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Hans Ibelings, 2010

Exposició /
RESTART
Arhitektura u Bosni i Hercegovini
Architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina
1995-2010

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RESTART

ARHITEKTURA U BOSNI I HERCEGOVINI
ARCHITECTURE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

1995 - 2010

Hans Ibelings (1963), who selected the projects and edited the book, is an Amsterdam-based architectural historian and critic. He is the editor of A10 new European architecture, a bi-monthly magazine which he founded in 2004, together with graphic designer Arjan Groot.

RESTART

by Hans Ibelings

A decade and a half after the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the scars and traumas are still visible in the built environment. The signs of years of fighting and destruction are everywhere in evidence. Despite this, city, village and landscape are starting to recover. The numerous building projects since 1995 are a reason for hope. The act of construction is an unmistakable sign of faith in the future. Architecture is inconceivable without such optimism, without the conviction that the world will, however slightly, be the better for it.

Building is a perpetuation of this conviction. And with construction, life too resumes, however many painful memories remain, and there is room for a new 'everydayness' with, in the best cases, architecture as a meaningful backdrop and entourage.

PAUSE/FAST FORWARD

It is a myth that after war there can be a stunde null or zero hour. A genuinely new beginning is an illusion. It is an inescapable fact that things will never again be as they used to be, but it is equally true that the past can never be entirely erased. At most it is possible to pick up the pieces and make a new start. Apart from untold human suffering and colossal material damage, war also causes an interruption to building activities and stagnation in cultural developments.

By the same token, the enforced building freeze often acts as a catalyst for the development of ideas. Not just during a war, when nothing at all can be built, but even in the early post-war years, when building activities are only slowly picking up again, the turnover of ideas is usually too rapid for construction to keep up. Construction is in the pause position while ideas development is in fast forward mode. And to stay with this metaphor, in the first post-war phase, there is a tendency for some activities to play out in slow motion, in the delayed realization of prewar plans, and the resumption of projects that were already under construction. All too often, moreover, there is a replay of pre-war practices.

The simultaneous acceleration and delay, the prolonged presence of the signs of destruction alongside the start of new constructions – they are all part of a transitional period in which various speeds coexist. Now, fifteen years after the end of the war, everything is starting to get back into step and architecture, too, is approaching normality.

Normalization can be discerned, for example, in Sarajevo, at the beginning of Zmaja od Bosne Street, where the Austro-Hungarian part of the city centre meets the new city.

What has developed there can be construed as a magnification of the transitional period of the last fifteen years, with old, new and renewed in amicable juxtaposition. There is the still dilapidated Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a consummate building by Boris Magaš, Edo Šmidih and Radovan Horvat, next to the still undeveloped site of Renzo Piano's Museum of Contemporary Art, and Studio Non Stop's stylish Importanne Centar. A little further along is another work by the same architects, the Alta Centar, opposite Juraj Neidhardt's restored dynamic parliamentary complex, and nearby two powerfully

expressive works by Ivan Štraus that have been revitalized since the war, the Holiday Inn hotel and the UNIS skyscrapers. Modernism (Magaš et al.), late-modernism (Neidhardt and Štraus's UNIS), postmodernism (Štraus's Holiday Inn) and what could be described as supermodernism (Studio non stop) stand side by side. Half a century of architecture and history is on display here, with all the continuities and interruptions and only one building in which is the war still clearly visible.

All over Bosnia and Herzegovina, from Mostar to Banja Luka and from Sarajevo to Brcko, the built environment testifies to how life is resuming, how things are returning to normal, to the fact that not only is the burden of the past being borne, but that it is once again possible for the everyday to come to the forefront. Idealistic mega projects and grandiose ambitions to change the world are absent and that is no great loss, because those kinds of pretensions rarely turn out well for either architecture or society. What is being built in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the beginning of the twenty-first century is no worldchanging architecture; at most it is an architecture that makes practical, aesthetic and functional amendments to the world as it is.

ARCHITECTURAL PIONEER PLANTS

The reconstruction of the built environment runs parallel with the reconstruction of society and community, of which architecture can be both the product and the producer.

Architecture is a slow profession and there is usually a gap of many years separating the intention to build and the realization. So also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there was relatively little new construction between 1995 and 2000, but where the years since have seen a steady rise in construction activity.

The way momentum has returned to architecture is comparable to what happened in the former GDR after the peaceful revolution and reunification, in other East Bloc countries after the fall of their respective communist regimes, and in the independent, ex-Soviet republics. Nowhere was the transition from communist to post-communist society free of hitches and obstacles. Bosnia and Herzegovina has had to cope not only with the switch from a centrally planned to a free-market economy, but also with an enormous post-war reconstruction and repair task. Nonetheless, broadly speaking the same process is visible as in other former communist countries. In the new circumstances, the same building types emerged, like pioneer plants on sites that had become wasteland in the wake of the social upheavals.

The architectural pioneer plants of the postcommunist societies are petrol stations, car showrooms, bars, restaurants, shops and supermarkets, in short, all the relatively small-scale commercial infrastructure in which private initiative and enterprise can blossom. These pioneers are followed by a generation that is made up of larger commercial projects such as banks, office buildings, shopping malls, and speculative (upmarket) apartment buildings that provide a counterweight to the onesided housing stock of the socialist era.

A third phase, which has been evident for some time in most post-communist countries, is now starting to emerge in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After repairing the damage to the economic infrastructure, the focus of attent on and resources is now turning to public infrastructure, witness the as yet cautious ambitions to construct new libraries, museums, sporting facilities, theatres and educational buildings, as

well as moves to transform public spaces and the revival of urban planning in the development of new urban typologies.

DIVERSITY

To say that Bosnia and Herzegovina have always known great cultural diversity may be stating the obvious, but that does not make it any less true. Without wishing to deny the problematical aspects and without ignoring the fact that diversity is less self-evident since the recent war, there exists a cultural multiformity, including in architecture, however fragmented architectural culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina may be nowadays.

In a way, European art and architecture since the nineteenth century has always had a more or less multiform character, but in a country like Bosnia and Herzegovina that was even stronger than elsewhere. Even an outsider can see that apart from all the individual differences between architects, there are also big regional and cultural differences. The architecture, including contemporary architecture, is different in Banja Luka than in Mostar and in Zenica different than in Brcko.

SELECTION

Diversity is also evident in the selection I have made from the 380 entries by more than 100 design teams. It is partly dictated by differences in origin and orientation but also, as always, by generational differences. Just as every generation has a musical preference, formed in the years of adolescence and young adulthood, so every crop of architects has its own frame of reference and own preferences which, though not immutable, remain an anchor during subsequent professional development.

On top of that, every architecture is also recognizably of its time. Every age has its own fingerprint, which changes every ten or twelve years. The architectural trend of the 1990s differs from that of around 2000, and what was built ten years ago is different again from what is being built today. In Bosnia and Herzegovina there are also projects that were delayed by the war, and for that reason there are also one or two instances of the late 1980s in this selection. The selection is based on what was submitted, at the invitation of the Association of Architects of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Not every architect of reputation and consequence was prepared to submit work, which is why Zlatko Ugljen, to mention the bestknown of the absentees, is not represented in this selection.

NO BALKANOLOGY

In making my choice, I have tried to reconcile several considerations. Firstly, I wanted to make a generous selection of work that stands out in a positive sense because of the architectural quality and the cultural and social ambitions and intentions it reveals.

In many countries in southern Europe (and the Balkans have a reputation to maintain in this respect), there exists alongside the formal, official architecture a parallel universe of mostly semi-legal, informal architecture. Every now and then, this informal architecture produces an exuberant cheerfulness, but often it results in buildings that are quite simply depressing. This parallel universe, which has come to be known as 'turbofolk' and 'Balkanology', has recently attracted more than its fair share of international attention, and more even than the official architecture. This publication is a fitting counterweight to that one-sided attention to architecture that, in the words of the architect and critic Edwin Gardner, lends itself to 'intellectual disaster tourism', a perverse form of entertainment whereby you get to stare

all you want at other people's misery without having to be confronted with it on a daily basis. Such forms of building are not interesting as architecture, or even as a source of architectural inspiration; at best as a sociological or anthropological phenomenon. The architecture of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and of the Balkans in general, deserves a more serious interest than the postmodernist cultural relativism perpetrated by so-called Balkanology.

Secondly, within the top echelon of entries, I have looked for interconnections so that this presentation would be more than a mere succession of individual projects. I have tried to discover and to apply a sense of coherence by grouping projects and arranging them under the same heading. No projects were rejected because they did not fit into the categories that arose as I worked, at most because the category already contained related or similar projects that I found more convincing.

The selected projects reveal a panorama of contemporary architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, indirectly, what they stand for in terms of society and community, in other words, how architecture is helping to shape postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina, which can be seen as a "totum pro parte" for the themes that are addressed here: identity, community, privacy and society.

Every arrangement a critic or historian applies to contemporary or very recent phenomena can be no more than a very provisional snapshot. If this is indeed the state of play, it is of necessity no more than a half-time score. Having said that, I think, or at least hope, that this selection gives an impression of the merits of a post-war architectural culture, a culture that in many respects had to begin all over again, had to pick up the thread, break new ground, and has done this in an intriguing manner. Its very breadth and variety is what makes this culture interesting. Despite the diversity, there emerges a common image which is best described as '81ea mixture'81f. Typically, there are few projects that adopt a radical position, whether that be conceptually radical or formally radical. There is not a lot of architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina that goes to extremes, that seeks out the limits of architecture. A simple explanation might be that the means and conditions are not there, or at any rate not yet. But it could have deeper roots.

All mixtures tend to be harmonious rather than rich in contrasts, congenial rather than hard. And although it would be a gross generalization to apply this characterization to each individual work, it is what strikes me most about the architecture of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It underscores the extent to which architects here go their own way. They are only partially in step with international trends and tendencie. In many European countries architecture is above all more of the same. And without wishing to speak in terms of exoticism, that is much less the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Here, too, of course there are good and bad imitators of international fashions, but most architects seem, in defiance of all the dominant trends, to express their own view, to articulate their own world. Because of this it is possible to find buildings and projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina that are quite unlike what is happening elsewhere, and in the age of globalization and attendant homogenization that is not an insignificant merit.

(Ibelings, 2010, p.6-13, "Restart 1995-2010, Architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina", Sarajevo Buybook, ISBN 978-9958-30-092-9)