

*Paper prepared for the
Second Euroacademia International Conference
Re-Inventing Eastern Europe*

Prague, 15 – 16 November 2013

*This paper is a draft
Please do not cite*

"Urboglyphs" (Urban figures of Memory) and Spaces of Lived Experience – New Forms to Reawaken the Memory

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Abstract: Memory now consumes the past as a set of reconstructed images manipulated and rearranged at random, and in this mimicking they say nothing about the city as a whole. So, how can the city become the locus of collective memory and not simply an outdoor museum or a collection of historic districts? Memory is above all anti-museum that unfolds in space, constructed as lived and moving expression that the arts of the city building must recover along with spatial reconstruction.

Keywords: identity, urban heritage, urboglyphs, space as lived experience, memory.

Aestheticized Identity

Architecture is essentially an epiphenomenon, dependent on socio-economic, political and technological processes that reconfirms the hegemony of culture and helps to assure its continuity.¹ Today's architecture is transformed within the market economy into an image that serves marketing what raises fundamental questions around the limits of individual freedom in design, the responsibility of architecture to the public and its institutions, architecture formal language of expression, and its programmatic integrity.² Almost half a century ago Guy Debord criticised in his *"Society of Spectacle"* the architects driven by neoliberal capital thus elaborating his perception that "capitalist production has unified space", a process that, far from construction "spectacular" monuments, was more that of "extensive and intensive banalization".³

Since the early twentieth century, architecture has been a commodity, as well as a form of publicity, but now in the triumphant culture of consumption, designer skylines and packaged environments have become vital instruments enhancing the prestige and desirability of place.⁴ Even though, homogenization of global communications, has been promoting a simple placelessness, it has indirectly provoked a counter-effect of a renewed celebration of the specificity of material place. Consequently, there is a perpetual quest today for «character» of the places and cities, enhanced by mass tourism, where history is becoming more and more abused. Identity has become fixed, over-determined, insisting on an essence, a point, and that is why Paris is becoming more Parisian – it is already on its way to becoming hyper-Paris, a polished caricature.

Identity has been, until recently, derived from physical substance, from the historical, from context, from the real, and thus it seems impossible that anything contemporary made by us, contributes to it. Globalization is on the other hand, reshaping today the identities of nation-states through cosmopolitanism, which is defined more by practices and ideologies, than citizenship, religion and ethnicity, what is often in conflict with pre-existing identities. Quoting the words of Brian Graham and Peter Howard: «Identities emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus, are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of identical, naturally-constituted unity – an identity in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness)». ⁵ Identities, like heritage and memories, are evidently highly selective processes that are in constant flux, from the local to the global scale, being constantly modified together with the culture to which they belong. ⁶

On the other hand, intensified visual stimuli characterize today all aspects of contemporary life, from the design of athletic shoes to the marketing of milk, to the creation of urban identity through unique architecture, i.e. "brand identity", that is opposed to the national identity. Culture is now dominated by simulation, and virtual heritage is already replacing tangible one, inducing a condition of hyper-reality. Creating an identity is an issue in all segments of our contemporary culture, and due to digital technology and globalization, the traffic in images and the privileging of image has led to an impoverished understanding of the built environment, turning social space (space of lived experience) into fetishized abstraction, by reducing communication and information to a codified system of signs. As Henri Lefebvre said: «The image kills». ⁷ We are in memory crisis of too many images, too phantasmagorical, too commodified, that inhibit the recall and recollection of images stored in the mind. Furthermore, our reality has been hijacked by the multinational conglomerates, and turned into an empty advertising slogan, where authenticity becomes a main indicator

in the hypermarket of hyper-reality, and the content is consumed and absorbed, within a general process of aestheticization. Everything has become aestheticized, even the world of urban heritage.⁸

Collective memory in post-socialist habitat

With the respect to the issue of contemporary i.e. global identity, Eastern Europe should be approached as the impossible space, re-articulated and made visible, parallel and juxtaposed to the dominant/absolute/United Europe, instead of saying that Eastern Europe is the Other (that is: instead of explaining the difference between the One and the Other).⁹

Any society devours art that places itself in a common space with the society. It doesn't matter how this is done whether through the dollar or through ideology since every society simply uses the means as its disposal. The role of commodity in one equals the role of ideology in the other and each permeates all pores of the respective society. However, the new, emergent conditions are more favorably inclined toward the globalized cultural artifacts than toward elitist, politically provocative, and socially subversive art and culture.¹⁰

A view on the history and memory in post-socialist countries of former Yugoslavia is ranging from victimization through amnesia to nostalgia. What these opposing positions have in common is their failure to recognize the full complexity of the phenomenon of collective memory and of the region's history of struggle over concepts of nation, political power, economic entanglement, and the contradictory lessons of the past. In the recent decades, this region has experienced unforeseeable counter-trends of national historicism, followed by denial of the recent past. Out of memory oblivions, the national narrative as a means of control grew up using the selected memory for desired ad hoc construction of identity.

These societies are characterized by an ontological uncertainty, i.e. kind of liminal state between socialism and a new political order where everything was open to question, uncertain and confusing. Post-socialism can be defined as a certain imaginary that neutralizes the condition of capital and excludes any notion of societal, collective change. The post-socialist condition is after all a global condition, not a specific location in time (after the Wall) nor place (Eastern Europe). This also means that it should be seen as a conceptual tool to understand the actuality in which we find ourselves, and not as an outcome, a destiny.¹¹

In such a socio-cultural space, national and folk cultures have been rediscovered with the help of a retrospective mythology. As being framed by unarticulated postulates of national rhetoric, the stability could have been obtained only through cultural homogeneity i.e. through symbolic and actual exclusion of certain groups from society. History was thus obliterated and has become a part of people's individual memory and personal mythology. The „new life“ was basically marked by return to national values and “museumification” of ethnicity, along with blending of communist's and nationalist's sentiments.

After the 1991-95 war, Croatia has been managing its difficult, recent past not through recognition of it but through *concealment* and *cultural reframing*, directing attention away from the war legacy. Decision to avoid the legacy of the 1991-95 war was linked to a broader absence of state-sponsored commemoration throughout the country. As well as the other states created after the fall of socialist Yugoslavia, Croatia has deployed national symbols strategically to promote favorable images of its heritage abroad – „nation branding“ and suppressed alternatives for other narrative performances. This emphasis on heritage in national ideology was elaborated in Ervin Goffman's work on stigma management, which is defined as a strategy of covering and concealment rather than commemoration, and where there are no strong „agents of memory“ other than the state to implement alternative versions of the past.¹² What happened in these countries is the reverse process where instead of being integrated, memory was uprooted, detached from life, packaged and „sold“, whether for hard cash or political points.

Ironically, societies in transition give a semblance of being completely homogenous and unified, with social divisions completely masked, and with the border between the state and civil society concealed, if not eliminated, the former annihilating the latter, along with the difference between the public and private spheres. The passage in the text “Transformative power of memory” by Aleida Assman profoundly depicts and illustrates how the trauma can defy the public acceptance of memory: “The form of politics of memory is not defined by covering and concealment but in its “opening” as a subject in the social space and by public acceptance. The trauma has a special affinity towards the silence. Defensive silence serves to avoid the punishment – such are all variants of silence: lie, excuse, and denial.”¹³ Therefore, as long as silence is the prevailed mode of dealing with the past, the memory will be used as a generator of manipulation and instrumentalization of society consciousness, instead as a corrective in the formation of a critical and polemical position towards the dominant forms of consciousness. The use of memory should be subjected with „the working principle” that whenever memory is invoked we should be asking ourselves: by whom, where, in which context, against what?“

Heritage is not an acquisition, a possession that grows and solidifies; rather, it is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath. The investigation of the past has become „destabilizing“ rather than stabilizing, and the national narrative as a means of control had been subverted and splintered into multiple and ever-changing narratives.¹⁴ Heritage should be interpreted as the fluid and constantly shifting result of boundless and flexible construction processes, since it is not an object, not our unchangeable tradition, and not something we have to maintain and defend but rather something we make, use and change in different social situations.¹⁵ One of the examples of new memory places presenting national identity that

occupies public spaces in Croatia is the contemporary War memorial built close to the Old City walls in Dubrovnik, Croatia (Figure 1). This memorial is causing conflicting views and opinions within community, making division between those who are linked to this memory place, and those who are not. Such identification with the power of the nation state produced "Image of Representation" using heritage as a social-political resource.

There is too much memory, too many pasts on Balkans on which people can draw, usually as a weapon against the past of someone else. Cynicism and mistrust pervade all social, cultural and even personal exchanges, so that the (re)construction of civil society, much less collective memory, is very difficult. On the other hand, there are multiple memories and historical myths, each of which has learned to think of itself as legitimate simply by virtue of being private and unofficial. Where these private versions come together, they form powerful counter-histories of a mutually antagonistic and divisive nature.¹⁶

We are all aware today that urban heritage is a social construction, and that the artifacts are not static embodiments of culture, but rather a medium through which identity, power and society, are produced, and reproduced. The fact is that behind its traditional philosophical matters of faith, heritage is at its core politicized and contested, and these cultural norms are being replaced today, by openly contentious and fractious cultural politics.

City branding in Urban Image Construction

Romanticized, historic narratives of national past are being embraced today worldwide, where exclusiveness of national identity often neglects the heritage of marginalized groups. Such production of consacrated, almost cannonized images, and romanitizing „adjustments“ of the historical past, within present trends of commodification and entertainment, is changing the concepts of authenticity and city identity, that are becoming more and more contested, and thus contradictory.¹⁷

Culture is going through a crisis – „a crisis“, as Jurgen Habermas describes it, „of legitimation.“¹⁸ Premonitions of the future, typical of traditional millenarianism, have been replaced now, by analysis of the past, where attention is directed not forwards, but backwards, a condition that Frederic Jameson termed as «inverted millenarianism».

Additionally, our contemporary culture and heritage is marked by a process of cultural fusion that is being reconstructed with our changing beliefs and values. In this process of cultural fusion, traditions are being „invented“, and „history“ is commodified and misrepresented. Changing concepts of identity, tradition, and history are thus altering the meaning and function of urban heritage that has been until now, taken for granted i.e. to save old things has been a «matter of tradition». The other trend that is overwhelming our contemporary society and our urban environment is our wish and persistence to „sanctify“ the image of a past, by preserving it through certain stylized images, that connect us closer to our origins, and strengthen our traditions. These static representations preserved city spaces such as Venice, Florence, or Paris, as if they were museum artifacts, what is in direct contradiction to the very concept of monument - „a generating force influencing a city's structural formation».

Most changes we see in urban practice, are the direct result of four fundamental forces that have altered the context for urban regeneration. These contextual forces are: digital technology, environmental concerns, globalization, and universal demand for everything to be "sustainable". Sustainability has meanwhile become, more and more a political category, an empty formula, and because for that reason, it is getting hard to talk about environment' and urban heritage' preservation without becoming ironic.

What we are witnessing in our urban habitat today can be described as city marketing and city branding that are designed in „silent complicity“ with agendas of the powerful, while urban image construction is entangled in government strategies, leading to colonization of public dissent and a silencing of conflict in „post-political/communist“ conditions. We can thus ask ourselves in our contemporary post-communist situation, and within the institution that is contemporary culture, which new languages are being created? Which new imaginaries are being produced? And which old things are being said with new words? Or, we could say: Which modes of critique and artistic creations are affirmative and which are transformative in this „new“ post-socialist phase of global capital?

The problem of our time is of permanence and discontinuity, of generation and rupture. We want to know what aspects of the city plan resist change and which do not, or what structures or forms have evolved slowly and collectively over time? How does the city become the locus of collective memory and not simply an outdoor museum or a collection of historic districts?¹⁹

Unfortunately, the function of culture in urban contexts has become "image -based", where the work of prominent architects, designers, and artists serve for the input of private (and public) capital, alongside the retail environments and corporate architectural styles. New technologies of cultural production and consumption have saturated the city with an array of images. Urban regeneration process is nowadays complicit with the interests of private capital, as well as the increase in studio and residential rental costs that inevitably occur in such a process. The art of selling now dominates urban space turning it into a new marketplace for architectural styles and fashionable lives. Images become aestheticized commodities representing livable cities for sale, placing products in lifestyle stage sets, turning museum' exhibitions and cultural entertainments into events for corporate enhancement.²⁰

Images of urban regeneration is premised as much on "image construction and advertising" as it is on actual physical transformation with culture's role in this instance being both external and internal: firstly, when beacon artists or architects are "flown-in" to focus media attention on a particular area and secondly where the indigenous artistic and cultural population are utilized as signifiers of the economic potential of a given areas - in so called "place-marketing".²¹ Evidently, present social and urban phenomenon myopically focuses on improving a city's marketability,

by enhancing its imageability, livability, and cultural capital. Should we define these urban and social phenomenon as the shift from political to economic manipulation, and towards the total commodification of memory? The fact is that contemporary urban dynamism does not reflect the provision of services for city residents, but a concern with the prosperity of the city and its ability to attract jobs and investment.

Urban theorists are claiming that monuments transfer meaning and knowledge across generations, and that these artifacts actually generate memory and inscribe civic conduct. But simultaneously this is opening up the possibility that city forms could fail to generate meaning and memory, that partial structures could cause memory loss by disrupting signification and de-centering the spectator. Ironically, there are no more obvious markers of memory in a city than its monuments and no more obvious sites for crises of memory. Memory is above all an anti-museum and not localizable, certainly not appealed to through revisionary historic and popular landscapes.²²

Urban figures of memory

Contemporary urban and heritage discourses are nowadays increasingly developing the strategies based on cultural and non-material aspects of urban life. Such interdisciplinary concepts as “mapping of controversies” or “integral urbanism” usually display the keywords of quite intangible nature: “temporalities”, “performance”, “media”, “remembering”, “provisional identity”, “fluidity” etc. One of these keywords of intangible nature is *urboglyphs*, a term that Croatian artist Boris Bakal (director of Shadow Casters) has coined for double reading of urban and collective memory, that encompasses and reconstruct immaterial cultural heritage and cultural memory in urban spaces through different artistic practices and initiatives, and researches in urban and cultural theory, and social sciences. According to Boris Bakal *urboglyphs* are symbolical and spatial clusters of signs and meaning, that are created by injecting (engraving) the event into the site of its happening”.²³ *Urboglyphs* can actually be compared with interpretative semiotics of space.

To fully appreciate or be able to read cityscape as text, spectators are therefore required to look at the city not only in formal and functional terms, but in figural or interpretative ways as well. However, in order to read across and through different layers and strata of the city requires, that spectators establish a constant play between surface and deep structured forms, between purely visible and intuitive or evocative allusions. Quoting the words of Gaston Bachelard from *The Poetics of Space* : “The reality of social space is dual, multiple. It implies language (poetry), signs, symbols, metaphors and concepts”.²⁴ The logic of metaphor as the primary tool in construction of social space can be recognized in the way that the Shadow Casters are envisaging memory – i.e. as an art connecting disparate and hidden/ silenced events, formed on the tactics of surprise, ruptures and over-turnings that transfer true power and meaning of memory over the spectator/s imagination. This international artistic and production platform, based in Zagreb (Croatia) is mainly concerned with exploration and investigation of urban spaces through various artistic multimedia activities and urban interventions. In their projects memory is linked to lived experience and is unfolding in social space, hence the activity of recollection is based on spatial reconstruction (remembrance embedded in spatial forms). We know that memory has to be linked to lived experience; since otherwise it will be reduced to „history“ becoming abstract or intellectualized reconstruction, debased or faked recollection. The work of Shadow Casters (SC) can be defined as the presence of interpretative systems that translate memories and urban traditions into meaningful contemporary forms. After all, this is an intrinsic strategy in art and culture: juxtaposing reality and its fantasy. Such an approach dwells on an attempt to establish counter-memories, i.e. to resist the dominant coding of images and representations and recover the differences and urban narratives that official memory has misrepresented or erased.

One of their main artistic-scientific research’ projects *Recollecting the City/Recollecting the Time (RCRT)* re-creates and socialize a commonly shared space by evoking the memory while underlying performative character of public spaces. The initial phase of the project was focused on detection, archiving, studying and exhibiting the artworks and the project’ documentation on artistic actions as well as political protests and public gatherings in Zagreb that occurred in public, non-typical performing spaces from 1945 to the present. In the core of RCRT interest was the temporality of those actions and events, which were not originally created or have been conceptualized as permanent. The project went further to explore the mechanisms of artistic creativity in order to re-discover, re-contextualize and re-create cultural memory while underlying the role of the artist as an conduit between temporal and spatial changes, that are occurring in contemporary regeneration of material and non-material aspects of urban life, by encompassing intensive civic interactions and participation. Amidst contemporary dynamics of the cities that imply new ways of thinking about local community, it is the figure of the artist that impacts our re-conceptualization of the cities and urban landscape by shaping contemporary creativity that contributes to the diverse and changing landscape of identity, beliefs and values.

RCRT has sprung out of the realization that the preservation of urban cultural memory is a vitally important issue for societies undergoing transition, in which cities are going through radical and dramatic changes that are often to the detriment of their immaterial cultural heritage. The project strove to capture fragile and ephemeral aspects of past events by searching for memories of individuals – artists themselves, journalists, accidental passer-by’s in various forms: from material ones (photographs, films, videos, written testimonies) to oral histories. The collected materials were mainly formed through two creative outputs of reflective and critical presentation: *Open Offices* and *Wall Newspapers*.

Open Offices were conceptualized as a form of communicating with a broader public in various public spaces of the city of Zagreb, where citizens were invited to bring their memorabilia (photos, films, written documentation) and share them

with RCRT team. These meetings were combined with various events including exhibitions, screenings, concerts, etc, and therefore consequently become mini-festivals of urban cultural memory. *Wall Newspapers* have been exhibited in eight street displays boxes (originally displayed at the temporarily closed Croatian Cinematheque) spread in the various locations in the center of the city, as an artistic and documentary medium (exhibition space) for different RCRT themes and concepts.²⁵ The closing of Croatian Cinematheque evidences one of many urban phenomenon in period of Transition, such are those empty, abandoned, and neglected display boxes that vividly illustrate “empty places” in urban texture. The chronology of the Wall Newspapers can be traced within last 10 years spanning in several editions. The first edition of Wall Newspapers from 2004 was dedicated to public protests in Zagreb that addressed the new use and changes in public spaces primarily driven by profit oriented agenda of new city investments. The second edition was focused on artistic happenings and urban interventions from 1962 to the present that were unfolding in public spaces surrounding these display boxes of Croatian Cinematheque that were juxtaposed with historic events that happened in these places. The third and fourth edition was actually conceptual continuation of the second one, that initiated imaginary walks in urban spaces and recollection of the events and memories that happened prior to those walks so the spectator can be re-positioned in temporal and spatial dimensions of the past and by re-constructing individual memories evoke places of memory. The last, fifth edition introduced urban individual oral narratives in the form of intimate diaries inscribing the figures of memory in public urban spaces.²⁶

Wall Newspapers feature urban hi/stories that were hidden, forgotten, presented through documentary and fiction collages of visual or written materials. Memories are recalled by time periods, by recollecting places visited and by situating ideas or images in patterns or thought belonging to specific social groups. As a result, new memory walks are created through the city, with new maps that resist and subvert the all-too-programmed and enveloping messages of our consumer culture. Placing the objects from bygone times or silenced/erased urban and cultural history into unique contexts and configurations, they have become a new form of „shock experience“, aimed to reawaken memory. Thus, they enable the spectator to think through “dream images” and to achieve a critical awareness of the present. Consequently, “*non-places* are becoming *places of memory* that are achieving meaningful contents and becoming theatres of memory and *tabulae* on which our quotidian *urboglyphs* are inscribed”²⁷. Furthermore, the purpose of Wall Newspapers is to simultaneously decode and encode spatial dimensions in a form of a Sign by publicly presenting the individual and specific figures of memory, and consequently transferring them to collective consciousness.

The project *Recollecting the City/Recollecting the Time* (RCRT) presents a critical, artistic, cultural, social and historical reflection of intangible cultural heritage that is still being dramatically neglected in the region of Western Balkans, in present period of the Transition. Drawing on the notion of *lieux de memoire* (as sites devoted to embody or incarnate memory, that are entirely reliant on the specificity of the trace), Shadow Casters recognized the need for archive as a specific *lieux de memoire* that would **serve** for the reconstruction of the past, and would be collectively used with respect to political and social context. However, RCRT’ archive is based on oral history as it recollects oral, biographical and fragmentary evidences which does not intend to petrify them into fixed forms of historical abstraction, but is an attempt to primarily archive them as the important figures of memory. It is this possibility of the reconstruction of figures of memory that is the essential methodological basis of the social-constructivist archives in Shadow Casters. After all, the question of archiving is not about the past, it is about the future and our responsibility for the future. Therefore, Shadow Casters are not just exclusively archiving urban figures of memory, but also communicating segments of collective memory through publicly shared urban spaces - *Open Offices* and *Wall Newspapers*, that are performative in their character, and after all symbolize a challenge and alternative to our society where culture turns out to be a product of society.

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