

THE CITY AS A FIELD FOR THE VISUAL CULTURE CONFRONTATION

By Marijan Susovski

Ten years before President Franjo Tudjman died and his Croatian Democratic Union lost the elections, that is, until the new Government's inauguration on 3 January of this year, we have been witnessing in Zagreb City various detrimental acts in the cultural field, architecture in particular. This is a peculiarity of the pre-capitalist progression that distorts established system of values. Through their hostile officiating inside a tightly closed administration the Zagreb City administrators - keen to actualize the ideas conceived at the top - were choosing servile and compliant architects who were willing to take part in altering the City's appearance or that of its distinguished old or new objects.

This created a perfect setting for the highly positioned people to take control in architecture, urbanism, protection of the cultural monuments or any other field that should have been transmitting visual culture in the City. The excuse was always same: their actions served the highest political interests. Consequently, arbitrary decision-making concerning the space shaping got out of control. This vacuum nurtured a moral crisis that favored private over social, individual over public. Such a nebulous situation resulted in idealess, chaotic and unruly construction, and in many cases the extent of devastation represents a criminal act against the City space. Transformations were supposedly creating a new architectural and visual identity of Zagreb as the metropolis of the new State. Yet, only newly created values mark the great epochs; small ones continue spending the old values.

Mediaeval town Medvedgrad is an ideal example. By President Tudjman's decree it became the "Shrine of the Homeland." The perpetual fire is burning before its highest tower. Medvedgrad is a pathetic symbol of eternity and of a millennial dream to get the national State. Built on the slopes of Medvednica, beyond romantic ruins of a mediaeval town, this shrine-acropolis is domineering the metropolis in a valley below. In the State of Croatia Medvedgrad has neither historic nor political importance. Inside its walls no monarch had ever lived nor an important State document was ever signed there. Regardless of the violated conservation and reconstruction standards during its adaptation, it nevertheless became an Arcadian mystically detached "Homeland Shrine" dedicated to Death Cult.

"Beautification" of Marko Marulić Square clearly shows the City officials' distorted idea of how to glorify a Croatian Renaissance writer. Across the old Secession building of the National University Library, an excellent example of the 1913 gesamtkunstwerk of the architect Rudolf Lubynsky, on a former lawn, they have decided to set up the monumental sculpture of Marko Marulić. Structure of this sculpture looks as if it was meant to be placed against the wall, rather than in a middle of a sunken, pool-like marble-tiled plateau inside a former lawn. Sculpture faces the Library building, but it's back, an artistically amorphous and incomplete part, fronts a very busy avenue. The Library architect, who by the book followed the unity of architecture, decoration, equipment and environment, did not anticipate a herein after sculpture installation. Whether or not one thinks that an art piece should be there, its aesthetic value must be perceivable from all sides.

A mammoth structure of the rebuilt soccer stadium "Dinamo" (renamed by Tudjman to "Croatia" against public opinion), now completely surmounts the 18th century romantic park Maksimir constructed in English style, though, the architect Vladimir Turina had planned the stadium (built between 1946-1962) to harmonize with the neighboring park. The shopping plaza "Importane Center" on Ibler Square (named after the well-known architect, builder of numerous Zagreb's houses in Bauhaus style) annihilates the

greatest urban objective - a public park fronting the Retirement Home. Besides an open vista this shopping center robs the old people of the only greenery around.

Reshaping of previously intimate Flower Square in the middle of the City, a charming place to buy flowers, see a movie or relax in cafes, involved not only installation of oversized lightening features but an overall alternation of its image. An extravagant application of marble has reduced its intimate and romantic image.

Furthermore, in 1923 the architect Viktor Kovačić built the Stock Exchange building on Burza Square by using classical elements on a facade. The Ionic columns on a top of an imposing staircase elevate this building from the ground and emphasize its distinction. To furthermore affirm building's dominant position he designed a low growing rose garden in front of the building. The former City administration has however built an oversized fountain before this building. The fountain not only degrades the original project but it hides this object from passers-by. Seen over that fountain the Stock Exchange building does not look like it is standing on the staircase or a raised podium, but it appears to be "springing out" of that fountain. The identical fountain adorns a foreground of the Ministry of Culture across the Burza Square. Both buildings have as a result lost their majestic image. Although the City now owns two imposing fountains, it has lost two small public squares.

A street between the Stock Exchange and the Ministry of Culture leads to a ring-shaped object inspired by classical architecture and columns. This building is the work of the well-known Croatian sculptor and architect Ivan Meštrović. Meštrović built this object in 1937 for exhibition space. Its rotund shape and the circular interior on various levels occurred before creation of the the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York by Frank Lyod Wright in 1959. However, its exhibition function lasted only briefly. For its representative image it was a constant target of various political concepts and aspirations. After the Second World War it became "The Revolution Museum of Croatian People," whilst the square around it got the name "Square of the Victims of the Fascism." After he came to power President Tudjman renamed it to "Square of the Croatian Notables." He wanted to make out of it some sort of "Pantheon" for the famous Croats, surly counting himself in, who throughout centuries fought for an independent Croatia. Thanks to protests of people in culture, artists and general public, popularly nicknamed "cake" did not become "Pantheon," but it was given back to the Croatian Association of Artists, and is now in use as a large, dynamic exhibition space thriving with activities. The square did not yet get its old name back. However, citizens insist that the name should be returned. This particular location is deeply connected with the anti-fascist resistance in Croatia and its victims. I think that the new City government is aware of mistakes the old one did, and it will return its former name. All these examples connect not a courage of the new but a continuance of old values.

What is happening to the new sculptures in the City's public places?

Once installed, though not in the place for which artist made them for but in some other space chosen by the "City's mighty," as is a case with the sculpture "Grounded Sun" by Ivan Kožarić, they are left at the mercy of those that have no penchant for the visual culture. Sculpture "Grounded Sun," scaled with golden leaflets, is scratched all over and spoiled with graffiti. Although placed in the center of the city, in front of "Dubrovnik" hotel, City Office for Urban Planning, Construction, Residential and Communal Affairs, which determined the sculpture's location and paid for its casting and installation, has since neglected it, as well as this Office's major job in urban planning. Sculpture "Grounded Sun" became thus a twisted transmission of the City's visual culture.

What can one say about the 1908 mill destroyed by fire? Since it is an excellent exemplar of industrial architecture cultural public immediately requested the mill for a cultural object. After renovation it would house the Museum of Contemporary Art.

However, the profiteering City administration was thinking of selling the land or a building for commercial use and did not accept this proposal. More than ten years have passed since, yet the mill ruins are still sticking out in a core of the City. A local tender for the new Museum of Contemporary Art resulted in an uninteresting architectural project. Because there is a total lack of interest for the Museum's construction, the project stands still - without further decisions or objectives for its realization. The colonial houses, bogus lion figures, or, the false antique or Rococo columns in the new Zagreb suburbs communicate the taste of the new wealthy people. At odds with this idyllic picture is social housing for the underprivileged or displaced persons, the disabled ex-servicemen or returnees to the war-devastated regions throughout Croatia. These last ten years the relationship between architecture and politics signifies parasitic monumentality or the monumental parasitism. Because of such a violation of architecture and Zagreb's visual culture, or a total disregard for the institutes for protection of monuments some architects kept turning down offers to participate in projects such as Medvedgrad or similar governmental projects, and certain art historians have refused to take State decoration. Politics aspires to determine and standardize human lives just as urbanism aspires to determine and standardize their living space. Precisely for that reason government did not permit architects to do their job. I have to admit that architecture was always partially, sometimes totally, dependent on government support, that is, money. Unfortunately, money and unscrupulous profit were a dominant factor during this last decade in Croatia. This year's election of the new government shows that politics should govern on behalf of the citizens. The fall of the former regime shows that behavior of the governing structures should be transparent, that decisions concerning urban planning, architecture and interventions in public places cannot be delivered inside the semi-secret commissions, but should be open to public opinions. Zagreb got a new City administration and the Republic of Croatia new ministries and new ministers. The minister for urban planning and protection of environment has already started a revision of things that went wrong in the last decade. The Ministry began demolition of villas and other objects built without location or building permits. They mostly belong to those politically privileged people who amassed wealth during the war or through malversation in privatization. For constructing the public buildings or for changes in the City's image government should appoint architects, urbanists and artists through public tenders or other public systems. In regard to professionals and democracy the government should have a clear conscience. Inside a new urban politics and construction government should appoint people who did not misuse power vested in them. This power strategy is a theme at the next AICA Congress in Croatia.

Note: The Association of Croatian Art Historians on 10 May 2000 held a discussion on "Architecture and Politics." The above text to some extent contains the opinions, viewpoints and conclusions of the attending architects, art critics and art historians.