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Postsocialist Capitalism:

Urban Changes and Challenges in Serbia

Edited by:

Jelisaveta Petrović and Vera Backović

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THE SYMBOLIC MARKERS OF BELGRADE'S TRANSFORMATION: MONUMENTS AND FOUNTAINS

Ivana Spasić

Abstract: The aim of this chapter is to examine a number of Belgrade's freshly constructed monuments as symbolic markers of the transformation the city has recently been undergoing. The selection includes statues to Tsar Nicholas II Romanov and Gavrilo Princip, as well as the fountains at Slavija Square and Topličin venac. It is argued that by their physical and aesthetic properties, as well as in how the process of their construction unfolded, these structures embody in a nutshell the crucial features of the overall urban change in Belgrade lately. These features may best be described as twin developments of postmodernization and demodernization. The first refers to an overemphasis on tourism, consumption, entertainment and "pleasure", foregrounding visuality and surfaces; as well as to disposing of previous practices of rational, strategically guided urban development based on expert opinion and relatively transparent lines of administrative decision-making. The latter concerns the aesthetic aspect where the legacy of Serbian/Yugoslav modernism is being discarded and increasingly replaced with older, more monumental and "literalist" artistic forms of earlier epochs.

Keywords: Belgrade, urban change, monuments, fountains, postmodernization, demodernization

Introduction

Belgrade's urban landscape displays an astounding diversity of shapes, sizes, styles, and eras – "excessive stylistic variegation", in the words of architectural historian Aleksandar Kadijević (2017: 13).¹ Whether this

1 "The cultural identity of Serbia's capital has over the past two centuries often changed, in parallel with its spatial expansion, dense buildup, and demographic growth," writes Kadijević, and the medley results from "war destructions, developmental discontinuities, changes in political regimes, as well as in dominant political and architectural ideologies" (2017: 13). See also Vujović (2014) and Ristović (2018).

is taken as a virtue or a failing, it constitutes the inevitable backdrop to any examination of urban change in Belgrade. Lately, we have witnessed a wave of transformative moves, threatening – or promising – to change the city in a more fundamental sense. Applying the useful typology of urban interventions proposed by Kadrijević,² these changes can be characterized as: unnecessary, hasty, poorly elaborated, lacking the support of experts or justification through democratic public dialogue, and following the strategies of crass capitalism and “investor-led” urban planning.

While this is the general subject matter of the entire present volume, this particular chapter³ discusses a number of recently erected structures which, as will be argued, conveniently condense the main trends in the city’s current urban transformation, as tokens of an advertised “new” face of Belgrade. Over the past couple of years, a number of statues and public fountains have been built,⁴ purporting to turn Belgrade, “finally”, into the bustling, shiny metropolis it “deserves to be”. As such, they may be subsumed under what Radović (2014: 140) has called the “targeted symbolic marking of the city center”. In contrast with “spatial cleansing” identified by Herzfeld (2002) as expression of the political in physical space, we may call this “spatial cluttering”, with the same function.

It has long been recognized that material objects and their distribution in space provide underpinnings to a shared, commonsensical reality of everyday life. “By their physical presence in the world, and in specific times and places, things sustain identity by constituting part of a matrix of relational cultural elements including practices, representations, and spaces which gather around objects” (Edensor, 2002: 103). Public statues and fountains are recognizable landmarks in the urban landscape and are often taken up in urban studies for an insight into deeper political and social processes. Public fountains, thanks to the presence of water, a vital natural resource but regularly shrouded in strong cultural signifi-

2 Differentiating by: 1) scale: expansive (encompassing) vs. smaller (less conspicuous) transformations; 2) degree of implementation: complete vs. less fully implemented; 3) civilizational character: necessary, inevitable, purposeful, supported by consensus of expert opinion vs. abrupt, ill-devised and under-elaborated, aggressive, environmentally destructive; 4) discursive viability: publicly justified with clear and reasonable arguments, or not, 5) methodology, 6) ideological and economic strategy (Kadrijević, 2017: 14–19).

3 The paper is part of the research project *Challenges of New Social Integration in Serbia: Concepts and Actors* (No. 179035), supported by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Scientific Research and Technological Development. I wish to thank Milan Popadić for useful comments on a draft version of the paper.

4 And as many as 54 more fountains were promised by the Serbian president and ruling party leader, Aleksandar Vučić, in April 2018 <https://www.danas.rs/beograd/vesic-na-inicijativu-vucica-beograd-ce-dobiti-54-fontane/>, accessed 24/08/2018.

tion, bring together visibility and utilitarianism, symbolic and pragmatic functions: they quench the thirst of passers-by, represent focal points for sociality, while often also possessing a memorial and symbolic character (Popadić, 2012: 144–160).

Public monuments in turn are prime vehicles for materializing urban memory. As “memory objectified” (Popadić, 2015: 66), they are indispensable instruments in the “symbolic coding of public spaces” (Potkonjak & Pletenac, 2007) and crucial elements in the “canonical system of symbols” – a system of signs that defines the text of a collective identity, determined in accordance with official ideology by those holding power (Azaryahu, 1999). Verschaffel (1999: 333) defines the “monumental”, as form and idea, as “the visualisation of a relation between time and stone”, with two main functions: to commemorate, and to represent power. This is accomplished by a specific materiality both woven into and defying everyday routines: “Monuments stand out, by their central and eye-catching position, by their size, which is somewhat larger than the habitual size of the quotidian, by their being placed on a pedestal, or by their massive and solid appearance. They thus function as landmarks and at the same time as obstacles one stumbles on as one goes about one’s daily business” (1999: 333).

Especially as, according to Johnson (1995:52), “an examination of public statuary ... highlights some of the ways in which the material bases for nationalist imaginings emerge and are structured symbolically”. Monuments are useful as a heuristic source for understanding the emergence and articulation of dominant discourses, and their locations “serve as the focal point for the expression of social action and a collectivist politics” (Johnson, 1995: 62). Even though they generally express dominant ideologies of states and rulers, monuments can also be used to challenge these, so battles over their placement or displacement occur regularly as part of political struggles (Crimson, 2005: xvi-xviii). After historical ruptures, the choices political actors make about which existing memorials to retain and incorporate into the new political idiom, and which to eliminate, tell us a great deal about changing official conceptions of national identity and the nation-building process (Forest and Johnson, 2002: 525)

The Markers

In spite of their obvious differences, the structures discussed in this chapter, together with a few antecedents, share a number of common features. To begin with, they have stirred controversy and divided the public opinion: people either like or utterly dislike them, few are left indifferent.

Secondly, in their coming into being, the institutional procedures of decision-making as defined by existing regulations have not been followed, or not fully. This also means that expert opinion (town planners, architects, landscape architects, designers, artists, art critics, and conservationists) has largely been sidestepped. The relevant professionals were generally not consulted, or the consultation was feigned; when they opposed the projects, their objections went ignored. Many of the structures were designed abroad rather than by Serbian artists. In sum, existing local knowledge was not tapped but instead, the whole “package” was simply imported. Finally, the form, design and location of the structures are in many cases marked by amateurism and incompetence.

Thirdly, decisions on which structures to build and where to place them have shown little or no concern for the needs of people actually living in Belgrade. Rather than amenities for residents, sorely missing in so many areas, these are devices to prop up a tourist and image-oriented vision of Belgrade, aimed at its visitors. A more general, and more upsetting feature, let us call it *symbolic abdication*, refers to the community’s abrogation of its own power to aesthetically regulate itself. In other words, the city gives up its sovereign right to determine its own visual landscape and the meanings the latter exudes. In the selected examples, this is expressed as surrendering to the pressures of money (“investors”), foreign political powers, or both.

It will be contended that the underlying process these examples point to can be described as *un-modernization*: a simultaneous *post*-modernization and *de*-modernization of Belgrade. The former refers to two kinds of change: in the fundamental concept of the city (overemphasis on tourism, entertainment, “pleasure”, and visuality), and in the practices of urban planning (where rational, strategically guided urban development is replaced by haphazard individual projects directed by erratic money flows). The latter process, *de*-modernization, takes place in the aesthetic realm: the legacy of Serbian/Yugoslav modernism is being discarded in favour of traditional art forms revived from earlier epochs.

The analysis focuses mainly on a selection of four representative structures: two fountains, at Slavija and in Cara Lazara Street; and two statues, for Emperor Nicholas II of Russia and Gavrilo Princip. All of these landmarks have been erected in the past six years, that is, since the abrupt political changeover of 2012 that brought the newly dominant Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to power in the city of Belgrade. These structures, while not unprecedented in their formal-visual and institutional features, do illustrate a significant acceleration of trends initiated previously. They might even turn out to be the beginning of the new mainstream in the

capital's town planning: What perhaps was a series of disconnected, loosely planned one-shot actions may be crystallizing into a more consistent new "logic" of urban policy in Belgrade.

The Red Rooster Fountain

The first marker to be discussed is the fountain constructed in 2016 at the quaint triangular intersection of Cara Lazara, Vuka Karadžića and Gračanička streets, in the very heart of Belgrade. The name comes from the granite sculpture of a rooster that sits atop the fountain, referencing a famous eponymous cafe nearby. The rest of the fountain is made of (very) white marble. Its author is the respected architect Branislav Jovin. Two identical exemplars (minus the rooster) already exist, previously designed by Jovin for towns beyond the borders of Serbia, but within what are sometimes called the "Serbian lands": one is in Herceg Novi (Montenegro) and the other in Trebinje (Republika Srpska, BiH).

The fountain came as part of a reconstruction of the square, undertaken in 2015–2016. The renewal also involved the removal of a number of large mature trees, which used to make the square uniquely pleasant on hot summer days. The cafe changed too.⁵ In such a setting, the fountain looks odd and superfluous. Visually, it cannot be appreciated from any angle, since the square is too narrow. The spot where it stands seems as though it was chosen at random. The marble sticks out in the environment, leading one commentator to liken it to plastic. The fountain's design is highly conservative and vaguely replicates the style of traditional Mediterranean architecture, which might be an excellent fit for Trebinje or Herceg Novi, but is absent from Belgrade's visual landscape (at any rate, a Mediterranean fountain would definitely not have a red rooster on it). The fact that this is practically a copy of fountains already constructed in smaller towns reinforces a sense of inauthenticity and secondhandedness.

The idea for the site, including the fountain itself, was originally conceived as part of a comprehensive plan for the pedestrian zone in central Belgrade whose implementation began in the mid-1980s. The whole project was premised on the anticipated construction of a subway system, which would allow for the heart of Belgrade to rid itself of car traffic, but which never materialized. The project was partly realized, most visibly in Knez Mihailova street, but then discontinued for lack of money. It was relaunched in the 2010s, despite changed circumstances and new aesthetic

5 After several rounds of changes in ownership, design, atmosphere and clientele, the current Red Rooster Cafe is a far cry from the old venue embedded in Belgrade urban mythology.

exigencies, by simply taking old sketches up from the shelf. As a critic writes, to revive a project that may have been good in its time but is now thirty years old, without any reassessment or adjustment to the new situation, is bound to cause problems.⁶

The Slavija Fountain

The other, much more massive and central fountain is the one at Slavija interchange. It was opened in June 2017, then closed again from August to November, for a large-scale reconstruction of the interchange. In the process, the statue and the grave of the early 20th century socialist politician and writer, Dimitrije Tucović, were removed (without his family's approval). This monument was the longtime visual and symbolic marker of the place, officially called Dimitrije Tucović Square for decades. Tucović's earthly remains were reburied at a cemetery, and the monument was moved to a much less prominent location at the edge of the square. This replacement of a leftist political leader, labor organizer and critic of Serbian nationalism, with a brightly-colored singing fountain, constitutes a near-perfect example of "re-writing the past into urban tissue" (Radović, 2013). In this unequal battle between socialist and capitalist imaginings of the Serbian past, it was not hard to guess which side would win.

The fountain is quite large, encompassing 800 square meters of water surface, with 350 nozzles that spray water 16 meters upwards, and 400 differently coloured spotlights. At certain hours during the day the fountain also plays music. It was enthusiastically promoted by the Belgrade authorities as something spectacular, fantastic, world-class, never before seen in Belgrade, "the only such fountain in this part of the world", "one of the largest European fountains", a symbol of Belgrade and a tourist attraction. In sum, "one of those things that make the difference between big and small cities", to quote city manager, Goran Vesić.⁷

Yet it was from the very beginning mired in controversies. The general public received it with both jubilation and the sharpest criticism. The broad framework for the debate concerns the entire reconstruction of Slavija, an important traffic node for Belgrade with a sad history of bad

6 Marko Stojanović, Očerupani pevac: Kako je jedna česma podelila struku i javnost, <https://www.gradnja.rs/ocerupani-pevac-kako-je-jedna-cesma-podelila-struku-i-javnost/>, 2016, accessed 12/07/2018.

7 Quoted in *Nedeljnik*, <http://www.nedeljnik.rs/nedeljnik/portalnews/glasajte-u-anketi-da-li-vam-se-vise-svida-slavija-65-ili-slavija-2017-godine>, accessed 3 Sep 2018. Interestingly, in the online poll the weekly organized, attaching two photos of the square 50 years apart, and asking the readers "Which version of Slavija do you prefer, 1965 or 2017?", 70% of respondents chose the old one.

reorganizations and botched attempts at improvement. This time, there was a comprehensive plan, which might have solved at least the most urgent circulation problems (especially the intersecting pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic), but then the local government changed and the project was changed accordingly.

That a fountain, of all things, was placed in the middle of a roundabout, with no access by pedestrians, caused considerable bafflement. By its sheer size, even without the multicolored lighting at night, it distracts drivers. Then, there are safety concerns: spraying water is not a desirable companion to speeding cars, especially in winter. As for its appearance, the designer and producer remain unknown. We may surmise that it is simply an item from the mass-manufactured, anonymous urban embellishment assortment purchased from a contractor.

The music is a problem in its own right. No one can sit down and listen to it, since there is no place to sit. Many have also complained about the poor selection of musical numbers (citing “bad taste,” and “lost opportunity to influence the nation’s cultural level”). A small number of songs are replayed over and over again for hours, which annoys the few who can – indeed, *must* – hear the fountain’s music, that is, the residents of the nearby apartment buildings and workers in offices overlooking Slavija. Again, the disregard for the interests of citizens is striking.

Investigative journalists discovered a host of unpleasant facts about the fountain. For instance, that it still lacked a use permit when it was opened; that the opinions of experts from the Faculty of Traffic Engineering were ignored; that safety warnings were not heeded and the requisite tests never conducted, and so forth.⁸ Within just weeks of opening, the fountain became the center of a series of smaller and larger scandals. Politically the most consequential of these, let us call it the “AliBaba controversy”, concerned the price of the fountain. A nearly identical fountain was promptly discovered on the Chinese online trading site AliBaba.com, offered for EUR 200,000 instead of the 1.8 million that were actually paid.⁹ This caused a debate that still continues and centers on allegations of corruption. The price difference remains unexplained, just like, after all, the whole business of procuring the fountain.

In the “foam scandal” in March 2018, unknown perpetrators poured detergent into the water at night. No group came forward to claim responsibility for this action but the city authorities immediately accused, with-

8 <https://www.istinomer.rs/clanak/2066/Kosava-ili-institucije-ko-je-zaduzen-za-bez-bednost-fontane>, accessed 15/07/ 2018.

9 See e.g. <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/beograd/2862307/pronadjena-potpuno-ista-fontana-na-alibabi-kosta-200-000-dolara-u-beogradu-18-miliona>, accessed 15/09/2018.

out reservation, their political opponents, who at the time were protesting the results of an election won by the ruling party.¹⁰

The “leaking scandal” occurred just three days after the fountain’s opening, when it began to leak on one side, flooding parts of the roadway and interfering with traffic. In the public altercation that ensued, it turned out that the project had to be modified during construction when it was realized that the originally planned pumps would push water over the brim and onto the street. Funnily, this simple fact was not discovered until four long months into the actual works.¹¹

Finally, the “crumbling scandal” involved the paved area across the fountain, on the square’s outer perimeter, rebuilt as part of the reconstruction project. Composed of terraced concrete defying the terrain and meaningless metal poles, with an overall design whose rationale remains obscure, the plateau began to fall apart almost immediately. After provoking a minor public outcry online, it was closed in March 2018 and stood abandoned for many months, to be provisionally re-opened towards the end of the year – though still deprived of any identifiable aesthetic or practical function.

To conclude, the Slavija fountain merely “looks” (and, alas, “sounds”), but, physically isolated and inaccessible as it is, it does not serve any practical purpose, be it rest, quenching thirst, or socializing. It cannot become part of everyday life since people cannot walk around, sit on its steps, enjoy the coolness of the water, or relax while listening to the music. In short, it cannot be directly utilized at all. It can only be *admired* from a distance.¹² In this sense, it is a remarkable illustration of postmodern “empty” visuality, a spectacular appearance in place of a real solution to real urban problems, with the residents’ voices unheard. As will be discussed in the concluding section: a skewing of the public agenda, if ever there was one.

10 “City manager Goran Vesić [...] blamed explicitly the activists of the Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own initiative. The movement denied the accusations, claiming their activists took no part in damaging the fountain and stressing that they always take responsibility for what they do, hence all their actions are public and announced in advance.” <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/iskljucena-fontana-na-slaviji-vodovod-zbog-sipanja-deterdzenta-podnosi-krivicne/2qezm8n>, accessed 08/07/2018

11 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/menjali-projekat-fontane-na-slaviji-u-toku-radova-ustanovljeno-da-ima-jednu-ozbiljnu/fgytbk>, accessed 08/07/2018.

12 Architect and blogger Marko Stojanović has an interesting answer to the question of why a fountain was built on the square in spite of all the obvious reasons to the contrary: because it harks back to the (imaginary) past of a bourgeois Belgrade from the 1930s, which is currently the favored historical period in the popular imagination (Stojanović, Muzička fontana na Slaviji koju niko ne čuje, <https://www.gradnja.rs/muzicka-fontana-na-slaviji-koju-niko-ne-cuje/>, accessed 09/07/2018).

The Gavrilo Princip Monument

Turning now to the recently erected statues, the first of these is dedicated to Gavrilo Princip, the patriot-revolutionary from Bosnia who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand von Habsburg in Sarajevo in 1914. In Serbia, Princip is generally considered a hero and freedom fighter, though no monuments have been dedicated to him thus far. The statue is located in a park, at the corner of Nemanjina and Sarajevska streets, close to the buildings of the Government of Serbia and the Ministry of Finance. This is the oldest public park in Belgrade (it originates from the mid-19th century), long called the Financial Park but in 2017 renamed after Gavrilo Princip.

The monument was unveiled in the presence of the presidents of Serbia and Republika Srpska (the Serb entity within Bosnia-Herzegovina), Tomislav Nikolić and Milorad Dodik, government ministers, officiating priests,¹³ and an audience of about one thousand onlookers, on 28 June 2015. This day, called Vidovdan, is probably the most heavily symbolic date in Serbian historical consciousness, on which many decisive events have taken place, starting with the 1389 Battle of Kosovo and including the 1914 Sarajevo assassination. According to press releases, the site was chosen because the members of Mlada Bosna used to gather in this neighborhood and it is from here they are said to have left for Sarajevo in 1914 (the railway station was nearby).¹⁴ However, the entire project appears to have been quite confused, and the eventual site was selected at the very last moment, through a decision-making process lacking any transparency. The initiative for the monument officially came from the national government and rather curiously, the Ministry of Labor, whose minister Aleksandar Vulin¹⁵ chaired the committee entrusted with organizing the monument's construction. The initiative was subsequently accepted by the

13 The decision to consecrate the monument with an Orthodox religious rite singularly falsified the original political convictions and goals of Princip himself and the organization he belonged to, Mlada Bosna (Young Bosnia), whose patriotism was emphatically secular, modernist and proto-Yugoslav rather than religious, conservative and ethnically exclusive.

14 That Belgrade's main railway station is no longer where it stood for more than a century, since it was closed in 2018 to make room for the Belgrade Waterfront renewal project and hastily moved into the unfinished, poorly equipped and nearly unreachable facility far from the city center, is another important feature of the "new face of Belgrade", but one that remains beyond the scope of this paper.

15 If one is tempted to ask what on earth does a labor ministry have to do with erecting monuments to controversial national heroes of the past, the answer should probably be sought in person of Vulin himself. This most colorful member of Aleksandar Vučić's entourage has for years been assigned the role of *provocateur*, giving the most

city administration's Committee for Monuments and Street Names. Described as a "joint project of the governments of Serbia and Republika Srpska, and the city of Belgrade", it is actually a donation from Srpska.¹⁶ An identical statue has been standing in a park in East Sarajevo, the entity's second political center, since 2014.

Lest the national-political implications of this monument, and the whole endeavor which brought it into existence, be lost on the public, President Nikolić in his speech linked the resistance to memorializing Princip with the prosecution of Serbian war crimes from the 1990s, and conversely, the celebration of Princip with the values of freedom and independence, and said that the monument was delayed by a century because Serbia had been ruled by the wrong kind of people.¹⁷ In this way he made quite an explicit connection between the monument he was unveiling and the most brazenly nationalist, self-complacent and denialist strand in Serbian politics.

The bronze statue is two meters tall and weighs 350 kilograms, a rather humane scale. Its author is Zoran Kuzmanović, a relatively well-known Serbian sculptor and expert in bronze. This statue's main drawback is its location and lack of harmony with its surroundings. It sits awkwardly at the lowermost corner of a descending park, facing the fence and with the park's grassy, rugged slope as an unseemly background. It has the air of a bad photomontage. Its position in the far corner of the park gives off a sense of marginality and negligence. But perhaps that was precisely one more political message – this time implicit, and reflecting the schizophrenia of contradictory political orientations generally characteristic of the SNS ("Yes, we celebrate Princip, but listen, let's not overdo it...").

aggressive, outrageous, unfounded and unreasonable public performances aimed against Serbia's neighbors and/or the domestic opposition.

16 See e.g. <http://www.politika.rs/sccl/clanak/330061/Spomenik-Gavrilu-Principu-u-Finansijskom-parku>, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/pogledajte-postavljanje-spomenika-gavrilu-principu-u-beogradu/ywpe329>, accessed 24/06/2018.

17 "If Winston Churchill ... wrote that Princip died in prison, and that the monument erected by his compatriots celebrated his and theirs crime and genocide, then the proposed resolution on Srebrenica comes as no surprise ... Gavrilo Princip did not have a monument in Serbia, and nothing is by accident. We had to wait for such people to decide on it who live by his principles of freedom, independence, unity; we had to wait for such people to decide on Princip who wouldn't have pulled Princip's memorial down, had there been enough courage to create it before." Quoted from: <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/beograd/1634063-gavrilo-princip-je-konacno-u-srbiji-na-vidovdan-otkriven-spomenik-na-koji-se-cekalo-vise-od-jednog-veka-foto>, accessed 24/06/2018.

The Tsar Nicholas II Monument

The other monument in our sample is, on the contrary, impossible to miss. It is the huge statue of Nicholas II, the last emperor of Russia, slain in 1918 by the October revolutionaries. It is placed in a – or better, *the* – central street of Belgrade (Kralja Milana), which connects two major squares (Terazije and Slavija), next to a whole series of important seats of political power: the Presidency, City Hall, and the former building of the National Assembly. The embassy of imperial Russia used to stand at this site in the 19th century and the present-day Russian Cultural Center is nearby.

The statue is a gift from the Russian Military Historical Society and the Russian Federation. The 50 tonnes, 7.5m monument was designed by Russian artists, Andrei Kovalchuk and Gennady Pravotvorov. The monument consists of a 3.5m full-figure statue of the stern-looking Tsar, clad in a military uniform, resting his hand on a column wrapped in symbols of imperial power and Orthodox Christianity, all portrayed in minute realistic detail and standing atop a granite pedestal, with a historical quote engraved on the sides.¹⁸ Having arrived from Russia, it was unveiled in November 2014, within the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of World War I. The erection of the statue was accompanied by a reconstruction of the surrounding park, also in cooperation with Russian experts. The park, once Devojački Park, was renamed Aleksandrov Park in 2017, to honor the Red Army Choir members killed in a 2016 plane crash over the Black Sea.

The monument was consecrated by the patriarchs of the Serbian and Russian Orthodox churches, and the ceremony was attended by a long line of dignitaries from both sides, including the Serbian president, Tomislav Nikolić, ministers, emissaries of the two governments, high priests, the mayor of Belgrade and his aides, and the Russian ambassador to Serbia.¹⁹ President Nikolić extolled the virtues of the Emperor and declared the eternal unity of the Serbian and Russian national destinies,²⁰ while

18 The quotes, in Russian and in Serbian, are taken from Nicholas' July 1914 letter to the Serbian Crown Prince, Aleksandar Karađorđević: "All my efforts will be turned toward protecting the dignity of Serbia... In no case will Russia be indifferent to the fate of Serbia."

19 The Serbian Wikipedia entry on the monument offers details. See <https://sr.wikipedia.org/>, accessed 19/06/ 2018.

20 "This monument at the heart of Belgrade shines to celebrate the memory of the martyred Emperor Nicholas, as a sign of the eternal victory of goodness and justice ... The pages of Serbian and Russian history are as if written by the same hand. Regardless of time and place, regardless of the social system in power ... the struggle for freedom, often for life itself, and Biblical martyrdom are common links in the sacred chain of endurance of the Serbian and Russian peoples." Source same as preceding footnote.

Russia's Patriarch Kiril called the event historical and pointed out that this is the first monument to Nicholas in Europe but outside Russia. Serbia's Patriarch Irinej, elaborating on the emperor's saintly character, stressed that now we are "reminded of what the Tsar did for *his* Orthodox, Serbian people" (emphasis added). Andrei Kovalchuk, also present for the occasion, assured that he and his coauthor did their best to harmonize the monument with the setting, adding that it was made "following the classical tradition, which is these days rather rare in Europe".²¹

Kovalchuk is a prominent Soviet and Russian sculptor, an artist in obvious political favor.²² He has won numerous state awards for his memorials to people and events from Russian national history (rulers, priests, poets, artists, warriors, workers, chiefs of security, and victims of disasters alike), scattered throughout Russia and the former Soviet republics, including a 2017 statue of Emperor Alexander III in Crimea. His aesthetics are unapologetically realistic, monumental, explicit, and celebratory, bereft of any trace of irony, doubt, ambivalence, or social critique.

So is Nicholas. In its physical proportions, the statue seems to conform to the "politics of scale" (Sidorov, 2000) from back home.²³ Awe-inspiring, almost intimidating by its size and posture, and in conjunction with the location, it clearly conveys the (geo)political message of intended Russian dominance. Given that it was erected voluntarily, there is more than a hint of embarrassing colonial obedience for the receiving side. Aesthetically, it is disheartening for its humorless literality. It emanates a distant, authoritarian power, aloof from everyday life and ordinary people. With the placement of the statue at such a highly charged site, an instance of "symbolically dense landscape" (Forest & Johnson, 2002: 529), the entire setting has been changed profoundly. Such as it is, the monument clearly embodies the "symbolic abdication" mentioned in the introductory sections: everything in this undertaking, from the general idea to the last

21 Quoted from: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/beograd.74.html:514543-Postavljen-spomenik-ruskom-caru-Nikolaju>, accessed 19/06/2018.

22 In addition to creating state-building monuments that promote the official ideology, Kovalchuk often poses for photos with Putin and plays prominent roles in Russian cultural institutions, including chairmanship of the Artists' Union.

23 Following the example of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow (1997), Sidorov writes that the new, reconstructed temple, in spite of the contrary opinion which was widespread but not attended to since there was no public debate – sound familiar? – followed the desires of the government to tread in the steps of an earlier architectural tradition: "The state-led restoration was to continue the tsarist and Soviet tastes for grandiose structures", a "past monumentalism" that "prioritize[d] size over symbolic significance" (Sidorov, 2000: 563). That in present-day Russia "the style and design of official monuments reflect[ed] much continuity between Russia and the USSR", and that "authoritarian and imperial representations of the Russian nation" persist today is also noted by Forest and Johnson (2002: 525).

detail of the finished work, was “donated”, that is, imported/imposed from the outside, with Belgrade acquiescing obligingly.

The monument did not go totally unchallenged however. In June 2017, it was sprayed with graffiti by an activist group, apparently (according to their Facebook post) in protest against nationalist and conservative cultural policies of the Serbian government. In news reports this was described as a “destruction” or “ruining” of the monument. Municipal officials, headed by the ubiquitous Vesić, said they were “appalled” by the fact that “vandals” damaged this “cultural-historical monument” (barely two years old at the time), “one of Belgrade’s most important ones”, and promised to punish the offenders.²⁴

Predecessors and Successors

The trends the examined structures represent so well, however, did not start in 2012. They can be traced at least a decade into the past, to a time when Belgrade was run not by the SNS but by their political opponents, a coalition around the Democratic Party (DS).²⁵

Some commentators see the monument to the turn-of-20th-century populist politician, Nikola Pašić, erected in 1998 at the freshly renamed eponymous square,²⁶ as the point of departure. Against the backdrop of increasingly strong appeals to “decommemorate” Yugoslavia and socialism in Belgrade’s public spaces, and “commemorate” a different, ethnonational and anti-communist past, the emergence of this statue “sent a clear message about both the new dominant political symbolism and new trends in urban public sculpture” (Radović, 2014: 131).

The second half of the 2000s abounded in realist figural memorials. At Belgrade International Airport, a controversial statue of Nikola Tesla was erected in June 2006 on the 150th anniversary of the inventor’s birth. Made of bronze, 3.5m tall and weighing one tonne, it portrays a standing Tesla, looking rather clumsy and confused. Of all the memorials discussed here, this one provoked the most resistance. It was denounced almost unanimously as dilettante and kitsch by experts,²⁷ the two relevant

24 <http://www.novosti.rs/%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8/%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B4.491.html:672489-Vesic-Unistavanje-spomenika-caru-Nikolaju-vandalizam>, accessed 16/09/2018.

25 Yet significant continuity is established through the powerful figure of Goran Vesić, who has succeeded in holding onto key positions in the city government for years and irrespective of changes in political leadership.

26 Marx and Engels Square until 1997.

27 More than one open letter protested the monument. Twenty-five Serbian members of the International Association of Art Critics demanded the statue to be removed:

committees of the city administration, and the public at large. The incompetence of its author, Drinka Radovanović, was pointed out, along with her evident political backing,²⁸ as was the bypassing of the required public competition and evaluation by expert committees. Still, the project was approved by the national-level Committee for Tesla's 150th Anniversary, headed by the then prime minister, Vojislav Koštunica, and the Belgrade City Assembly assented. The memorial was commissioned by EPS, the national electric utility, and hence also belongs to the category of "gifts". This becomes particularly problematic at the symbolically crucial location of the international airport, the "door to a country", as a critically-minded young sculptor put in his comment,²⁹ where foreign visitors arrive and first see Belgrade and Serbia.³⁰

Another addition to the "gifts" series appeared in 2009, when a statue of the Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin, was erected in the (again, freshly renamed) Cyril and Methodius Park. A donation from the Association of Russian Writers and the Russian Federation, the statue was created by Russian sculptor, Nikolai Kuznetsov-Muromsky, and unveiled on Pushkin's birthday by the Russian Ambassador.³¹

The point at which aesthetic anti-modernism was conjoined with symbolic abdication in its crudest form – before the Tsar Nicholas statue plunged standards to new lows – was the reconstruction of Tašmajdan Park in 2011. The works were financed entirely by the government of Azerbai-

"The chance for Serbia to place at this key node of communication with the world ... a convincing, adequate memorial, worthy of Tesla's name and legacy, has been wasted mindlessly. Instead, what was put on the pedestal was a monumentalization of illiteracy, ignorance and primitivism of a community unable to tell art from non-art" (<http://mondo.rs/a30254/Zabava/Kultura/AICA-trazi-uklanjanje-spomenika-Tesli.html>, accessed 12/07/2018.). Another, very similar statement came from a dozen prominent visual artists and art professors, published in *Politika* on 20 Jul 2006.

28 Radovanović, although a self-taught sculptor without academic credentials, has been entrusted since the late 1980s with creating a large number of memorials to Serbian historical personalities. See e.g. <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=508261&print=yes>, *Vreme*, 9 Aug 2007, accessed 12/07/2018). For a more elaborate analysis see Milenković (2009).

29 Quoted in *Novosti*, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/kultura.71.html:186107-Umetnicko-gusarenje>, accessed 12/07/2018.

30 In spite of all the criticism, the statue not only remained in place but its maligned author was warmly welcomed ten years later by the Airport Authority, as special guest at the celebration of Tesla's 160th anniversary (<http://www.beg.aero/lat/vest/13011/aerodrom-nikola-tesla-obelezio-160-godina-od-rodenja-naucnika-cije-ime-nosi>, accessed 05/09/2018). Passions apparently fade rather quickly.

31 The official press release explained that Pushkin, together with the existing monuments to Saints Cyril and Methodius and the Serbian language reformer Vuk Karadžić, completed a monumental personification of Slavic culture (<http://www.seecult.org/vest/spomenik-puskinu-kod-vuka>, accessed 24/08/2018).

jan, under the condition that a statue to Heydar Aliyev, the country's first president, be placed in the park. The city authorities agreed, adding the statue of the Serbian writer, Milorad Pavić³², as a sort of fig leaf intended to ease the humiliating asymmetry of the deal. The park was opened with much pomp by the presidents of the two countries (Boris Tadić and İlham Aliyev, the son of Heydar), and hailed as a "symbol of permanent friendship of the two peoples" (which incidentally lack any direct historical, cultural, personal, or any other kind of connection). It was probably the most expensive, and the most un-democratic, "donated" intervention into the city's tissue ever enacted in Belgrade.³³

The line of anti-modernist public statuary with dubious institutional backgrounds seems to be continuing. In late 2016 a monument to the American pop-art icon Andy Warhol was announced, its design totally at odds with the artistic credo of Warhol himself (Stojanović, 2016). Although nothing has been heard of it since the announcement. In spring 2018, a much-ridiculed Yuri Gagarin memorial, another gift of shady provenance that includes Russia and a domestic tycoon dynasty, was put up and quickly taken down, amidst public uproar over its caricatural appearance. In the same year, the project for a (very monumental) memorial to Stefan Nemanja, the medieval founder of the Serbian state, designed again by Russian authors won the first prize in a competition for the reconstruction of the square in front of the former railway station.³⁴ We cannot but wait and see what the future will bring.

Urban Transformation as Post- and De-Modernization

The structures discussed conform in many respects to Belgrade moving in the direction of what is usually labeled the "postmodern city". This concept emphasizes "the significance of culture ... and consumption for (economically) promoting the city, as well as the role of urban consump-

32 Pavić's most famous novel, *The Khazar Dictionary*, is ostensibly about the ancient Khazar people, believed to be the forefathers of today's Azeris. However, the connection, made out of desperation by the cash-strapped, hypocritical city authorities, would likely have been dismissed by Pavić himself, had he lived to see it: his sophisticated literary postmodernism hardly squares with such simplistic political assimilations.

33 The reconstruction cost EUR 2 million. Both statues, made of bronze and about 3m tall, authored by the Azerbaijani sculptor Natig Aliyev, were completely produced in Azerbaijan. No one from Belgrade had any influence on their design or execution.

34 The jury's president was Nikola Selaković, the Serbian president's chief of staff and a lawyer by training. <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/389683/Beograd/Spomenik-Stefanu-Nemanji-2019>, accessed 20/09/2018.

tion spaces and urban lifestyles as major aspects of social integration accomplished through consumerism” (Petrović, 2009: 44). Statues and fountains, especially if they lack a strong use value and are not grounded in citizen demand, are superficial adornments that serve other purposes than satisfying the needs of residents, solving urban problems, or enhancing the quality of life in the city. They are rather moves in the game of the symbolic economy – “the production of a dominant city image” – which in postmodern urban policy takes over from political economy (Petrović, 2009: 91).

The construction of these structures, like just about anything else that the Belgrade municipal authorities have been doing since 2012, is being justified in terms of “attracting more tourists”, “polishing our city and making it more beautiful”, or “making our city enjoyable to our guests”. We already know of “city as advertising space” (Batarilo, 2015), but more is suggested here: as if the entire city ought to become a huge ad for its own self.³⁵

These arguments are reminiscent of what Eisinger (2000) has called “building the city for the visitor class” which is based on the “politics of bread and circuses” (although, admittedly, “bread” is increasingly being dropped from the equation). Turning a city into an entertainment venue, Eisinger warns, “is a very different undertaking than building a city to accommodate residential interests”, and the two are not easily reconciled (2000: 317). This orientation towards outsider needs, whereby “local elites create a hierarchy of interests in which the concerns of visitors ... take precedence over those of the people who reside in the city,” skews the civic agenda to the detriment of fundamental municipal services. Huge resources are invested in urban face-lifting and entertainment, while “more mundane urban problems and needs must be subordinated or ignored” (2000: 322). Similarly, Harvey speaks of a transition “from managerialism to entrepreneurialism”, in which “urban governance has become increasingly preoccupied with the exploration of new ways in which to foster and encourage local development and employment growth”, even though “such an entrepreneurial stance contrasts with the managerial practices of earlier decades which primarily focused on the local provision of services, facilities and benefits to urban populations” (Harvey, 1989: 3).

In Belgrade, all questions asked by the public as to the justifiability and viability of new urban projects receive one and the same answer: they

35 The curious practice of keeping Christmas lights on in the city streets from mid-September until late March, with the costs rising 150-fold between 2014 and 2018, is arguably the most outrageous example of this attitude. <https://www.danas.rs/beograd/vesic-da-dokaze-kako-je-grad-zaradio-od-rasvete/>, accessed 25/09/2018.

will boost profit from visitors. In this, again, Belgrade behaves in a “post-modern” way. As Srećko Horvat (2007: 12) writes, in postmodern cities any protests against new buildings are quickly quelled by the argument of “millions of visitors”, that is, profit. All this is manifested even more brutally in a postsocialist context, where “local authorities ... comply with the strategy of promoting urban consumption spaces ... which, due to inherited under-urbanization, is presented uncritically as a form of progress. In this way capitalism is sub-consciously legitimized, although the city of consumption creates more divisions than it provides services” (Petrović, 2009: 68).

The other aspect of postmodernization, identified in the introductory section, is a transformation of planning practices. The discussed symbolic markers of Belgrade have resulted from processes that do not show any overall plan and in which the purposeful and consistent agency of state institutions is not prominent. In other words, earlier practices of rational, strategically guided urban development, based on expert opinion and relatively transparent lines of administrative decision-making, are being disposed of.

The modern city was characterized by plans and programs developed on the basis of information. “Survey before plan”, the touchstone of such rational comprehensive urban planning, assumed accumulation of knowledge on how the urban system operates before interventions are devised by planners to improve the urban environment. Moreover, “modernist planning was committed to an idea of social progress, via social engineering and the intervention by planners to achieve specified ends. Usually such plans involved ideas of social balance, greater social equity and increased access to resources and facilities” (Thorns, 2002: 77). This “authoritative planning”, based on strict projects and universal schemes (Petrović, 2009: 54), sought legitimation through technical and scientific expertise: “It was based around the idea that it was possible to produce logical, coherent and systematic arrangements for urban development” (Thorns, 2002: 182).

While in the Fordist/modern city local government aims at developing and maintaining collective consumption, in the postmodern/post-Fordist city it focuses on utilizing urban resources in order to attract mobile international capital. In the former, space is shaped in accordance with collective goals set on the basis of utopian visions grounded in solidarity; in the latter, space is independent and autonomous, and local specificity is defined in the service of economic growth and competitiveness (Petrović, 2009: 54). Investor-led town planning takes over, which is the “adaptation and subordination of urban space to the interests of those who intend to undertake (re)construction”, when the interests of the investor are taken as absolute, regardless of the consequences for the environment, quality of housing and living, or the city as a whole (Petovar, 2006).

These two sides of the process of postmodernization – culturalization and spectacularization, fueled by entrepreneurialism, on one hand, and the abandonment of planning, on the other – are not unrelated. Harvey (1989: 12) identifies a “subterranean but nonetheless vital connection between the rise of urban entrepreneurialism and the post-modern penchant for design of urban fragments rather than comprehensive urban planning, for ephemerality and eclecticism of fashion and style rather than the search for enduring values, for quotation and fiction rather than invention and function, and, finally, for medium over message and image over substance”. Cynics will say that we should, after all, rejoice that Belgrade has finally joined the trends Harvey diagnosed three decades ago.

There is an important sense, though, in which the way Belgrade is transforming is *not* postmodern, at least not in the customary understanding of the term. Urban theory holds that not only does the focus in urban policy move from the political-economic to the cultural-aesthetic dimension, but “urban political debate tends to shift from questions about how to redesign the city to increase equality and social justice ... to ones more focused around the politics of identity” (Thorns 2002: 80), or more precisely, “towards the expression of *diverse* identities” (Petrović, 2009: 52, emphasis added). What is alluded to here, of course, is a plethora of identities *other than* and *thriving within* the single, national identity: gender, ethnicity, age, race, sexuality, cultural background, lifestyle, value choices and commitments etc. In Belgrade on the contrary, what is promoted by the current selection and design of symbolic markers is precisely the good old nation. The analyzed monuments unify and uniformize collective identity: a “(re)invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) clearly gives precedence to the national over other types of membership. What is more, this one identity is given a single prescribed shape, mandated from above, that rules out critical reflection. In other words, instead of postmodern *diversity*, it is *sameness* that is celebrated. One is tempted to conclude that here we have a two-pronged, seemingly contradictory development: culturally modernist objectives – homogenization and centralization – are pursued by postmodern means, in terms of the technology of governance. Another possible interpretation would be to see what has been going on in Belgrade simply as an instance of a “reactionary” response to the crisis in urban planning that shook off its old habits and certainties from the early 1990s onwards (Thorns, 2002: 192).³⁶

36 Thorns explains: the outcome of the crisis “has been either reactionary, with an affirmation of the status quo and tradition leading to what has been termed neo-traditionalism which tends to be expressed through the revival of community ideologies as part of a new set of moral rhetoric about social inclusion, or resistance which, in contrast to the first, looks for a program of political change which addresses issues

The second process, de-modernization, concerns the formal artistic properties of the markers. Here, a traditional realism, which the top echelons of Serbian art effectively renounced decades ago, is resuscitated. The discussed statues are all figural (i.e. they materially “represent” the personalities they are dedicated to) and realistic in terms of style. They date from the beginning of the 21st century, while a history of public monuments (Michalski, 1998: 7) argues that as far back as 1914, the epoch of stately marble statues of great individuals had already past. In the period that followed, abstraction was gradually gaining ground and the “demise of the public figural monument” became definitive in the second half of the 20th century. Moreover, a new type of monument emerged in the 1960s: the inconspicuous one. “In the mid-1960s, the widespread feeling that the status of the political public monument had been rendered meaningless resulted in a new art form: monuments which tried to attain invisibility as a way of engendering reflection on the limitations of monumental imagery” (Michalski, 1998: 172). In Serbia, having participated in global art trends for a couple of decades, we are now evidently moving in the opposite direction.

Being an integral part of international artistic developments coincided, paradoxically, with the period of communist single-party rule. In Yugoslavia, this rule was specific in many respects, including the arts. Socialist realism, originally the official style of the communist regime, uncritical towards and celebrating the dominant ideology – a “kind of antimodernism” (Šuvaković, 2008), was abandoned in SFRY as early as 1952, after the 1948 break with Stalin’s USSR. It was superseded by socialist modernism, which developed thanks to increasing communication with Western high modernism and the avantgarde (Denegri, 2003). Socialist modernism, the dominant artistic orientation in Yugoslavia for more than thirty years, was considered an expression of the country’s progress and independence, yet with an explicit awareness of belonging to the international artistic world. And not only that: due to the country’s position between the two Cold War blocs, it “emerged as such only in Yugoslavia, thus constituting a unique formation resulting from the cross-breeding of the properties of the Eastern and Western art model”, although the Western model prevailed over time (Denegri, 2003: 173). Importantly, modernist art understood itself as ideologically neutral and autonomous from political power, guided exclusively by aesthetic concerns. It is ironic that under a repressive regime art enjoyed more autonomy than in the context of political pluralism and apparent democracy, when it is again called upon to perform political and ideological services.

of power” (2002: 192). In Belgrade, the former evidently dominates, while the latter is present marginally and sporadically, e.g. in the form of urban civic initiatives like Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own.

After the abstractionist recess, we have reverted to the most classic figural realism of 19th century. Also, sharing in trends characteristic of Western art seems no longer to be taken for granted. Belgrade is obviously happy to have, on its central street, a monumental statue whose style is, in the words of its own author, “rarely found in Europe these days”. The prominent art historian and critic, Irina Subotić, notes the strangely regressive form of recent monuments. These “utterly conservative, meaningless and artistically worthless memorials,” she argues, are radically changing the spirit of Serbian cities. An “urbicide by monuments” is taking place in which Belgrade is being killed by “a collision of provincial traditionalism with neoliberal economy”.³⁷ Though not as extensive and ambitious as the thorough “rebranding through architecture and monuments” in Skopje (Cvitković & Kline, 2017), the revamping of Belgrade shares some of the latter’s features.

While monuments are generally put up to embody “sacred” or “iconic” (Alexander, 2010) societal values, recent monuments in Belgrade and Serbia engender social conflict and division because they do not stem from a consensus reached through open, democratic debate. Instead, as art critic Nebojša Milenković (2009) writes, they come as results of political brokerage: “A politician in power, disregarding the requisite procedures, or barely, chooses an artist on his or her own whim ... transfers the money from the public funds, and *voilà!*” In this way, Milenković argues, rather than being “symbolic sites that reflect those (central) values that in a given society are exemplary and thereby incontestable – the monuments become points of endless conflicts, divisions and the basest politicking”.

Conclusion

The symbolic link that mediates the triadic relationship between the visual form, the city, and the political, is undergoing transformation in contemporary societies. Yet the direction of this transformation is apparently not the same in all contexts. Overall, the movement has been described as one of informalization and wilful unpretentiousness, so to speak. “The monumental is out of fashion in modern societies. Although on some occasions power still relies upon monumentality and the distance it creates, it now prefers to look more ‘informal’ and warmer”, while the significance of monuments in public space “seems to lie primarily in their suitability to be transformed into an icon” (Verschaffel, 1999: 335).

In Serbia, however, a different path has been taken. Power still likes to be expressed in the old-fashioned, grand forms, and the iconicity of

37 Interview published in *Vreme* 1425–1426, 26/04/2018, <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1594251>, accessed 12/07/ 2018.

Belgrade itself seems to no longer be a priority. The statue of a foreign emperor at a key spot in the city center, an assembly-line fountain, another fountain with two older twins in small towns – these are all clearly not intended to become symbolic markers of Belgrade as a unique, inimitable place. At the same time, older Belgrade icons, that is, structures that can be found only here, distinctive in their form and meaning, which have served as symbols of the city for a long time – such as the statue of the Victor at Kalemegdan, the Monument to the Unknown Hero at Avala, the Museum of Modern Art, or the city skyline at the confluence of the Sava and the Danube, which is currently being permanently disfigured by the high rises of the Belgrade Waterfront project – are almost forgotten. They are falling into disrepair, as well as being symbolically dissolved in the new jumble of proliferating signs.

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