Reconsidering Partisan Memorial Landscapes in un-brotherly and disunited times

Published in:
Landscape Values: Place and Praxis: Conference, Galway 29 June - 2nd July 2016

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Reconsidering Partisan Memorial Landscapes in un-brotherly and disunited times

Dr Neil Galway

School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering, Queen's University Belfast, Third Floor David Keir Building, Stranmillis Road, Belfast, United Kingdom, BT9 5AG, e–mail: n.galway@qub.ac.uk

Landscape Values

"It is vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brains and our bowels, the primitive vigor of nature in us, that inspires that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador and greater wildness than is some recess of Concord, i.e. than I import into it."

Thoreau, Henry David, *Journal 30th August 1856*

The human landscape was described by Lewis (1979) as 'our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form... All our cultural warts and blemishes are there, and our glories too; but above all, our ordinary day-to-day qualities are exhibited for anybody who wants to find them and knows how to look for them' (p.12). In a similar vein, Conzen (1981) considered the human landscape to be the 'objectification of the spirit of society in its own cultural context and in the historical context of the area' (pp.57-8).

Cultural landscapes are the product of the innumerable changes wrought by previous generations who modified their environments to meet their aspirations, vanities, ambitions and weaknesses (Sudjic 2006: p. 326). Leach's (2002) description of the metropolis as more than just the amalgam of buildings, roads, parks and rivers; '… it is a patchwork quilt of traces of human existence' (p.2) could be extended to the cultural landscape. The incremental nature of how cultural landscapes evolve as inhabitants alter their environments, without entirely erasing all traces of the past, has led to urban landscapes being described as 'palimpsests of history, incarnations of time in stone, sites of memory extending both in time and space' (Huyssen 2003: p.101).

The accretive nature of landscape change lends itself to textual analysis as different layers of historical time are superimposed on each other in the form of changing means of agricultural production, land use changes and architectural strata. Duncan (1990) argues that landscapes are ordered assemblages of objects, and texts through which 'a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored' (p.17). This echoes Duncan's description of the traditional mode of interpreting landscapes as 'reflections of the culture within which they were built or as a kind of artifactual "spoor" yielding clues to the events of the past, particularly diffusion' (1990: p.11).

Mitchell (2000) explains that landscapes can be understood as being 'authored' to the extent that they '… are 'made' (by hands and minds) and represented (by particular people and classes, and through the accretion of history and myth)' (2000: p.121). The representational aspect of landscape reflects how sanctioned narratives are ascribed to particular sites by those in positions of authority to create cultural memories. The spread of the landscape conservation movement coincided with the age of the nation-state in the 19th Century, when western nations started to identify and sanctify their national monuments, built heritage and symbolic landscapes.

These symbolic landscapes were identified for veneration as part of a sanctioned national heritage that forms the 'iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings that bind people together' (Meinig 1979: p.164). To create a national heritage, decisions on which events, mythologies, literary associations, folk memories, surviving physical relics, landscapes, places, buildings and historic sites are deemed worthy of passing onto the next generation are necessary.

Hodgkin & Radstone's (2009) work on 'regimes of memory' recognises that for nationalism; '… the continuing transformation of the supposedly eternal physical environment – is one of its most powerful and contentious tools, as well as one of power's most explicit attempts to rewrite the past, literally re-inscribing the surface of the world, and changing the name on the map- often while laying claim to something more ancient and authentic than the 'old' one' (pp.11-12). The values ascribed to these symbolic landscapes are malleable, present-orientated and political cultural constructs, which the nation state uses to portray its peoples' history, shared identity and collective memory to the outside world. The following section will discuss how post-World War II Yugoslavia created symbolic memorial landscapes

through the construction of abstract Partisan *spomenik* (monuments) which dominated former battle sites.

Sanctifying the soil: Memorial Landscapes of Socialist Spomenik in Yugoslavia

'Nothing in this world as invisible as a monument'

(Musil 1987)

The former Yugoslavia has always been framed as a place apart from Western Europe, an interstitial place at the religious and cultural crossroads of Europe. The ethnic diversity of the former Yugoslavia is encapsulated in the following quotation, that it was a 'federation of seven neighbours, six republics, five nations, four languages, two scripts, and one goal; to live in brotherhood and unity' (Crnobrnja 1996: p.15). After the Second World War ended, Yugoslavia was in ruins as the wider global conflict was the setting for a bitter civil war that erupted from the failings of ethnocratic, Serb-dominated, First Yugoslavia (previously known as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes).

The internal combatants in this civil war were: the fascist Croat Ustaša regime under Ante Pavelić; Serbian nationalist Chetniks, who desired the creation of a Greater Serbian Kingdom led by Draža Mihailović; and the multi-ethnic, anti-fascist Partisans led by Marshal Josip Broz Tito. When the Partisans eventually emerged on the victorious side at the end of World War II, they inherited a land where all 'religions and nationalities ended the war as victims and victors, cowards and heroes, torturers and tortured, traitors and loyalists on all possible sides' (Lovrenović 2001: p. 176).

When Tito became the leader of the country, he had to deal with the nationalist tendencies within the region. To do this he introduced a strict socialist regime, which emphasised the similarities and mutual dependency of the different ethnic groups of the six republics within the region (Mackic 2014). Mindful of mistakes made in the interwar years, Tito set out to build a structure that would be more stable and durable than those of the first Yugoslavia by advancing the slogan of '*bratsvo I jedinstvo*' (brotherhood and unity), which was to remain the political credo of the years he spent in power (Crnobrnja 1996: p.69). Rather than re-opening the wounds inflicted by the ethnic wars Tito pursued a strategy of national forgetting by closing this "chapter of history rather abruptly" (*ibid.*) in order "to throw hatred into history's deep freeze" (Glenny 1996: p.148).

Part of this strategy of national forgetting involved the symbolic appropriation of the landscape from 1960s to 1980 when the Yugoslav landscape was to be altered by the banal nationalist interventions of the construction of more than 100 Partisan *spomenik* (monuments) to commemorate the victims of fascism. These monuments commemorated a war in which citizens fought on opposing sides, so '… the war monuments could assume neither a heroic nor a patriotic guise' (Neutelings 2008) as they had to be neutral enough for both victims and perpetrators. Most of the monuments are located in areas where the fiercest battles against fascism happened.

To avoid the often militaristic tendencies of war memorials with armed horse bound generals and thundering cannons, a more neutral and abstract visual language was adopted, whereby the Partisan spomenik look more like sculptures in an open air museum with **Figure 1** from the outskirts of Banja Luka illustrating the abstract aesthetic of these huge memorials. Their aesthetic reflected the socialist 'regime of forgetting' that looked towards a future of freedom, equality, independence, progress and a better life for everyone – a future that could only exist thanks to the fact that others had given their life (Mackic 2014). The constriction of these spomenik to mark the symbolic landscapes could be described as part of what Young (1993) describes as 'the state-sponsored memory of a national past [which] aims to affirm the righteousness of a nation's birth, even its divine election. The matrix of a nation's monuments emplots the story of ennobling events, of triumphs over barbarism, and recalls the martyrdom of those who gave their lives in the struggle for national existence – who, in the martyrolgical refrain, dies so that a country may live' (p.2).

Fig. 1. Banja Luka Spomenik

Neutelings (2008) argues that their design was abstract to aid in the forgetting process as they '… formed a cheerful backdrop for the bright future awaiting the socialistic model society, the official policy line of which was to smooth over all of the former conflicts'. Each monument was located to be consciously out of place: the futuristic concrete structures lost in natural landscapes were designed to become public memorial spaces. They were often prominently located on higher ground to which visitors would have to hike to mourn their friends and family members who died at the battle sites or to learn about the history and the origin of Yugoslavia.

Given that these imposing edifices commemorated those who died fighting fascism in a civil war, those associated with the defeated Ustaša and Chetniks forces would not have shared in the glorification of the heroic Partisan values that formed the nation's foundational myth as Young (1993) states; '… the relationship between the state and its memorials is not one-sided, however. On the one side, official agencies are in a position to shape memory explicitly as they see fit, memory that best serves a national interest. On the other hand, once created, memorials take on lives of their own, often stubbornly resistant to the state's original intentions' (p.3). The frozen conflicts that these symbolic landscapes sought to forget were to be reignited in the 1980s by the rise of nationalist leaders who placed "…a profound strain on the map of a unified Yugoslavia and soon this tired document began to tear along nationalist lines. The frightening complexity of Yugoslavia's ethnic composition, which had been largely forgotten over forty years, began to reveal itself" (p.32) as the largest war on European soil since World War II was waged as the country fragmented.

Partisan Pasts: Post-conflict heritage interventions at landscapes of the ideological 'other'

The protagonists in the wars associated with the fragmentation of Yugoslavia utilised a policy of urbicide, ie the targeting of religious and cultural heritage sites to remove the traces associated with the memory, identity and history of the 'other'. This practice involved the widespread destruction of religious heritage and sites associated with historical adversaries including those sites associated with the socialist regime. Partisan heritage was systematically targeted with nearly 3000 monuments to the World War II Partisan movement destroyed or damaged in Croatia during the war (Pavelic 2013; Schäuble 2014). Despite this conscious targeting of Partisan memorials, their peripheral locations, solid construction and massive scale meant that many could not be demolished during the Yugoslavian civil war (Mackic 2014). The shifting boundaries and new independent nations that resulted from the war meant

that the meaning of many of these symbolic landscapes had been transformed as the regime they represented, whether revered or reviled, had been consigned to the history books as 'each monument is a tombstone that reminds visitors of the land that used to be called Yugoslavia' (Mackic 2014).

In the post-war period, many of these secular Partisan memorials have been neglected and left to nature or subject to systematic targeting for destruction and vandalism because of their associations with the former regime. The overgrown and vandalised state of the prominent Partisan memorial complexes in Sarajevo and Mostar **(Figure 2)** show how the built legacies of the Communism are residual relics of a defeated ideology in a context in which ethno-nationalism prevails. These complexes, constructed from the 1960s as memorials to the victims of the struggle against fascism in World War II, have been incorporated into their national heritage registers since the Communist period as part of a national narrative of a shared struggle against fascism. This version of World War II history in Yugoslavia was not accepted by the ethno-nationalist combatants in the Bosnian war and the occupying Croat forces, whose uniforms bore the insignia of the fascist Ustaša state, dynamited the Partisan Memorial complex in Mostar in 1992 because it memorialised their antecedent's enemies (Andrić 2011).

Fig. 2. Partisan memorial complex in Mostar

In the post-war era, the memorial complex in Mostar was subject to an unsuccessful proposal to remove the headstones to the almost 800 Partisan dead interred at the site and to restore and convert the monument into an outdoor theatre. This proposal was approved by the Croatian authorities who sought to erase this part of the region's history from their urban palimpsest before the decision was overturned following vocal resistance from local World

War II veterans. The veterans then gained the financial support from the international community necessary to fund the reconstruction of the memorial site but within a short period after it was restored the site had more damage inflicted by Croatian 'hooligans' than it received during the war (*ibid.*). The Mostar authority's refusal to provide security and surveillance cameras at the site has meant that, despite being restored again it has been subject to further vandalism and a lack of maintenance which has resulted in it being overgrown with weeds, its pools becoming full with empty beer bottles and graffiti bearing fascist slogans and symbols daubed over the monument.

The lack of political will to protect this artistically significant (but ideologically deviant) national monument represents how the ethno-nationalist Croat 'regime of memory' has been unable and unwilling to incorporate this memorial landscape associated with the ideological 'other' into its narrative. Challenges of how to accommodate sites designated by the Communist regime because of their significance to the struggle against fascism extend beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina, as Croatian regional heritage authorities have been reviewing these political heritage designations. In the Primorje – Gorski Kotar county in Croatia, the heritage professionals were taxed with reviewing outdated inventories that contained a wide variety of sites associated with the Second Yugoslavia.

Fig. 3. Podhum Spomenik

The example of the socialist *spomenik* at Podhum (**Figure 3** Jelenje) illustrates how heritage cannot be divorced from its social context, as meanings are malleable and narratives from the past are open to reinterpretation through the perceptual lens of the present. The memorial complex which, was constructed in the 1960s to commemorate the massacre of 91 Partisan

villagers by Italian fascists in 1942, has been appropriated by the relatives of the dead who have 'sacralised' the space by gaining permission for a cross to be erected inside the walls of the site and for the local priest to hold an annual commemoration ceremony for the dead. The 'Catholicisation' of the site, despite the fact that it commemorates atheists massacred by Italian Catholic fascists, demonstrates that 'regimes of memory' are present-orientated and selective in their interpretation. Furthermore, it demonstrates that decisions to sanctify sites by constructing monuments are designed primarily for their audience, the living, rather than those they are to commemorate. The heritage intervention at Podhum illustrates that this heritage site, like all others, is a 'vessel of value' that becomes increasingly vulnerable to 'obsolete transmissions' as increasingly less people who remember the war are still alive leaving these dramatic landscapes as legacies of a 'lost world of yesterday' (Zweig 1964).

Bibliography:

Andrić, R. B., "Interview with former mayor of Mostar, Radmilo Andrić" in M. Sudović (Dir) *The Forgotten: Bosnia and Herzegovina twenty years on documentary,* Mostar: Institute of War and Peace Reporting - http://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/11691/The-Forgotten--Bosnia---Hercegovina--Twenty-Years-Later- accessed 28/06/14.

Conzen, M. R. G., 'Historical Townscapes in Britain: a problem with applied geography' in J. W. R. Whitehand (Ed.) (1981) The Urban Landscape: Historical Development and Management, Academic Press, 1979, pp. 55-74.

Crnobrnja, M. The Yugoslav Drama, I.B. Tauris, 1996.

Duncan, J. S., The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Glenny, M., The Fall of Yugoslavia – The Third Balkan War, Penguin, 1996.

Hodgkin, K. & Radstone, S., 'Introduction – Contested Pasts' in K. Hodgkin & S. Radstone (Eds) Contested Pasts – Memory, History, Nation, Transaction Press, 2009, pp.1-21.

Huyssen, A., Present Pasts – Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory, Stanford University Press, 2003.

Leach, N. (Ed.), The Hieroglyphics of Space – reading and experiencing the modern metropolis, Routledge, 2002.

Lewis, P., *"Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene"* in D. W. Meinig (Ed.) The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes, Oxford University Press, 1979, pp.11-32.

Lovrenović, I., Bosnia – A Cultural History, New York University Press, 2001.

Mackic, A., Mortal Cities and Forgotten Monuments at:
http://www.failedarchitecture.com/mortal-cities-and-forgotten-monuments/ accessed
26/04/16.

Meinig, D. W. (Eds.), The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes, Oxford University Press,
1979.

Mitchell, D., Cultural Geography – a critical introduction, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

Musil, R., "Monuments." Posthumous Papers of a Living Author. Trans. Peter Wortsman.
Hygiene: Eridanos, 1987.

Neutelings, W. J., Spomenik, The Monuments of Former Yugoslavia -
http://www.jankempenaers.info/texts/03/ accessed 12/01/2014.

Pavelic, B., "Bring Nikola Tesla Monument Back, Urges Croatia PM" in Balkan Insight, 23rd
January 2013 from http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/croatian-pm-calls-on-tesla-s-
monument-renewal accessed 02/06/14.

Schäuble, M., *Narrating Victimhood: Gender, Religion and the Making of Place in Post-War
Croatia,* Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2014.

Sudjic, D., The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World, Penguin,
2006.

Thoreau, H. D., The Journal: 1837-1861, New York Review Books Classics, 2009.

Young, J. E., The Texture of Memory- Holocaust Memorials and Memory, Yale University,
1993.

Zweig, S., *The World of Yesterday*, University of Nebraska Press, 1964.