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Media propaganda vs public dialogue: the spatial memorialisation of conflict in Belgrade after the 1999 NATO bombing

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Two events marked the turn of the millennium in what remained of former Socialist Yugoslavia: the NATO bombing of Serbia, and to a smaller extent Montenegro, in 1999, and the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime in 2000. This was the infamous epilogue of the turbulent 1990s, a decade of successive violent conflicts that tore the federal state apart, destroyed its heterogeneous culture, divided its territory along ethnic borders, and definitively rejected socialism to embrace an unhinged variant of neoliberal capitalism. Serbia played a complex role in those events, both as an aggressor accused and convicted for war crimes, and as the target of an asymmetric conflict with NATO that led to the separation of its southern province of Kosovo and left deep scars in its urban environment. The effort to reconstruct these damaged buildings, therefore, poses deeper questions about understanding the past, facing unpleasant truths, and setting the course for an uncertain future. This article will illuminate those multifarious processes by examining the role of media propaganda and public dialogue in the reconstruction of two structures in Belgrade that were damaged during the 1999 NATO bombing. Both buildings, the Avala Tower and the television headquarters on Aberdareva Street, were in use by the Radio Television of Serbia (RTS). In a fragmented society that is still struggling to make sense of these difficult issues, I argue that state-controlled media has a decisive influence on steering public debate, creating the false image of social consensus, and weighing in on architectural design, while downplaying the role of architects.

Introduction

> There is no immediate ontological division between construction and destruction. We're speaking about the political plastic […] the way in which political forces slow into form.[1]

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The collapse of Socialist Yugoslavia after the successive armed conflicts of the 1990s and early 2000s was marked by the systematic and politicised destruction of its art and architecture.[2] The resulting 'Balkanisation' of its territory revealed, or rather confirmed, the role of architecture and shared spaces as a medium through which collective identities are formed.[3] The key process for creating an ethnically homogeneous territory in an inherently heterogeneous society, as that of former Yugoslavia, involved destroying architectures of diversity, or as Martin Coward has put it, buildings that sustain 'the condition of possibility of being-with-others'.[4] The process of building a monocultural future went hand in hand with the process of destroying evidence of the multicultural past, including the eradication of unwelcome representational art and architecture, as documented by Robert Bevan and András Riedlmayer, among others.[5] This practice effectively reaffirmed Maurice Halbwachs's theory about the essential role of shared spaces in the formation of collective memory. But it also showed the power of (destroying) places as symbols and representations, a practice that was repeatedly adopted later in planned attacks on architecture, from 9/11 to Palmyra.[6]

The postwar reconstruction of damaged buildings with elements of memorial architecture is both an opportunity to re-establish the values under attack, and to form a basis for the development of a post-violence national and cultural identity. Andrew Herscher has argued that there is no real difference between creative and destructive processes when it comes to the task of shaping the built environment; both serve as a tool for self-discovery and self-identification.[7] In former Yugoslavia, urban reconstruction unfolded as the theory and practice of continuing the conflict by other means, even when this was financed by international organisations. For example, Emily Gunzburger Makaš has shown how insisting on the reconstruction of cultural heritage that could be easily attributed to different, and still belligerent, ethnicities revived national divides in Mostar. Arta Basha-Jakupi and Violeta Nushi have also demonstrated that international involvement in the reconstruction of Priština only enhanced its social stratification.[8] These practices went so far that the dissociation from others, or from a mutual past, actually became the new identity. In this sense, current politics of memorialisation of the 1990s wars in ex-Yugoslav republics seek to exploit the 'frozen conflict' narrative, 'in an effort to master the past in order to control the future'.[9]

In what follows, I build on these theories that see architecture as a mediator and active participant in political processes. As architecture alters and is altered by violence, and urban memorialisation becomes a building block of postwar identities, this article contributes to these debates by discussing mnemonic practices in Belgrade after the 1999 NATO bombing. Postwar reconstruction of damaged architecture in Belgrade is generally characterised by the absence of clear strategies in the urban memorialisation of the war. The palpable difference between governmental and private/local mnemonic practices, caused by the constant political balancing between two opposing (pro- and anti-EU) sides, the absence of open public dialogue, and the (often purposeful) misinterpreting of the city's own past add to this bigger picture. This

socio-political climate favours media propaganda which has used its powerful influence to step in and act as a substitute for public consensus. This becomes especially evident in the case of reconstruction of two structures that are closely related to Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), the Avala Tower and the RTS Building (soon to be Memorial) on Aberdareva Street. Although both projects were promoted by the national broadcasting service, the architectural competition for the RTS Memorial clearly showed the benefits of engaging with the public. Conducting an architectural dialogue about the memorialisation of a violent past was notably missing from the reconstructed Avala Tower.

Both the RTS Building on Aberdareva Street and the Avala Tower, a 202 m high TV transmitter on the eponymous mountain at the outskirts of Belgrade, were regarded as extended arms of the regime by NATO. As such, they became targeted in the war against Milošević's propaganda machinery. Their destruction was highly symbolic; since it was first built, the Avala Tower stood high above Belgrade as both an icon and a visual landmark of the city, while the targeted southern wing of the RTS building came crumbling down dragging sixteen RTS employees to their death. Public discourse about the reconstruction of these buildings, however, was notably different from that about the rest of the damaged structures. After the war, a strong media campaign led by the RTS turned these sites into spontaneous 1999 war memorials. Their reconstruction was advocated under the pretext of public interest. It was presented as an issue of national pride, despite the undeniable financial profit this would generate for the national television corporation. In this article, I argue that the selective and biased spread of information by the media superseded a necessary open dialogue, and sped up the decision-making process by creating the illusion of a social consensus. The negative outcome is reflected in the disputed architectural and memorial value of the proposed reconstruction, although different planning approaches produced different visual (and by extension, memorial) effects. The closed, one-sided decision to erect the exact same replica of the Avala Tower based on the original plans reduced the new tower to a mirage of the old one, with no commemorative value except for the restored silhouette on the horizon. By contrast, an open design competition accompanied by public debate preceded the planned renewal of the RTS building. As several competition entries for a new memorial complex offered a variety of spatial solutions that served as an architectural and cultural critique of political violence against the city, they also exposed the deep political and historical rifts that still postpone its realisation.

Urban memorisation of the 1999 'Air War'

After the fall of Milošević in 2000, the new democratic government brought novel allegiances with it, as it rejected the socialist heritage and embraced former 'aggressor' countries as new political allies.[10] This immediately produced conflicting approaches to the public memorialisation of the war, since it opened a rift between the official politics of memorialisation and the citizens' popular sentiment. As a result, the 1999 War memorials had to 'choose'

Figure 1.
Svetomir and Svetozar Radović, 'The Eternal Flame', Friendship Park, New Belgrade, 2000, courtesy of Bojan Kovačevič. 2017

between public approval and spatial/political relevance, since they could not accomplish both. The first monument to be erected in the memory of the NATO bombing, for example, favoured spatial/political relevance over public acceptance. Built by renowned sculptors Svetomir and Svetozar Radović in 2000, 'The Eternal Flame' in the Friendship Park in New Belgrade (Fig. 1) was one of the last acts of the Milošević regime before its fall. Although it was formally built to commemorate the war casualties, the white obelisk with the actual burning flame on top effectively symbolised the resilience and desired eternity of the Socialist Party. In addition, its placement in the Friendship Park that symbolised Yugoslavia's internationalist aspirations for decades can be interpreted almost as a mockery and 'a cynical reminder that no friendship is forever'.[11] After the regime overturn in 2000, the obelisk, which was already concealed by trees, was vandalised, neglected, and the fire on its top was extinguished. The piety for NATO victims could not equal the heavy burden of socialist heritage in a spatial setting designed to celebrate the Party's power and international acknowledgement.

It took more than a decade for a new official monument to be erected, this time at the traffic-jammed Savski Square in the old city's centre, not far from the still standing ruins of bombed buildings.[12] The open competition for a new memorial, ambiguously titled 'The memorial to victims of the wars and defenders of the fatherland from 1990 to 1999', instigated controversy. The design by young architects Jelena Pančevac and Žarko Uzelac was eventually selected (Fig. 2),[13] but the message it was trying to

Figure 2.
Jelena Pančevac and Žarko Uzelac, 'The memorial to victims of the wars and defenders of the fatherland from 1990 to 1999', Savski Square, Belgrade, courtesy of Bojan Kovačević, 2017

convey was equally confusing. While it sought general approval, it actually appealed to no one, because it encompassed two essentially different conflicts (the civil war in Yugoslavia from 1991 to 1996 and the Kosovo conflict of 1998 and 1999 that ended with the NATO bombing in 1999), and honoured diverse actors (both perpetrators and victims of war crimes). Even before its completion, the monument became the cause for protests by anti-war groups such as Women in Black for 'equalising victims and butchers', while its inauguration was interrupted by victims' families because 'it does not have names, not even a cross'.[14] The abstract form, positioning, and scale of the monument raised several questions about its design, as a concrete plateau elevated to eye-level dwarfs the steel/glass plate and water pool, rendering the whole site practically unnoticeable for everyday passers-by. More recently, in September 2017, Belgrade city officials announced a new architectural competition for a monument to the medieval Serbian ruler Stefan Nemanja, the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty and of Serbian statehood, also to be built at Savski Square (Fig. 3).[15] With its central position and whooping height (reduced from 28 to 23 m after protests from civil groups, including notable architects and artists), it already became the dominant element in the Square and also affected the surrounding buildings. As soon as its construction started in August 2020, 'The memorial to victims of the wars and defenders of the fatherland from 1990 to 1999', was completely removed from the site (Fig. 4). Official documents show that the Belgrade City government made a resolution to relocate the

Figure 3.
Monument to the medieval Serbian ruler Stefan Nemanja, designed by the Russian sculptor Alexandr Rukavishnikov at Savski Square, 2020, MONDO <https://mondo.rs/Info/Beograd/a1350436/Beograd-Savski-trg-spomenik-Stefan-Nemanja-postavljanje.html> [accessed 18 February 2020]

memorial some 200 m away from Savski Square, on the public green area in front of the Railway Museum, but this has not yet materialised.[16] Only eight years after its construction, the message of remembrance and reflection represented by this highly contested memorial was completely erased, demonstrating the extent of its political, spatial, and public insignificance.

On the other hand, semi-private monuments erected in the same period were dedicated to the civilians killed in the NATO bombing. These included 'Bili smo samo deca' ['We were only children'], dedicated to three-year-old Milica Rakić; 'Zašto?' ['Why?'] in Tašmajdan Park, dedicated to the sixteen RTS employees; and a memorial dedicated to seven people killed in the Dragiša Mišović hospital at Dedinje. With better media coverage, all of them were more positively received by the general public. One can argue that this was a result of their clear, unequivocal message, targeted audience, but also of the private initiatives that got them realised. While the city of Belgrade mainly contributed by not objecting to the proposed locations, it did not elevate any of them to the rank of national memorial site. This is clear even from a superficial analysis of the selected locations: Dedinje is an elite neighbourhood in Belgrade, physically and symbolically disconnected from 'ordinary' people; despite its central location (just 100 m from the Serbian Parliament), Tašmajdan Park is also isolated from the main spaces of diplomatic activity or political significance by a mammoth Post Office building. Only the '*Zašto?*' monument came close to becoming a surrogate for a national monument to the 1999 War. But this was mainly owing to its continuous media coverage by the RTS.

The ruins of damaged buildings thus became a silent, acceptable way of memorising the 1999 NATO bombing. This was also noted by Italian

Figure 4.
Construction of the monument to the medieval Serbian ruler Stefan Nemanja at Savski Square, November 2020, courtesy of Bojan Kovačevič

semiotician Francesco Mazzucchelli who examined spatial signs and symbols in postwar Belgrade. He concluded that Serbs deal with the trauma by dwelling in the past ('look what they did to us!').[17] But as this ultimately prevents them from moving forward, it also encourages the preservation of ruins as self-evident memorials to NATO war crimes. More recently, Eric Gordy, Orli Fridman and Krisztina Rácz discussed the hybrid mix of entertainment, realpolitik, and culture of victimhood in Serbian mnemonic practices, while Lea David and Gruia Bădescu focused on the struggles to translate these complex sentiments into spatial memorials.[18] This fetishisation of ruins reached its apogee with the never-ending saga regarding the reconstruction of Generalštab [General Staff Building]. Its ruins are the most photographed and most popular tourist landmark in Belgrade today, although all decisions about its faith are made behind closed doors.[19] In this political and cultural climate, only the proposed reconstruction of the two damaged buildings I discuss here, the Avala Tower and the RTS building, seemed to have had undivided public and governmental support. But this was mainly because the media influence of RTS, the sole benefactor of these two structures, established a distorted image of national consensus. The questionable memorial value of the new Avala Tower and the problems that followed the realisation of the RTS

memorial reveal deep national divides. These are not limited to the politics of urban memorialisation, as they also extend to the nation's understanding of its own past and the ways in which it seeks to reinvent its post-socialist and postwar cultural identity.

Media propaganda in place of public debate

From the moment it was completed in 1965, the Avala Tower became the visual landmark of Belgrade.[20] It was positioned 439 m above sea level on the slopes of Avala mountain, and with its projected height of 202 m, it clearly marked the position of the capital city in the Pannonian Plain. The tower was also praised as a veritable architectural and structural achievement, an undeniable proof of socialist progress. After architect Uglješa Bogunović won the competition for a new television tower in 1959, he was joined by another architect, Slobodan Janjić, and the structural engineer Milan Krstić. They designed an elegant, tripod structure whose basis took the form of an equilateral triangle. The legs of the tower connect above the ground to form a 137 m high concrete torso that culminates in a restaurant-viewpoint, where a 65 m high steel antenna was installed to its full height (Fig. 5). Although the tower was primarily intended to serve as a TV transmitter, the architects used its attractive position and high altitude to add commercial content: a round-shaped restaurant with rotating belvedere stood 117 m above the ground.[21] Admiring it as a high technical achievement, citizens of Belgrade also regarded it as a tourist attraction. As such, the whole site was never tainted with ideological associations.

Large antennas and the prominent position of the Avala Tower could not have been overlooked by NATO analysts, and the whole structure was brought down on 29 April 1999, thirty-five days after the beginning of the military campaign (Fig. 6). Although the destruction of the tower could have been driven by its potential military use as a radio transmitter, the cessation of broadcast was only temporary. As such, the destruction was primarily a symbolic act in a war against the Serbian regime's 'hazardous propaganda machinery'.[22] The psychological effect of the familiar silhouette missing from the horizon should not be underestimated either. Military experts I interviewed claim that many of the 1999 NATO bombings served as a clear statement: 'look what we can do to you!'. They formed part of an attempt to weaken public support for Slobodan Milošević.[23] But despite the above, the financial, institutional, and media support for the reconstruction of the Avala Tower breaks the usual pattern, and remains incomparable with that of any similar project. This is not surprising. The proposed reconstruction managed to satisfy nationalist sentiment – still sore after the war – without provoking former aggressors or new political allies in the West with an obviously aggressive design solution.

In 2005, RTS initiated an aggressive campaign to rebuild the Avala Tower, despite many open questions about the necessity of this project.[24] Telecommunication experts claimed that the technology it used to transmit radio signal was obsolete. As such, it could not justify the estimated cost that ranged

Figure 5.
(left) Uglješa Bogunović, Slobodan Janjić and Milan Krstić, Avala Tower, 1959–1965, in Branislav Božić, *Avalski toranj* (Beograd: Dan Graf, 2009), unpaginated; (right) Mašinoprojekt, New Avala Tower, 2005–2010, courtesy of the leading project manager, Irena Ilić, 2014

between four and ten million Euros.[25] The journalist Miloš-Bata Milatović, who initiated the campaign 'Let's rebuild the tower on Avala', constantly emphasised the tower's symbolic value rather than the practical rationale for this huge investment.[26] Mass media presented the reconstruction as an endeavour to retrieve the identity and pride of the capital city that had been wounded by the 'aggressor'. That broadcasting corporations would benefit the most from its re-erection went unnoticed, as sentiments of nostalgia, pride, and defiance of NATO eventually prevailed. More than 500 celebrities participated in the initiative to 'resurrect the symbol of Belgrade', inviting people and companies to donate.[27] Even schools invited their pupils to donate 'one [Serbian] dinar for Avala Tower'. A list of donors was never fully disclosed, but it included many prominent public figures, businessmen, private and state firms, and eventually the City of Belgrade and the Serbian Government. At the opening of the new tower in 2010, RTS announced that, in a 'spontaneous referendum, more than one million citizens of Serbia accepted the initiative for the reconstruction of the Avala Tower', a highly speculative figure, to put it mildly.[28] Besides fundraising, the general public did not participate in the decision-making process. As such,

Figure 6.
Ruins of Avala Tower after bombardment, courtesy of Sava Starčević, 1999

a much needed open dialogue on the politics and forms of urban memorialisation, on what is being memorialised and why, did not take place.

The lack of public participation was especially evident in the process of deciding the specific steps of the planned reconstruction. Made behind closed doors, the decision to rebuild the exact same replica of the Avala Tower based on the original plans ruled out an architectural competition or public debate. The decision can be attributed to Đorđe Bobić, then city architect of Belgrade. Bobić summarised his stance through his statement at the ceremony that marked the beginning of construction:

> The [NATO] bombing took away from us a lot of things; with the demolition of the [Avala] tower, an important creative part of our lives also disappeared. The construction of the new tower is our best response to those who have demolished it.[29]

The resilience of the nation, expressed through the persistent repetition of the same form, was therefore seen as an adequate response to the symbolic destruction of architecture. The pro-EU government did not object to the initiative, despite the strong anti-NATO narrative of media and the general public that could have jeopardised the planned integration into the Western

political sphere. Memorialisation by restoring the original form was considered as the most benign approach, gaining the approval of both sides of the political spectrum. Sticking to the original design was also meant to serve as an acknowledgement and homage to its celebrated design team, led by Bogunović.

That the task of reproducing the original blueprints was interpreted too literally became evident when the project was entrusted to the small team of architects and engineers at the Centar za Istraživanje i Projektovanje [CIP; Institute of Transportation], who were known for their achievements in traffic infrastructure and structural engineering. Assuming that architects would not even be needed for this project, public officials proposed scanning the original blueprints and using those at the construction site.[30] But it soon became clear that the new structure could not be exactly the same as the destroyed one, since new technologies and updated safety regulations were now in place.[31] To address this, the officials insisted that the new design should preserve the familiar *silhouette* of the tower as accurately as possible, reducing the necessary alterations to a minimum. But these alterations were not, and could not be, imperceptible. On the ground level, the spatial organisation and the architecture of the ancillary buildings had changed, including the materiality of their envelope. The two-storey building on the northeastern part of the parcel (visible on the lower right side of Fig. 5) was to be connected with the tower plateau with a small overpass, which was not eventually built. The cross-section of the access ramp was also modified to fit the installation pipes, with another vertical support, a wide flattened column, added to its highest end. At the entrance level, the whole annex was rounded up, a concrete base got thicker, and glass windows became more segmented, while the anteroom windbreak was completely removed. On the upper levels, the torso of the tower was sporadically perforated to meet fire safety regulations, and the façade of the restaurant got the high-tech look.[32] Instead of the old three-legged TV transmitter, a slightly higher, four-legged antenna sits on the top of the tower, whose overall height is 204.68 m now, approximately 2 m higher than its predecessor.

To sum up, the new Avala Tower is only a mirage of its old self. Their resemblance is only illusive, as too many small adjustments have added up to essentially change it. Its commemorative value and its political statement lie merely in the restored silhouette on the horizon. The projected message of stubborn resilience rings hollow, since it can only last as long as the lived memory of the destructive event, and it does not yield any space for deeper reflection. The only sign of the violent past of the building visible on the site is a broken plaque with the names of the original designers of the tower. Recovered by construction workers, this was placed near the ticket counter on their own initiative. Besides this, the extent to which people can actually associate the new tower with the NATO bombing, or with the original architectural project, is questionable, since the reconstruction does not satisfy either of these two aspects. As I will demonstrate through the next case study, an architectural competition would have stirred public debate, bringing fresh

ideas into the picture. Architects should have been offered a chance to respond qualitatively and critically to the demanding task of this mnemonic redefinition of space. The benefits of this approach are attested by the competition for the RTS memorial complex on Aberdareva Street.

The architectural competition as public debate

The architecture of the bombarded RTS building on Aberdareva Street was never notable, since its overlapping styles across the decades created a visual mishmash (Fig. 7). Designed by royal architect and consultant Rajko Tatić, the building was originally conceived as a student dining hall under the patronage of Queen Marija Karađorđević in 1939.[33] Known for his appreciation of historic architectural styles, and his sincere attempts to integrate his projects into their surrounding contexts, Tatić designed a Romantic Serbo-Byzantine building, almost assimilating its style with the nearby St Marko's church. Its construction was interrupted by World War II, and although the project became a film studio after the war, Tatić was offered the opportunity to realise his design, with the alterations needed to accommodate the new function.[34] Since 1963, the building hosted the RTS, and before 1999 it underwent minor adaptations and one disproportionately large, modern extension designed by architects Lužajić and Marčić in 1989.[35] With the construction of the Modern 'House of Pioneers' by Ivan Antić in its vicinity, the entire Classical ambience of Tašmajdan Park envisioned by Tatić lost its Romantic appeal. In the new Modernist context, it was Tatić's creation that looked like an intruder, and it is exactly this building that was bombed by NATO (Fig. 8).

The bombing of the RTS building at the very heart of Belgrade raised controversy and became the standard-bearer for all the victims of the 1999 War, owing to the number of lives that were sacrificed there for political gain.[36] Sixteen civilians, all of them technicians and employees of the RTS, were found dead in the rubble of the bombed building. Their deaths were pointless, since the RTS managed to restore its regular TV programme only a couple of hours later. NATO officials offered the usual explanation that the bombing was part of a war against Milošević's propaganda machine, although the part of the building that got hit was only used for international broadcasting, and that they regretted the civilian casualties, invoking the rule of reasonable proportionality.[37] The bombing was condemned by many human rights associations as an attack on press freedom and a war crime. But the only convicted person was the former director of RTS Dragoljub Milanović, who was deemed responsible for not evacuating the building, although he had been informed about the upcoming attack.[38] In the eyes of bereaved families, sixteen lives were sacrificed in a propaganda war between the NATO and Milošević's regime, so both parties were equally to blame. Human tragedy gave a new dimension to urban destruction, and took precedence over the attack on architecture and what this represents. Constant media exposure and annual commemorations of the event turned the RTS building into a place of sacrifice,

Figure 7.
Aerial view of Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS) complex, DAB, *Konkurs*, p. 1

victimhood, and remembrance, which was celebrated as a surrogate national memorial to the 1999 War more than any other site targeted by NATO.

The initiative to transform the ruined building into a memorial site came from the victims' families, while 'everybody else, including the State, seemed completely uninterested', but did not object to the architectural competition either.[39] One can argue that its concealed location persuaded officials to consider the creation of a memorial park on this site, despite expected political reprimand from the west.[40] Located in the blind alley behind the RTS Headquarters, surrounded on three sides by megastructures (the Main Post Office building, St Marko's church, and the 'House of Pioneers'), and separated from governmental buildings by two important arterial roads (Boulevard of King Aleksandar and Takovska Street), the location is safe and sheltered from overexposure, unwanted visual access of foreign diplomats, tourists, and everyday passers-by. Like other monuments to the 1999 NATO bombing, the subordinated position of the site in relation to its surroundings prevents the planned RTS memorial from attaining national significance. On the other hand, Tatić's original architecture was not contaminated by ideology. Its ruins could therefore be freely comprehended as a place of mourning and reflection. When the initiators of the project raised the issue of reconstructing and transforming the building into a memorial site, a critical stance towards its destruction was not only expected, but encouraged.

The public announcement for the RTS memorial architectural competition was published in July 2013.[41] The tone of the announcement suggested that the primary design task was to respond critically to the violence that had transformed the site, and the human tragedy that ensued. Article 3 stated that:

> The essence of the artistic and design solution is a dignified marking of the site of the tragedy. […] The conception, design, and spatial solution ought to commemorate in the best possible way the site of the tragic perishing of the RTS employees […]. It is necessary to preserve the remains of the building, to keep the horrific image of the ruin.[42]

This graphic formulation shows that the project aimed to celebrate the victims' sacrifice and the suffering of their families, without officially mentioning the political connotations that caused the tragedy or the memorialisation of the 1999 War as a whole. Even before the competition was announced, its organisers decided that preserving the ruin was the right way to treat the urban memory of the place that had been violently reshaped by the tragic event. The secondary, but not less important, goal was to restore the identity of this part of Tašmajdan Park that had been lost long before the bombardment.

Figure 8. (opposite) RTS Building after the NATO bombing, Belgrade, 1999, DAB, *Konkurs,* unpaginated

The first prize went to the Belgrade studio Neoarhitekti (Snežana Vesnić, Vladimir Milenković and Tatjana Stratimirović). Their design emphasised the rudimentary remains of the building, including fractured raw concrete, torn reinforcement bars, and collapsed stairs and windows, not as a contemporary fascination with the ruin, but because they illustrate the temporal stratification of the spaces (Fig. 9).[43] The dissection of diverse materials, extrapolated from various stages of the building's life, points to the flow of time, connecting past events with the present, and setting the character of the space for future interpretations. In order not to 'cancel' the effect of ruins with obtrusive forms, the authors created an architecture that is light like a cobweb, almost as if it is only presumed; a *hint* of architecture. In search of a solution, they reached for a concept that was successfully used in the reconstruction of New York's Ground Zero: emptiness that replaces the spatial form which is now eternally contaminated by a disastrous event. This 'experience of the emptiness' originates from the idea that no architecture can adequately fill in the space that got irreversibly violated in our perception: the image of the historic event that took place there overpowers the architecture that served as a stage for that event. The recourse is to leave this emptiness untouched and offer only a hint of the structure that once was, and that possibly could be: our memory of the event will enable our imagination to fill in the rest.

In the 'Reflecting Absence' memorial in New York, architect Michael Arad used two square fountains in the footprints of the World Trade Center towers to evoke their presence: the buildings may be absent, but as their silhouette still hovers above the crumbling sound of water, everyone can recreate the tragic event in their minds. For the RTS memorial in Belgrade, Neoarhitekti followed the same logic: instead of the horizontal footprint on the ground, they preserved a vertical section of the building from which the contours of the original edifice could be extrapolated. Nothing was put in front of the section so as not to block the suggested silhouette of the bombed building. Even water is included, a shallow pool on the plaza in front of the ruin, whose purpose is to reflect the remains of the building. The absence of spatial forms is compensated by the fundamental, material crudeness of the red bricks. This creates both the sense of returning to basic values of space and the ominous evocation that something dreadful occurred in this place. As such, architecture does not have primacy here; it serves only as a tool which renders possible the reading of one essential attribute of the place: the trauma moulded by the senseless violence. To use the architects' own metaphor, 'the architecture is only a lens, the

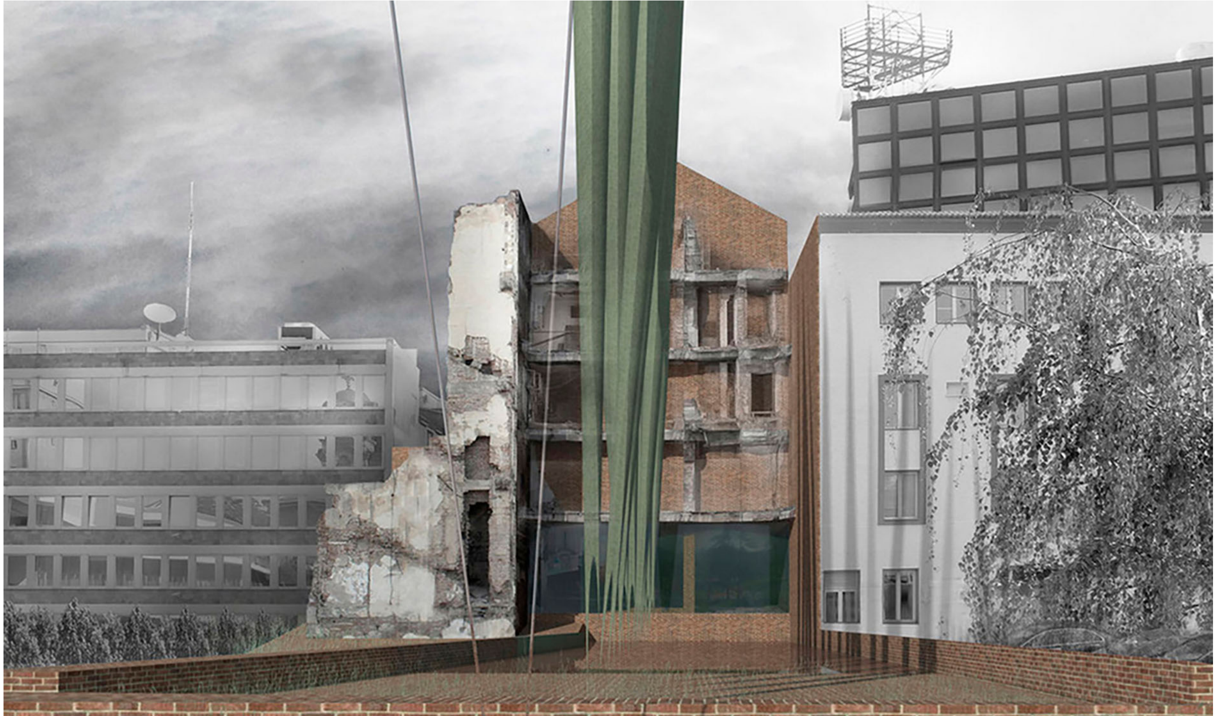

Figure 9. (opposite) Neoarhitekti, 3D model of the winning entry to the competition for the RTS memorial on Aberdareva Street, 2013, courtesy of Neoarhitekti

aperture of a camera through which we are framing the actual character of the place'.[44]

The winning design for the RTS memorial on Aberdareva Street directly responded to the complex brief. But it also succeeded in instigating wider critiques of violence against architecture in a politically charged conflict.[45] In this project, architectural design managed to appropriate the disaster to reshape public space and counteract the effects of the bombing. The vocabulary of destruction, including the ruin, emptiness, dystopia, and crudeness, became an architectural vocabulary that completely stultified their original negative meanings and adjusted them to suit creative needs. This competition proves that architecture should be offered the chance to recognise the wider implications of urban destruction and devise spatial solutions that can serve as cultural critiques of political violence against the city.

However, the public discourse surrounding this initiative also brought deeper political and social divides to the surface. Critics warned that the short time that was offered to the architects to draft their idea was a sign of frivolity on the part of the organisers, and that the brief of the competition was too rigidly defined, 'as if someone was describing an actual project'.[46] Despite the relative success of the competition, nothing has been built thus far, because more debates keep emerging around it. Two years after the competition, Milutin Folić, then the city architect of Belgrade, announced that the construction of the memorial would begin 'as soon as some administrative obstacles are surpassed'.[47] The project lay dormant for four years until 2019, when the renewed initiative to place sixteen mechanical 'blades of grass' in front of the ruined building (Fig. 10) signalled that the construction of the installation might commence in 2020.[48] After securing the support of the new city architect Marko Stojčić, Neoarhitekti resumed their work on the blueprints for the installation. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, the general elections in Serbia, and the open competition for the new RTS management in 2020 have caused more delays and created new uncertainties.

Conclusion

The seemingly disoriented approach to the reconstruction of some of the most iconic buildings in Belgrade after the 1999 NATO bombing reveals a lack of clear mnemonic strategies in postwar urban renewal. The absence of a unified and consistent foreign policy by Serbia's political leadership, and the persistent battle for power between ideologically opposite groups at the level of the state, additionally ignite the stark polarisation of public opinion. Constant balancing between Serbia's aspiration to join the EU's sphere of political influence and the nurturing of radical nationalist narratives of the conflicted past satisfies no one. This indecision is in turn reflected in the urban sphere where the reconstruction of damaged buildings is left to chance, including right-wing populist organisations, private initiatives, and 'dark capital'. Lea David has argued that this is done on purpose, since 'obfuscat[ing] the

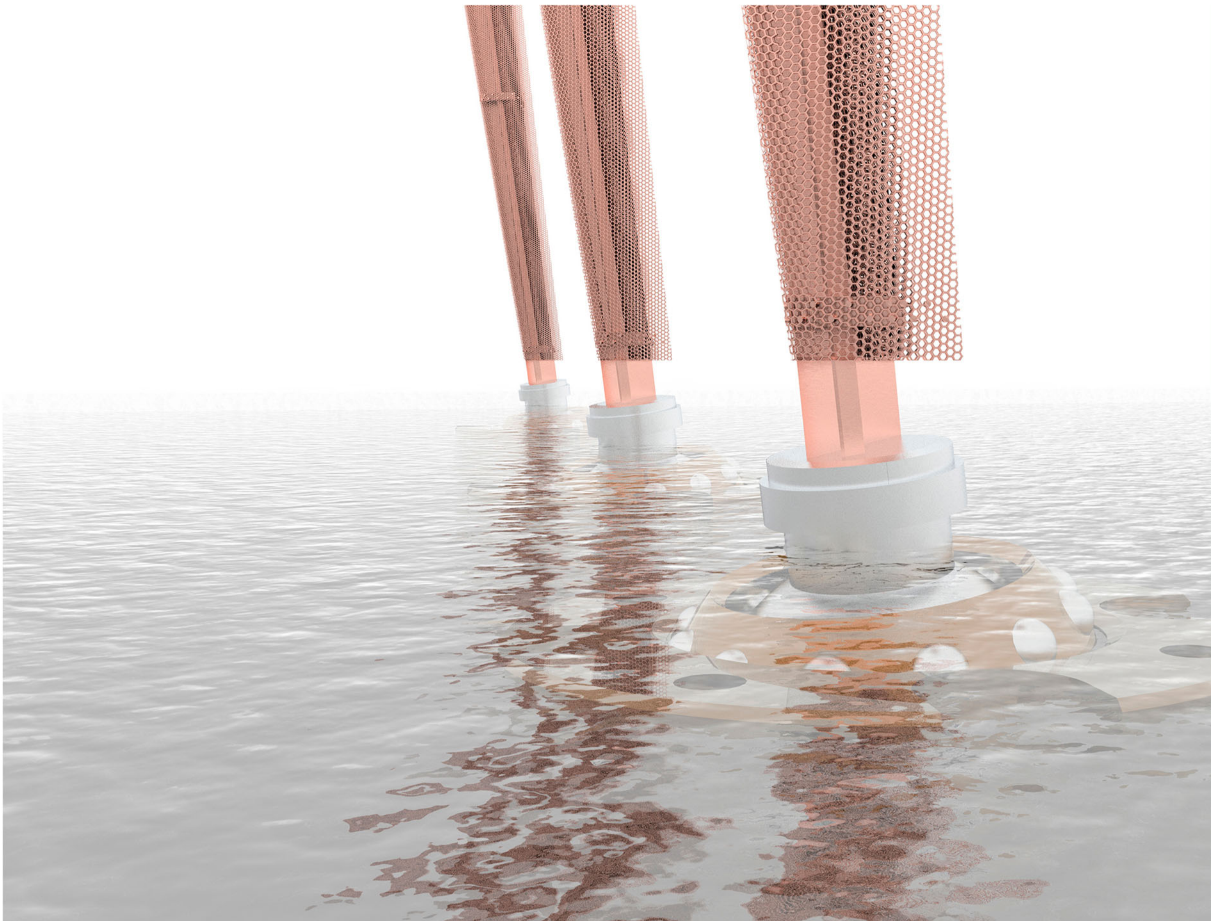

Figure 10.
Neoarhitekti, detail of the 'Blades of Grass' memorial in front of the ruins of the RTS building, 2019, courtesy of Neoarhitekti

past [is] a way of controlling and managing it, rather than to pick a side'.[49] The rare cases of realised reconstruction projects, such as the Serbian Government building on Nemanjina Street, document a tendency to erase and forget rather than address the difficult memory of a violent past. Although officially not protected as an architectural monument, the Nemanjina Street building was restored to its original state only two years after the bombing, but without even a simple plaque to commemorate the destructive event. Architect Mihajlo Mitrović testifies that he had suggested to accentuate the line that separates the old part of the building from the new one ('the line of destruction') with a golden-like insertion, echoing 'Kintsugi', the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery, but his proposal was rejected as 'too provocative'.[50]

The two buildings discussed in this article form exceptions to the rule, because their reconstruction started with a strong media campaign by RTS that created a sense of victimhood, pride, and defiance. The campaign

Figure 11.
Generalštab (General Staff Building), Belgrade, 2017, photographed by Aleksandar Staničić, 2017. The gigantic Serbian Army billboard covers the ruined building after the NATO bombing. The caption reads: 'Whoever dares, can. Whoever knows no fear, moves forward', a quote from the famous Serbian World War I general Živojin Mišić.

engaged with the negative sentiments towards the 'aggressor' to the extent that the public overlooked the powerful influence and profit that this had brought to the national broadcasting corporation. The competition for the RTS memorial did stir public debate and proved that architecture can offer solutions when given the chance to do so. It also served as a reminder that the suppression and propriety of postwar monuments is inextricably linked to the architectural language they use. If direct association is rejected as the most blatant method to convey messages that inevitably leads to unilateral readings, ambiguity can be embraced as a concept of formal expression. After all, erecting abstract monuments, a practice popularised in the socialist era, can evidently lead to multiple possible readings. The difference, however, is that the obvious lack of aura in post-socialist monuments, as well as the forced attribution of meaning, renders them more susceptible to political abuse.[51]

Addressing Serbia's dual role in the wars of the 1990s, when the country successively became a culprit and a victim, requires comprehensive social dialogue. Memorial architecture can aid these processes by creating forms that allow for deeper reflection, encourage public participation, and serve as educational tools. The perils of inaction, postponement of dialogue, and prolongation of 'temporary' solutions are multiple, as they can lead to another type of fetishism, a fascination with ruins. The naked foundations of the Public Library at Kosančićev Venac as the most famous monument to World War II, and the remains of Generalštab as the most famous monument to the 1999 Air War (Fig. 11), prove that Belgrade follows a long, established practice of suppressing the conflicted past. From the vantage of Serbia's current cultural and urban practices, these ruins are, in fact, the most appropriate war memorials.

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13. Efforts to organise this competition spanned from 2002 to 2006, but the monument was hastily erected in 2012. Pančevac and Uzelac won the second prize (no first prize was awarded), but the jury recommended their design to be realised anyway. Bojan Kovačević (president of the professional organisation 'Academy of Architecture of Serbia' and then member of the jury), interviewed by Aleksandar Staničić (Belgrade: 15 September 2017).
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