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Peer-reviewed author version

Bogojevic, Anja; Puzic, Amila & ZULJEVIC, Mela (2019) False stories from the history of Mostar. In: Space & polity, 23 (2) , p. 216 -228.

DOI: 10.1080/13562576.2019.1635445

Handle: <http://hdl.handle.net/1942/31915>

This is an original manuscript / preprint of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Space & Polity* on June 27th, 2019 available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13562576.2019.1635445>

False stories from the history of Mostar

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False stories from the history of Mostar

This visual essay presents a set of stories written for a performative walk in public space, complemented with a short reflection and documentary graphic material. The art intervention, titled 'False stories from the history of Mostar', was conceived and performed by Abart – an art production platform started in the city of Mostar in 2008 to work on contextual forms of socially engaged art practices. The intervention addressed eight problematic sites in the city, through fictional stories which aimed to expose the underlying processes shaping the transitional management of space in Mostar.

Keywords: site-specific art, public space, neoliberalism, socially engaged art

Introduction

Abart was an art production platform active within the Youth Cultural Centre Abrašević in Mostar in the period from 2008 to 2014. Our motivation to start Abart came when, after finishing our studies, we returned to our hometown, Mostar, willing to take initiative in the cultural field and work on issues related to public space which we thought (and still think) were important. Having in mind that the city was heavily affected by the war, as well as the post-war political and economic transition, our intention was to delve into the complex and highly politicised context we were acting in. By working with contextual forms of socially engaged art practices, we wanted to contribute to the struggle for public space, as well as to produce a wider knowledge about specific urban issues.

One of our first collective actions was the performative walk “False stories from the history of Mostar”. It was realized as part of the *Art in Divided Cities* project in which we collaborated with artists and activists from Beirut, Kosovska Mitrovica and Berlin to discuss the roles and potentials of art practice to intervene in ethnically divided societies. Within the research trajectory of the project, we looked at the post-war transformation of urban space with the aim of understanding how the city’s division affected transitional spatial planning and development. In doing so, we drew upon our knowledge, experiences and anxieties as citizens of Mostar to

discuss, map and document places which were broadly recognized in Mostar as sites of shared memory, while undergoing transformation or devastation linked to divisive political strategies. We wanted to engage with art strategies in public space to challenge the neoliberal agendas behind these strategies and, in particular, the historical revisionism they were initiating through partition of space and development strategies. Our idea was to use fiction as a way of speaking about the underlying mechanisms which – for us – were changing the city for worse. We selected eight among the most problematic sites in Mostar; sites that well-represented the difficulties that the city encountered in the transitional phase from war to post-war, from socialism to neoliberalism. These sites include spaces left ruined after the war (The Glass Bank and the department stores Razvitak and Hit), those removed or transformed extensively by post-war construction-related activities (Hotel Rose, The Franciscan church, The Old Hospital) as well as new construction sites more emblematic of the city's post-war privatization process (The Pyramid and The Biosphere shopping malls).

We wrote eight stories as a critical reflection on actual coverage and controversies surrounding the sites – by focusing on the dubious details and power games related to the processes of construction, reconversion or devastation, as well as on new architectural qualities emerging in the transition and reflecting the invasive aesthetics of private capital. In doing so, we chose to mimic the format of a short historical review by using surreal humour and sarcasm. We tried to address, but also to expose through mocking, some of the ravaging background processes which guided the transitional management of space in Mostar such as the neglect of public spaces or their uncontrolled privatization, corruption, and the destruction of nature and heritage, among others. Overall, we wanted to point out to what we understood as the elemental problem - the post-war process of rewriting historical narratives so that they could support nationalist discourses. We wrote these false stories as our own metanarrative, based on the history of the city, to counterpoint this divisive process and bring to light the underlying goals, alliances and ways of working of nationalist perspectives.

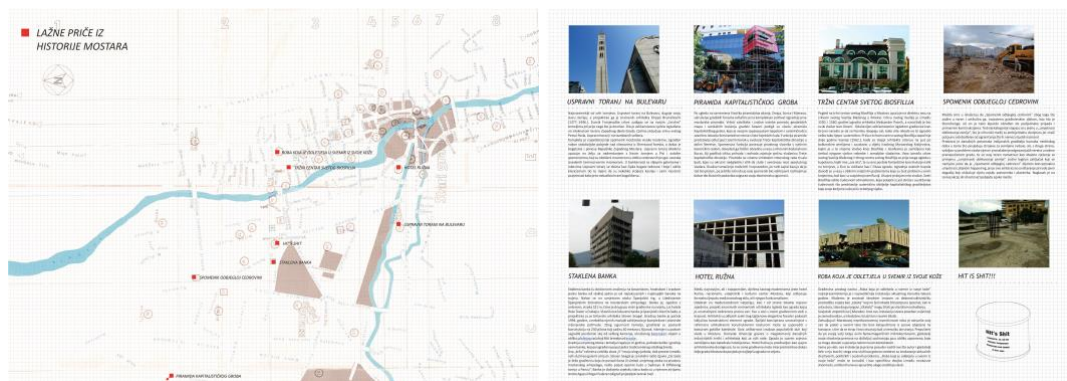


Figure 1 (a) and (b). Map of the locations, front and back side. by Abart

We designed and distributed a map (Figure 1) of the eight locations and prepared eight plates on which we engraved the new name we gave to each site, as well as the full story. Together with a small crowd of attending friends, citizens and visitors, we walked the route connecting one place to the other and installed the engraved plates at the sites after reading each story to the audience. In doing so, we performed an act of legitimizing a critical narrative about these places, while celebrating our actions with the group of participants. In this visual essay, we present the eight stories written for this performative walk accompanied by photographic documentation.

False stories from the history of Mostar

Monument to the Runaway Cedarwood

We might be tempted to define the ‘Monument to the Runaway Cedarwood’ as a construction work similar to Stonehenge, insofar as it penetrates and spans the terrain; on the other hand, it is composed in a sculptural manner that allows it to be also defined as a primary construction.

These two categories melt into the one of land-art that can be considered as the finest medium for ambient sculpture since it implies a supreme liberation of all constraints imposed by human ratios. The advantage that contemporary descendants of Neolithic Indian tomb builders possess is in the fact that they use machines for excavation, but on the other hand, they face difficulties

with high prices and with acquiring appropriate plots in our overcrowded city; so, this plot was recognized as the ideal solution for a land-art application. The only logical conclusion implied is that the ‘Monument to the Runaway Cedarwood’ can be equally considered as a work of conceptual art and a happening since this ambitious step to destroy nature involves the element of a public event with an entire army of assistants and hirelings participating. Although the action itself is highlighted, the result implies a victory of the epic imagination.



Figure 2. The site of Old Hospital ('Monument to the Runaway Cedarwood').

Figure 3. The Pyramid shopping mall ('The Pyramid of the Capitalist Grave').

The Pyramid of the Capitalist Grave

In the image of the contemporary pyramidal edifices in Visoko, the ones of the Dragon, the Sun and the Moon, the association of city pharaohs was encouraged to undertake the ambitious step of constructing the first Mostarian pyramid. By performing satellite and aerial scans via geodesic maps and probe drillings, the city pharaohs have erected the hanging pyramid of the Capitalist grave which has, with its remarkable beauty and authenticity, officially thrown the Hanging Gardens of Babylon off the list of the seven world wonders. The role of this pyramid represents the final decisive step in the evolution of the Third capitalist dynasty in the valley of Neretva. The aforementioned role provides a connection between the private owner and eternal cosmic order, by putting him, physically and ritually, in contact with the supreme deity of Stock

market, whose annual cycle of incomes and outcomes conditions the Third capitalist dynasty's eternal reign. The pyramid is considered to be a symbol of thousands of people's slave labour, who were forced by the cruel supervisors to serve and increase the absolute ruler's power. This interpretation can be also unfair since some records suggest that the labour was paid, so it's closer to the truth to say that this monument was a big public work which ensured economic security for a large number of Stock market's subordinates.

Glass Bank

The 'Glass Bank' (literally meaning 'a bank made of glass' in Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian language) is one of the most luxurious and costly banks in the world. It is situated on the artificial island of 'Spanish square', in the United Spanish Emirates on the Mostarian archipelago. The bank is, together with the antenna, 321 meters high, which makes it the second highest building in the world, right after the Rose Tower hotel in Dubai. The owner of this luxurious bank is the Spanish knight De Sade, and it was designed by the British architect Steven Seagal. The construction started in 1994 and several of its features requested difficult and pioneering engineering endeavours. In order to secure the foundations, the builders placed the construction on 320 pylons that penetrate the sand 40 meters deep. The engineers afterwards placed a surface rocky layer, enclosed with a concrete layer in the form of beehive to protect the foundation from erosion. The construction of the artificial island and foundations lasted for three years, as well as the construction of the bank itself which was built in the shape of a traditional knight ship's sail. Two 'wings' arranged in a V letter shape play the role of masts, while the space in between functions as a great atrium. Steven Seagal said in his statement for the local radio: 'De Sade wanted the building to become an icon or a symbol of the artificial island in the area of Mostarian archipelago, something like the opera house in Sydney or the Eiffel tower in Paris.' The bank was internationally recognized when Andre Agassi and Roger Federer played a friendly tennis match in its atrium.



Figure 4. The Glass Bank. Figure 5. Site of the demolished department store Hit ('Hit's Shit').

Hit

Hit's Shit

The Upright Tower on Boulevard

The most outstanding of all towers, the Upright Tower on Boulevard, owes its renown to a mere twist of fate, and it was designed by an eminent architect called Filippo Brunelleschi (1377 – 1446). The turret of the Franciscan church rose on its 'firm' foundations even before it was finished. It is a part of an ensemble built on distinct terrains of the West part of the City. The ensemble consists of the St. Peter and Paul's church, The Upright Tower and several residential buildings. This complex presents the most ambitious monument of Mostarian High Modernism, built after the Victory of Radobolja over the knights from Sherwood forest, as an evidence of the West Mostar Republic's wealth and pride. The Upright Tower directly points out an ambition to compete with the Leaning Tower of Pisa and other monuments which were coated in layers of marble in the form of horizontal stripes and patterns moulded in dark red marble. In combination with blind galleries and arcades, the Upright Tower resembles a lace of rich texture

and colour, and it radiates classicism so extensively to make even Mostarians, born several centuries later, believe that it used to be a temple of the god of Mars.



Figure 6. St. Peter and Paul's church tower ('The Upright Tower on Boulevard').

Figure 7. The construction site of Hotel Rose ('Hotel Ružna').

Hotel Ružna

Among the latest but also the most controversial works of late modernism is the hotel Ružna; the national, artistic and cultural centre of Mostar, whose architecture abandons the formal beauty of International Style as well as its functionalism. As the winning result of an international competition selected by the local municipal community, this project, designed by anonymous eminent architects, resembles a building whose interior turned itself out. Everything related to this building is radically extreme. Architects have abandoned every trace of Ugljen's elegant facade in order to display solely the constructive element of the building. The interior designed as a cave with delicately articulated construction skeleton can be compared to a gothic cathedral skeleton. The spare utilitarianism expresses the spirit of populism dominant in Mostar. The gigantic proportions exhibit the megalomania of today's industrial corporations and the architects they employ. This building was knowingly envisioned as a cathedral of hotel management. Hotel Ružna was recognized as an exceptional architectural piece, in this way the building itself can be interpreted as a proof of the ambition that the city of Mostar expresses to

have the most beautiful building in the world.

St Biosphilius's shopping mall

The view of St Biophilus's shopping mall refers to a direct connection with the Saint Basil the Blessed church in Moscow. Saint Basil's church was built by the architect Alexander Posnik in the period of 1550- 1569, and its patron was the Russian ruler John the Terrible. Thrilled by the building's magnificent appearance, John the Terrible commanded that Posnik's eyes should be poked out, so he could never again build anything as beautiful or authentic as this. The story of the St Biosphilius's shopping mall started two years later (1562) when the blind architect headed for a trip around the Balkan countries and stopped in the area of the East Mostar Kingdom, which was at that moment ruled by the Prince Biosphilius I. The building was envisioned as a symbol of his eternal divine and terrestrial rule. The connection between the St Basil's church and St Biosphilius's shopping mall is first of all reflected in the domes, which are 'over and above' and which have become stunning constructions resembling towers, painted as vividly as the rest of the building. The construction of these domes is connected with the enormous amounts of snowfall which are a frequent problem in these areas, as well as in neighbouring Russia. The overall impression is very strong. St Biosphilius radiates an unearthly atmosphere, which originates from an even more stringent and refrained unearthliness as an authentic feature of the capitalist construction works rooted deeply in the middle ages.



Figure 8. Biosphere shopping mall ('St. Biosphilius's shopping mall').



Figure 9. Razvitak department store ('The merchandise which flew into outer space out of its own skin').

The merchandise which flew into outer space out of its own skin

The building simply named as 'The merchandise which flew into outer space out of its own skin' is the most representative and unusual installation in this contemporary moment of the current year. It can be considered as an ideal expression of a deconstructivist image of the world as a text which never desires to be fully known, not even by the author himself, so his 'readers' can interpret it by their own discretion. The Soviet artist Jurij Marakov creates a specific world through this installation, self-sufficient but at the same time unreasonable and close. By virtue of Marakov's untouchable innovativeness, the merchandise fulfilled its dream to fly into space by being catapulted out of a device hanging on ropes, with the ceiling and roof opening at the moment of launching. Left to wander on their own through this phantasmagorical microcosm, the spectators transfer their understanding to experience and store it in the form of memories, which can be recalled in some new contexts. In its own, this installation is an empty container and it holds everything that the author and spectators wish to place in it; in this way, it serves as a mean to express actual social, political and personal problems. 'The merchandise which flew into outer space out of its own skin' can also be interpreted as a specific dilemma between tacky reality, broken dreams and the absurd role of central government.

Conclusion

The intention of 'False Stories' was in line with Abart's initial agenda to examine, speak about and act upon the different imaginaries of memory and power in Mostar. We wanted our intervention to contribute towards exposing the exploitation of space undertaken by those in power – in doing so, we attempted to claim a position of power ourselves by making a statement and intervening with a critical narrative in public space. It was the first step we took towards challenging the nationalist revision of history set in motion through spatial transformation – by claiming our right to scrutinize this process and to write the history of the city under our own terms. As one of our first art interventions in public space in Mostar, this was an act of positioning ourselves as cultural workers and activists in the transitional reality of the city by reflecting on it in a critical way, as well as by contextualizing this reflection through research and a collaborative practice.

Acknowledgements

The stories were translated from Bosnian to English by Kathryn Hampton.

Funding details: This work was supported by the European Cultural Foundation under Art in Divided Cities project [grant number 910].