park, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Designed by Dušan Džamonja and completed in 1972. Photo by Aaron Putt.

Crowning the tall peak of Kosmaj mountain, the *Monument to the Fallen Soldiers of the Kosmaj Partisan Detachment* (1970), designed by Vojin Stojic and Gradimir Medaković employs a less immersive, yet similarly visually stunning aesthetic strategy. Located 50 minutes from Belgrade, it is situated in rural Serbia. Jutting from the treelined ridge, the pointed tips of the concrete monument pierce the sky. The road leading to the Kosmaj monument is fairly well-maintained, as the memorial site is located within a recreational park complex spotted with hiking trails and close to a nearby village. There are few signs indicating the monument itself. The surrounding pine tree forest is bucolic and serene, with the occasional runner or hiker passing by. Walking up the large concrete stairway which leads from the road, the massive star-shaped concrete structure materializes from above. What appears from the distance to be a single star, emerges as five distinct towering forms. Constructed using poured concrete and rebar, the marks of the wood slats from the mold structure are also visible on the double-pointed forms and are used for aesthetic affect (figure 7). Arranged diagonally, the embossed markings radiate out from the center of the star form, adding a subtle yet potent dynamic element to the entire structural composition. The pointed “fins” each extend and curve dramatically 40 meters into the air (figure 8). When looking up at the pointed tips from the center of the structure, the sky forming the backdrop, the shapes become further abstracted. Seeing the large forms tower and swoop above, the monumentality is apparent, and the impressive physicality and visual grandeur becomes emphasized. On the ground, below the center of the structure is an engraved circular marble memorial plaque, sometimes still used for commemorative

ceremonies. Donald Niebyl, who operates the *Spomenik Database*, a website cataloguing the memorials of former Yugoslavia describes the site:

The most obvious symbolic form embodied in this spomenik is that of the five-pointed star. This star (specifically the red star) was a pervasive and essential symbol to Yugoslavia, which symbolized strength and resistance, most specifically against fascism and Nazi occupation.... the five points of the star are often said to be symbolic for the five fingers of hand of the worker.... Furthermore, another interesting symbolic element of this monument is that, from a distance, the star spomenik appears to be one continuous sculpture, however, it is only when directly underneath of it do you realize that each 'finger' is indeed separate and free-standing. This visual effect may represent the idea that, from afar, the Yugoslavian workers/fighters operated together as a singular uninterrupted unit, while, up close, the unit could indeed be seen to be comprised of unique individuals cooperating and collaborating.³⁷

³⁷ Niebyl, "Spomenik Database".



Figure 7. *Monument to the Fallen Soldiers of the Kosmaj Detachment.* Located in Kosmaj Mountain Park, Serbia (1 hour south of Belgrade). Designed by Vojin Stojić and Gradimir Medaković. Completed in 1972. Photo by Aaron Putt.



Figure 8. View from below of the “fins” of the “Kosmaj Monument.” Located in Kosmaj Mountain Park, Serbia. Designed by Vojin Stojić and Gradimir Medaković. Completed in 1972. Photo by Aaron Putt.

3 MODERNIST MEMORIAL ARCHITECTURE IN SERVICE OF THE STATE

At first glance, the Yugoslav modernist monuments seem to eschew many of the aesthetic characteristics of traditional monumental architecture and do not seem to function as traditional war memorials. James E. Young, a highly-regarded historian of cultural memory, asserts that typical war memorials tend to promote the wars they portend to commemorate, “valorize[ing] the suffering in such a way as to justify it, even redeem it historically.”³⁸ Strikingly uncharacteristic of typical state-sponsored monumental architecture, the Yugoslav *spomeniks* avoid didactic narratives and overt imagery. This absence of a legible representational narrative prevents much of the characteristic depictive mythologizing of war. Instead of bronze figures, marble plinths or obelisks, and other explicit references to classic motifs—often employed to link current or newly established regimes to a linear narrative of the past—these monuments reject didactic narratives in favor of abstract modernist aesthetic principles. They memorialize specific events of World War II and the Partisans fighters through an explicitly unspecific aesthetic of modernist abstraction.

However, what first appears as avoidance of explicit ideological messaging, upon closer examination can be understood as an intentional effort by state authorities and cultural elites— who were aligned with the aesthetic and political ambitions of the state—to exploit these monuments for their own means. In many ways, although abstractly, they still perform the primary roles of conventional memorial structures, commemorating

³⁸ James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

particular events of war and giving material form to specific historical narratives. Like most state-sponsored architecture, these monumental forms served the needs of Yugoslav authorities. They were part of a larger ideological strategy to insert officially-sanctioned ideas into the public sphere, promoting ideologies of the states, and functioning as much as tools for political propaganda, as they did as sites of memorial. The choice of modernism as the dominant architectural aesthetic for the nascent Yugoslav state can be understood as a deliberate attempt, according to Sanford Levinson, a legal scholar who writes about monuments, “by public institutions to symbolize the public order and to inculcate in its viewers appropriate attitudes toward that order.”³⁹ In essence, contends Stankovic, the Yugoslav State exploited “architecture’s power and responsibility to give material shape to a larger social project,” transforming the modernist abstract forms into “emblems of power.”⁴⁰

Significantly, modernism was adopted by Yugoslavia as the state-sanctioned architectural aesthetic shortly after the break with the Eastern bloc and Stalin in 1948. The separation was caused by disagreements between the leaders of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and “issues concerning the application of Communist ideology.”⁴¹ These included disputes regarding the rigid aesthetic dictates of the Soviet Union, specifically the compulsory use of the socialist realism in art and architecture. The rapid adoption of modernism suggests that one of the primary objectives of this aesthetic shift

³⁹ Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 38.

⁴⁰ Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," 158.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

away from socialist realism was as a means of communicating differentiation—distinguishing Socialist Yugoslavia from Soviet Communism. Stankovic has noted that:

The fact that modernist discourse entered the Yugoslav representational system only two years after the Yugoslav-Soviet schism in 1948 signaled the Yugoslav Communists' intent to mark their difference from Soviet-type communism in not only ideology but also visual representation. By endorsing modernist art as an official representation of the system, the Yugoslav Communist authorities put the visual into the service of politics.⁴²

Similarly, Kulić asserts that the modernist aesthetic was deployed largely “as a visual signifier of Yugoslavia’s distinction from the Soviet bloc.”⁴³ For the Yugoslav state, abstraction became “a rhetoric of power.... conveying the strength and dynamism with which Yugoslav Communists equated themselves,”⁴⁴ as distinct from that of the Soviet East. Distinguishing themselves from the Soviet Communists “served not only to legitimate the now-dominant [Yugoslav Socialist] ideology but also to create a unifying symbolic order for the new society.”⁴⁵ As Kulić suggests, “Yugoslavia upset [the] clean stylistic division between the East and the West through its own version of socialist modernism, which highlighted the country’s independence from either bloc.”⁴⁶ Significantly, it also served to distinguish it from previous aesthetics associated with Fascism.

⁴² Ibid., 152.

⁴³ Kulić, "Architecture and Ideology in Socialist Yugoslavia," 42.

⁴⁴ Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," 159.

⁴⁵ Horvatinčić, "Memorial Sculpture and Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia," 105.

⁴⁶ Vladimir Kulić, "Building the Socialist Balkans," *Southeastern Europe* 41, no. 2 (2017): 104.

Modernism exemplified the desire of the Yugoslav socialist state to find what came to be referred to as the “third way”—a mode of political organization that operated between the cold war divisions of East and West—as a means to forge their own distinctive practice of socialism. Leaving the “Soviet orbit” necessitated a “reinvention of the state’s founding ideology and geopolitical alliances.”⁴⁷ This involved a reinterpretation of Marxist theory and a redefinition of Yugoslav socialism, much of which was based on redefining the place of the individual within socialist Yugoslav society.⁴⁸ In 1952, the Sixth Party Congress changed the name of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia to the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (YLC), and, according to Stankovic, adopted a socialist ideological position that was “an indirect critique of the Soviet model of socialism and the uniformity of Stalinist thought.”⁴⁹ They “claimed for themselves the correct interpretation of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and accused the Soviets of chauvinistic imperialism in their foreign policy and bureaucratic despotism in their internal affairs,” and saw Yugoslavia as “the isolated and unique island of “pure” socialism” and the superior alternative to [Stalinist Communism].⁵⁰

In contrast to Soviet communism, Yugoslav socialism emphasized individuality, as “subordination of the individual to collective life was almost entirely shunned in Yugoslavia.”⁵¹ This resulted in increased freedoms of expression, as exemplified by the

⁴⁷ "The Builders of Socialism: Eastern Europe’s Cities in Recent Historiography," *Contemporary European History* 26, no. 3 (2017): 551.

⁴⁸ Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," 153.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

use of modernism, and more liberal economic freedoms. Nevertheless, it is important to note that although individual expression was permitted under the new “measures of liberalisation,” it was still to be in service of Yugoslav socialism. The underlying mandate being that cultural and economic production needed to express the “desire to strengthen and struggle for socialism.”⁵²

Artists and architects were drawn to modernism as an explicit rejection of socialist realism and the Soviet ideology it contained, and the promise of greater artistic freedom. Self-expression being “the basic assumption of modernism,” according to Stankovic.⁵³ However, though modernist abstraction was selected by artists independently, it was also adopted by state authorities as part of the wider ideological strategy. As Stankovic asserts, “This is clear from the fact that measures of liberalisation in the political-economic sphere ran parallel with the introduction of modernism in culture.” Stankovic goes on to quote literary critic, Sveta Lukić, who explained the increased freedom of cultural production:

Politicians and ideologues at the time needed proof of freedom of ideas in literature and culture in order to undermine Soviet dogmatism. However, too much independence of mind in domestic literature went beyond official plans and desires. The League of Communists of Yugoslavia was more interested in scoring a foreign policy goal against the Soviet Union than in securing genuine internal freedom for Yugoslav culture.⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid., 156.

⁵³ Ibid., 152.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

This suggests the deliberate promotion of modernism to demonstrate that “artists in the socialist Yugoslavia were completely free to express their artistic creativity, in contrast to those ‘behind the iron curtain,’ where socialist realism was still dominant.”⁵⁵ So while artists were permitted much greater freedoms of expression in Yugoslavia than those in the Soviet bloc, it is logical to assume that the state did have an active interest in exploiting artistic production for its own means. As Stankovic has wondered, “how was it possible for a Communist society to embrace modernism? Or, to put it specifically, how could Socialist Realism with all its deep leftist connotations be abandoned by a Communist society favour of a modernist aesthetic with its capitalist connotations?”⁵⁶ It would seem that modernism, with its capitalist connotations, not only served to communicate an overt distinction from Soviet Communism, but also signaled an embrace of western notions of individuality and freedom of expression, as well as a degree of acceptance of the economic structures of western capitalism from which these concepts emerged.

Stankovic suggests that the position of the “individual in Yugoslav society” was in direct comparison to that “of Western democracy, a factor that came into play during the crisis years of the early 1950s.”⁵⁷ In fact, Yugoslavia’s “third way” of socialism, did incorporate elements of capitalism beyond increased freedom of expression,

⁵⁵ Putnik, "Second World War Monuments in Yugoslavia as Witnesses of the Past and the Future," 208.

⁵⁶ Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," 152.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

significantly, preserving and permitting limited private enterprise.⁵⁸ According to Mrduljaš and Kulić:

During the short time the country belonged to the eastern bloc in the first post-war years, the attempt at the political imposition of socialist realism excited a heated discussion about the architectural expression appropriate to a socialist society, which came to a sudden close after the break with Stalin in 1948. From then on Yugoslavia built socialism oscillating tactically between East and West, cultural freedoms were gradually augmented, and modernism and functionalism became legitimate options that were no longer called into question.⁵⁹

The Yugoslav-Soviet schism meant that Yugoslavia no longer had to abide by the Soviet mandate, including those specifying architectural and monument aesthetic guidelines. The most recognizable example of the differentiation in aesthetic dictums was the rejection of the Soviet doctrine of socialist realism, based on the formula “realistic representation plus celebration of socialism.”⁶⁰ The Yugoslav socialists saw socialist realism as obsolete and associated with a communist ideology they found anachronistic. According to Stankovic, “the rejection of Soviet-type Communism also meant the repudiation of Socialist Realism, equated with Stalinism.”⁶¹ This aesthetic conflict originally stemmed from a previous dispute with the Soviets regarding the “application of Communist ideology” and a “quarrel over the application of ideology in the arts;” both of these conflicts revolved around differing “concepts of the individual”

⁵⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁵⁹ Mrduljaš and Kulić, *Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, 9.

⁶⁰ Kulić, "Architecture and Ideology in Socialist Yugoslavia," 37.

⁶¹ Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," 152.

and a “question of self-expression.”⁶² She adds, “While the modernism of the Russian revolutionary avant-garde ended up being strangled by Stalinism, Yugoslav modernism was created to strangle Stalinism.”⁶³ The drive towards modernism was also “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.”⁶⁴ Lazar Trifunovic, a prominent art critic of the time stated, “the [Yugoslav] modernists understood art as a creative process, as opposed to the socialist realists, who insisted on ‘art-as-education.’”⁶⁵

The separation from the Eastern bloc also initiated the non-alliance movement, which sought to resist the hegemonic division of the world into blocs, between the two superpowers, that of the Soviet Union and the United States, according to Cold War allegiances. The policy of non-alignment prompted “intense international exchanges of architectural and planning expertise with the West.”⁶⁶ State authorities promoted these cultural exchanges, both within and beyond the borders of Yugoslavia, offering stipends for artists to travel abroad, as well as inviting international specialists and hosting international art exhibitions (including some from the USA).⁶⁷ Government programs sponsored artists and architects to travel and study in Europe and the USA. They were sent to cities around western Europe, where they studied and worked in such

⁶² Ibid., 157.

⁶³ Ibid., 152, 57.

⁶⁴ Horvatinčić, "Memorial Sculpture and Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia," 105.

⁶⁵ Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," 158.

⁶⁶ Kulić, "The Builders of Socialism: Eastern Europe's Cities in Recent Historiography," 551.

⁶⁷ Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," 152.

institutions as the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.⁶⁸ Many of these architects worked with modernist masters such as Le Corbusier and later became the major supporters and builders of modernist architecture in Yugoslavia. Significantly, a number of these students went on to work for the socialist Yugoslav state, holding “important positions in the public administration, government offices and the university.”⁶⁹ As artists and architects traveled and trained outside of Yugoslavia, they were able to appropriate modernist styles and participate in the ensuing modernist program occurring in Western Europe. Kulić states that, “after the break with the Soviet bloc in 1948, Yugoslavia established friendly connections with the West and the state released control of cultural production.”⁷⁰

Yugoslavia partnered with a number of nations outside of the rigid cold war divisions and within the non-aligned movement—a group of nations who also rejected any formal alignment, for or against, with the major power blocs. Notably, many of these partnerships took the form of modernist architectural projects in post-colonial African and Middle Eastern nations. According to Kulić, this impacted production in Yugoslavia as well as the nations with whom they partnered. “The influx of architectural expertise, labor, and materials into the Balkans acquired a whole new set of paths in the 1960s, replacing or complementing the more traditional ones established by the various powers

⁶⁸ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁹ Bogo Zupančić, “Plečnik’s Students in LeCorbusier’s Studio,” in *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, ed. Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić (Zagreb, Croatia: UHA/CCA, 2012), 392.

⁷⁰ Kulić, “Architecture and Ideology in Socialist Yugoslavia,” 42.

that had dominated the region in the past."⁷¹ Modernism was also imported into the region by awarding of architectural contracts to international modernist architects. For example, the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange (a follower of Le Corbusier), was selected and brought in to rebuild the city of Skopje after the 1963 earthquake, with support from the United Nations.⁷²

Modernism thus served to signal to the outside world a move away from Soviet Communism and towards (however tacitly) certain Western ideals. The lack of representational iconography and use of abstraction in the commemorative architecture allowed problematic narratives, stemming from historical regional ethnic and religious conflict to be avoided, as well. As it had in the past, Yugoslavia continued to inhabit a similarly challenging position on the landscape, though, instead of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, it was now positioned between the similarly hostile, "socialist East and capitalist West."⁷³ It was therefore expedient for the Yugoslav state to use modernist abstraction to signal differentiation from these opposing global forces, while employing it as a symbolic indicator of an advanced, unified nation, moving towards a progressive future.

⁷¹ "Building the Socialist Balkans," 107.

⁷² Nika Grabar, "5+2 Points on Architecture and Ideology," in *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, ed. Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić (Zagreb, Croatia: UHA/CCA, 2012), 65.

⁷³ Mrduljaš and Kulić, *Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, 6.

In this way, the modernist monuments of Socialist Yugoslavia were different from conventional memorial architectural construction. Having no precedent or architectural legacy associated with power, these monuments did not resemble those of their neighbors, or their own historical aesthetic lineage. As Stankovic asserts, "Yugoslav modernism did not resemble that of the Russian avant-garde," instead, it looked to "the Ecole de Paris for its inspiration."⁷⁴ This is interesting, as expediency is typically a primary consideration for authorities when erecting sites of political symbolism and power, as state power seeks to reify its presence and power on the landscape as quickly as possible. It requires there be no time wasted in communicating the authority and legitimacy through monumental construction. There are often practical obstacles in this effort, as Kulić states, "short-term political expediency often thwarted long-term ideological goals, representation trumped the more profoundly transformative plans."⁷⁵ Accordingly, most governments opt to construct monumental architecture which is already legible in the visual language of the past. This allows the structures to be understandable as sites of power, not only in their monumentality, but also as they relate to recognizable styles of past authority. It is unsurprising that in many instances, revolutionary governments defaulted to already existing symbols of authority. After the Bolshevik revolution, Communist Russia, following a half-hearted foray into modernism, adopted socialist realism as its aesthetic of choice (which, paradoxically, had been favored by Czarist Russia), as it communicated its heroic intentions in terms already

⁷⁴ Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," 157.

⁷⁵ Kulić, "Building the Socialist Balkans," 105.

decipherable to the general public. The Soviet modernist movements of Constructivism and Suprematism, designed explicitly to embody and promote revolutionary communist ideals, were quickly discarded in favor of recognizable socialist realist and neo-classical forms (especially after Stalin came to power).

Because the aesthetic of modernism had not been a prominent architectural style in the region and was also not previously linked with symbols of past authority, or that of the Yugoslav socialist state, it was necessary to educate the public. They had to be taught to make the symbolic association between modernism and Socialist Yugoslavia. According to scholars such as Beti Žerovc, modernism was not a legible aesthetic for much of the Yugoslav population. In order for the abstract monuments to be meaningful as memorials and seen as more than abstract sculptures, public educational rituals were essential. Yugoslav authorities initiated pedagogical programs to teach Yugoslav citizens to “read” the visual language of modernism as an expression of Yugoslav socialism, reinforcing ideals of national unification and shared identity. These programs and events were an integral part of the memorial experience, which brought Yugoslav citizens of all ages and from different areas of Yugoslavia to learn about these sites and the events they commemorated (figures 9 and 10). Memorial complexes functioned as “places where young generations would be educated about the foundations of socialism,” through exposure to the modernist forms.⁷⁶ It was during these educational experiences that Yugoslav citizens would become fluent in the symbolic vocabulary of

⁷⁶ Putnik, "Second World War Monuments in Yugoslavia as Witnesses of the Past and the Future," 209.

modernism and equate it with socialism, thereby ensuring that “modernism and socialism became synonymous.”⁷⁷ National celebrations were organized by state authorities, who transported school children and families to participate in a type of nationalistic pilgrimage and state sponsored ritual. Putnik describes that “Numerous ceremonies were held in the open areas of the memorial parks with several thousand visitors and radio and television coverage. At opening ceremonies President Tito and other important politicians.... often held spirited speeches in front of hundreds of visitors.”⁷⁸ Horvatinčić notes, “that Yugoslavia’s socialist-era memorials anticipated, sometimes by decades, the participatory strategies that would later be celebrated in Western memorial sculpture and architecture.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Kulić, "Architecture and Ideology in Socialist Yugoslavia," 36.

⁷⁸ Putnik, "Second World War Monuments in Yugoslavia as Witnesses of the Past and the Future," 208-09.

⁷⁹ Horvatinčić, "Memorial Sculpture and Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia," 111.



Figure 9. Commemorative ceremony at the Sutjeska Memorial Monument.
<https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/tjentiste>



Figure 10. Commemorative ceremony at the Kozara Monument.
<https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/kozara>

4 MEMORIALIZING STATE POWER

According to Kirk Savage, a noted art historian who has focused on memorial architecture in the United States, “public monuments do not arise as if by natural law to celebrate the deserving; they are built by people with sufficient power to marshal (or impose) public consent for their erection.”⁸⁰ Governing powers have an incentive to control public aesthetics and the ideas they express, logically, privileging and promoting officially-sanctioned ideologies while repressing those they find threatening. In this way, state authorities, and especially new regimes, validate their ascension to power by giving it material form. Sanford Levinson emphasizes that, “The image of the state as either benignly neutral or, perhaps even more remarkably, supportive of unorthodox ideas, is quite naïve, not least because it almost wholly fails to pay adequate attention to the fact that the state is often an active participant in the intellectual marketplace.”⁸¹ Furthermore, the state is able to legitimize particular ideas due to its ability to allocate resources and mobilize bureaucracy for its own ends, giving these ideas material form. In this way Levinson contends, the state is able to mold “a distinct consciousness, [while] subtly, (or not so subtly) delegitimizing others.”⁸²

Monuments and memorials, by virtue of being permitted in public space by those with the power to make such decisions, Levinson argues, inevitably reflect “how those with political power within a given society organize public space to convey (and thus

⁸⁰ Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies*, 63.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 80.

teach the public) desired political lessons.”⁸³ Therefore, the construction of monuments and memorial sites, in particular, indicates a fundamental desire by state authorities to promote ideological narratives which align with those of the state. In this way, the majority of public art and architecture, even when aesthetically coded in abstraction, express a state-sanctioned point of view and “a particular kind of national consciousness.”⁸⁴ More often than not, public art is “the art chosen self-consciously by public institutions to symbolize the public order and to inculcate in its viewers appropriate attitudes toward that order.”⁸⁵ It does not appear by accident, or is permitted haphazardly without sanctioning by the state or dominant cultural authorities, even in political systems which allow for open and free artistic expression.

The fact that these modernist monuments were built means that they must have benefitted and reflected the values represented by the dominant cultural forces that brought them into being. Their very existence on the landscape and presence in public space, and the substantial resources devoted to their erection, indicates that they were sanctioned by authorities and must have performed specific functions for the state. However abstractly, these monuments operated as potent symbols for the state, and served as “an important part of the cultural exchange system that, among other things, establishes relationships of hierarchy and domination.”⁸⁶

⁸³ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 107.

Anida Sokol, a scholar of Balkan cultural memory has noted that the monuments of former Yugoslavia were used as a means to “demarcate the territory, to tell the official narrative of the majority population . . . to demonstrate power, to give the illusion of creating something for eternity, to provoke . . . or to repel the other.”⁸⁷ As such, state authorities made use of these sites to reinforce nationalistic ideologies, attempting to insert particular narratives into the collective memory. The willingness of the Yugoslav authorities to abandon socialist realism, with its inherited communist connotations, can be seen as a further indication that modernism served a very real and practical function, and benefited state authorities. Operating as hegemonic devices, these monumental structures served to mythologize chosen histories and legitimize state authority by erecting symbolic expressions of dominant cultural messages, and were used as, what Pavlakovic has called, a “symbolic strategy of nation building.”⁸⁸

The extent to which these sites truly served as sites of commemoration for the public at large, however attractive as examples of eclectic modernism, remains questionable. The necessity of pedagogical programs suggests that the abstract visual language was not immediately legible to the wider Yugoslav population. It is not surprising then, as Beti Žerovc asserts, that the “high-modernist monuments were received, in their own time, with considerable disfavor.”⁸⁹ She argues, somewhat controversially, that these sites are less about effectively commemorating the events of

⁸⁷ Anida Sokol, "War Monuments: Instruments of Nation-Building in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Croatian Political Science Review/Politička misao* 51, no. 5 (2014): 108.

⁸⁸ Pavlaković, "Symbolic Nation-Building and Collective Identities in Post-Yugoslav States," 7.

⁸⁹ Žerovc, "Toward a Concrete Utopia: Learning from Yugoslavia | Moma Live."

WWII, and instead function primarily as “ideological apparatuses” of the state.⁹⁰ Designed by artistic and political elites, they are essentially the product of an exclusive cultural-political alignment, partly intended to convey messages regarding the socialist aspirations of the state to a diverse populace and, perhaps more importantly, as a means to speak to an international community. Žerovc contends that although modernist abstraction may have allowed the Yugoslav state to communicate to the wide variety of people within this heterogeneous region, avoiding competing historical narratives and underlying ethnic tensions, it might not have been an understandable aesthetic for those not educated in modernism. In many ways, as Stankovic suggests, “the Yugoslav version [of modernism] became an autonomous art, detached from the needs of reality (the working class), and in the service of the ‘Cold War profiteers,’ ie, the Communist Party elite.”⁹¹

It remains equally doubtful whether these abstract forms permitted open interpretation. Burghardt and Kirn suggest that abstraction “facilitates multiple interpretive approaches and awakens fantasies . . . [allowing] for an appropriation of meaning that bypasses official narrations, allowing access to the monuments also for people disagreeing with the official line of politics.”⁹² However, it is extremely unlikely that state authorities would permit viewpoints antithetical to their own ideological intentions. Although the abstract forms seemed to communicate a universal message, it

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Stankovic, "The Case of Exploited Modernism," 157.

⁹² Burghardt and Kirn, "Yugoslavian Partisan Memorials: The Aesthetic Form of the Revolution as a Form of Unfinished Modernism?," 91.

is improbable that these public works contained messages of dissent. It seems more likely that the inaccessibility and illegibility of the modernist visual language, at least to a large portion of the citizenry, was a strategy which prevented a thorough reading and understanding of these sites. It also served to tamp down ethnic or regional distinctions that might problematize national unification. Inadvertently or not, the promotion of modernist abstraction was likely part of a larger approach by Yugoslav state officials to propagate specific messages regarding national unity and progress.⁹³ Levinson stresses that “art placed within [public] spaces is almost always the product of some instrumental purpose outside of the domain of pure aesthetics.”⁹⁴ The real value of abstraction may have been that specific representations could be avoided, with an undefined narrative left to take its place. The hope being, in doing without explicitly mythologized heroes, heterogenous Yugoslav society might instead focus on these sites and the structures contained within as a symbolic representation of a forthcoming future of progress, modernity, unification and equanimity. Failing that, they would at least be seen as powerful expressions of state power and authority.

Viewed in contemporary circumstances, these sites remain difficult to interpret. The absence of identifying historical indicators and their abstract aesthetic leaves their meaning indefinite and their memorial function questionable, especially to the outsider. The whimsical brutalist abstraction which they employ, also does not seem to align with western expectations about the memorial architecture of a formerly socialist country,

⁹³ Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies*, 63.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

often (mistakenly) associated with Soviet aesthetic doctrines.⁹⁵ Disconnected from their historical contexts, these monuments are “no longer read through the prism of socialist ideology but through their functional and spatial qualities.”⁹⁶ Difficult to categorize, both historically and aesthetically, they are now interpreted in primarily formal terms and experienced often as abstract sculptures. Since the period of the construction of these monuments, “high” modernism has also become mythologized and connected to specific historical narratives, making it even more challenging to “see” in historical terms. As Kulić describes the shifting perceptions of memorial and monumental architecture, “changes in the ideological system... transform the meanings of architectural artifacts and the values ascribed to them and to their creators.”⁹⁷ Thus, these sites can no longer be experienced as they functioned during the time of their construction. What has been termed “Yugo-nostalgia,” an idealized return to the values of Socialist Yugoslavia, a phenomenon found both within and outside the region, further complicates how these sites can be read. The period of Socialist Yugoslavia has become fetishized by some, especially younger generations, being viewed as a time of prosperity and stability, particularly after the Balkan civil wars of the 1990s and

⁹⁵ Žerovc, "Can the High Modernism of Yugoslav Monuments Be Viewed as a Trojan Horse of Capitalism in Socialism?."

⁹⁶ Vladimir Kulić and Maroje Mrduljaš, "Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States," in *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism*, ed. Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić (Zagreb, Croatia: UHA/CCA, 2012), 11.

⁹⁷ Vladimir Kulić, "Coming to Terms with Socialism: Historizing the Architecture of the Recent Past in Former Yugoslavia," *Centropa* 10, no. 2 (2010): 179.

subsequent economic crises. The recent foreign fascination with these monument sites also tends to see “socialist [modernist] buildings as exotic, otherworldly objects.”⁹⁸

However, the difficulty in interpretation does not mean that the ideological associations have been completely stripped away. Since the collapse of Yugoslavia, many conservative governments and political figures have understood the modernist monuments as reminders of a socialist past, which has been subsequently and disparagingly, associated with Soviet Communism and conflated (confusingly) with Nazi Fascism. In many cases there has been a calculated effort to destroy these sites. Pavlaković describes that during the disintegration of the unified Yugoslav state, “authorities in the emerging nation-states....sought to inscribe new meanings onto these monumental examples of socialist modernist architecture, there have been numerous examples of memorials being deliberately destroyed, defaced or left to fall into disrepair, especially in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.”⁹⁹ During the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, “buildings and public space that served important cultural functions with which inhabitants could identify were strategically bombed” effectively erasing the “legibility of their history and identity.”¹⁰⁰ Levinson, discussing the treatment of monuments by new regimes, asserts, “organizers of [new regimes] must decide which... heroes of the old regime deserve to continue occupying public space. And the new regime will always be concerned if these heroes might serve as potential symbols of resistance.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ "Building the Socialist Balkans," 98.

⁹⁹ Pavlaković, "Symbolic Nation-Building and Collective Identities in Post-Yugoslav States," 11.

¹⁰⁰ Mačkić, "Mortal Cities Forgotten Monuments".

¹⁰¹ Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies*, 10-11.

Furthermore, “those who overthrow regimes often take as their first task the physical destruction of symbols--and the latent power possessed by these markers--of those whom they have displaced.”¹⁰² Thus, the treatment by these succeeding state authorities indicates that these abstract monuments continue to have symbolic and political import, in many cases, at odds with current political and economic agendas.

5 CONCLUSION

To the extent that Socialist Yugoslav society may have been highly educated and exposed to international modernist art exhibitions, modernism may have remained a top-down aesthetic favored by the political and cultural elite, ultimately leaving out those to whom its abstract messages remained unclear and without real commemorative function. The possibility exists that the state’s use of abstraction represents an aversion to historical and cultural reconciliation and, therefore, genuine unification (relying on Tito’s charisma to hold the country together). Cultural divisions based on complicated historical circumstances may have been unwittingly left to fester during the post-war years. The historical, ethnic and religious divisions remaining unacknowledged in the abstract public monuments. There is therefore some reason to speculate that by ignoring historical divisions, and those of the Second World War (during which the region was divided between the Partisans and the Ustaše fascists), tensions were left unresolved. As Beti Žerovc reminds, before WWII, the nation was divided, and after, it was more severely divided, between those who fought for the Axis powers and those on

¹⁰² Ibid., 12.

the side of the Allies, each having vastly different heroes and events to commemorate.¹⁰³ Through its sanctioning of an abstract modernist aesthetic, the Socialist Yugoslav state may have, unwittingly, ignored or repressed the “existence of competing discourses that compete for cultural hegemony,” privileging “by use of the state apparatus,” the cultural and political elites.¹⁰⁴ It is possible that having nonrepresentational imagery prevented ethnic and religious participants from having adequate memorial expressions for their history. The avoidance of specific historical and national/ethnic narratives may expose a blind spot in the utopian idealism, or naïveté of the Socialist Yugoslav government. Ignoring or remaining oblivious to the realities and focusing too much on a utopian future, the Yugoslav political leaders overlooked the need to reconcile the past. Particular voices, left out and perceived as abandoned, may have become agitated in the process.¹⁰⁵ Burghardt and Kirn note, “critical voices suggest that the abstract form of these monuments is problematic.... As a visitor you don’t get an idea of who the perpetrators were and who the victims.”¹⁰⁶ Through an attempt at creating a universal language, with which to speak to all Yugoslav citizens and which emphasized national unity and a prosperous future, complicated and competing historical narratives were never reconciled and remained unresolved and left to fester. Levinson, quoting the work of Michael Walzer, who writes in *On Toleration*, “even the most tolerant state is likely to have only one civil religion that

¹⁰³ Žerovc, "Toward a Concrete Utopia: Learning from Yugoslavia | Moma Live."

¹⁰⁴ Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies*, 80.

¹⁰⁵ Burghardt and Kirn, "Yugoslavian Partisan Memorials: The Aesthetic Form of the Revolution as a Form of Unfinished Modernism?," 92.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

necessarily disadvantages alternative understandings.”¹⁰⁷ One is left to wonder whether the failure to reconcile these long and complex histories and neglect of competing narratives, reflected in the abstract aesthetic, reveals a weakness in the utopic aspirational ideology? It is possible that this points to underlying social pressures that were kept in check and suppressed through Tito’s dominance and cult of personality, destined to burst with his absence.

While numerous sites have been actively destroyed or left to fall into disrepair, many continue to stand and gain increasing attention by artists, historians, and tourists, especially as their images are circulated online. These monumental relics now serve as reminders of a country and political philosophy which now exists only in these impressive yet tragic forms. In this sense, these monumental modernist structures remained imbued with potency. And, although it remains questionable as to whether these sites endure as effective memorials (if they ever did)—particularly those without the aid of didactic elements, especially to those not educated as to their meaning—they do still retain an aesthetic magnificence. Related primarily to their radical formal elements, an appreciation of brutalism, and the unique historical circumstance which led to the construction of such distinctive monuments, they remain compelling and significant. Spread across the region, they now function more to memorialize a country, and even a political philosophy that no longer exists.

¹⁰⁷ Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies*, 85.

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