

# BOGDAN BOGDANOVIĆ AND THE PUBLIC SPACE TO ENJOY SOLITUDE: PRILEP, TRAVNIK AND VUKOVAR

## A B S T R A C T

*We enjoyed the company of Bogdan Bogdanović a few times. He told us about his life and his work, among other things. This article is to a large extent a result of those pleasant meetings.*

Everyone needs to be alone from time to time; to be alone in the open air, away from their own private room and from the public street. And in the same way as two people can be alone in the same place without disturbing each other, the public space for being alone is not only a necessity but also a possibility. But all that is fairly fragile. It is difficult to design spaces for solitude, and it is particularly difficult to make them work. Sometimes, perhaps, the places preferred by people on their own are just a matter of chance. Moreover, they can easily disappear. Three of such spaces: so fragile and so fascinating, are the subject of this study. They are memorials for Prilep, Travnik and Vukovar, all works of Bogdan Bogdanović. Each of them is a drop of culture in a desert.

## KEY WORDS

BOGDAN BOGDANOVIĆ  
PUBLIC SPACE  
CENOTAPH  
MAUSOLEUM  
MEMORIAL MONUMENT

## PRILEP: DEFORMED CLASSICAL COLUMNS

On a rise outside Prilep, overlooking the town, stands the monument to the partisans. It is a group of deformed classical columns – or a group of ancient fertility goddesses. There are no flags, no eternal flame, no red stars. Bogdanović calls it a female monument, one that evokes continuity.

In 1960, Bogdanović received a call from the mayor of Prilep (Macedonia), asking him to come for a talk. There had been a very strong partisan movement in Prilep that had been very successful in its fight against the Bulgarians, who were allies of the Nazis. In the same year as the commission for the memorial, Prilep held a jubilee and proclaimed itself a partisan town. The monument had to be ready for the jubilee celebrations. Of all Bogdanović's commissions, this was the fastest to be built.

Three or four possible sites were offered for the memorial. One of the most spectacular was Markova Kuli (Marko Mountain). In fact, when Bogdanović was contacted there was already a design for a monument to be built on the summit of Markova Kuli with partisan figures that would carry a marble flag. But Bogdanović didn't like any of those locations. So they began to look for a new one. In the end, Bogdanović found an old man who suggested a different site. He recommended a place where there had been a park before the war. Bogdanović was grateful for the advice: "Any Greek builder would be happy to be able to build on this site." The place is at the edge of the town, at a slightly higher level, on a plateau with good views. When Bogdanović first saw it, it was devoid of houses or trees. It is where the countryside begins, but is linked to the town by a paved road. The site is dominated by the blue sky of the south, "it is an air monument", according to Bogdanović, "It was fantastic and phantasmagorical, this monument in an empty space." In the 1980s the site was spoilt by a new road that ran through the area and a petrol station which was built nearby. Bogdanović was called back to help save the area. Following his advice, a pine wood was planted to hide what had been built – or rather, what had been destroyed.

Since the monument was to be unveiled that same year, 1962, Bogdanović was in a considerable hurry. So he drew the designs directly on to the wall of his flat. And that was to be Prilep. Afterwards he drew some plans to scale so that the stonemasons could directly carve the monument. He also felt obliged to make them a small model. He never liked making models, but this time the work had to be done quickly. Bogdanović spent the first two or three days with

the stonemasons in order to make the first forms, and after that he left them to get on with it on their own.

The Prilep necropolis consists of deformed Ionic columns. They are bulbous 2.9m columns, like amphorae or wide-hipped women. That seemed to lie somewhere on the boundary between the primitive and the classical. The whole architecture of the memorial is female, according to Bogdanović, since it is woman who represents continuity.

Historically, women on funerary monuments had magical properties, because everything was governed by natural cycles. “This is how my nymphs were created, the figures in Prilep. Surrealist, because their heads have two faces: a face in profile and a full-frontal face. Like Janus,” said Bogdanović. And he added: “But I have never thought things out in advance: I do a female figure, like the one in Prilep, or figures with magic eyes, like the ones in Travnik. I have always been guided in my work by a childlike curiosity.”

The clients were not satisfied with just these figures but wanted the monument to be a symbol of victory. So Bogdanović invented a different, larger figure and said it was the goddess of victory.

The Prilep figures were made by local stonemasons. According to Bogdanović, they were the only ones who knew where to find the best stone. They are at their best when working with their own marble from Prilep: they have a mental relationship with it, for they understand its soul. According to the sound it makes, they know whether it is good, whether it is healthy. For them the stone is a living creature.



Figure 1 Drawing for Prilep on the wall of Bogdanović's flat in Belgrade.



Figure 2 Prilep in the 1960s

The placing of the figures was very important. Bogdanović had not drawn any plan and nor did he have it in his head. He ordered two extra plinths to be built, making a total of nine. “So that archaeologists of the future will be puzzled about the two missing figures,” he joked. Bogdanović made these two plinths really so as to have greater freedom with the seating of the figures. He used the same method later on in Vukovar. Once the plinths had been built, he brought along children from the local school and stood them on the spots where the figures were to go. Each figure consists of three blocks of stone: two form the lower part – the geometrical part – and one the upper part – the artistic block.

In Prilep, as elsewhere, Bogdanović worked on site: “I built the mound *in situ*. With a string, like the real masters did in the past. Today an architect hardly ever sees the building site. Plečnik, too, worked in this way, using the classical method. This is no longer possible nowadays.”

Reactions to the Prilep monument were very satisfactory. Except for the reactions of the sculptors, because Bogdanović said it was architecture.

The people of Prilep are proud its monument and treat it with respect and joy. It is a living place and a good example of variety and compatibility of uses. Depending on the time of day, one can find children playing there, people running and walking by, or old men out for a stroll. At night or very early in the morning some solitary person will visit it.

#### TRAVNIK: FRIGHTENED EYES IN THE GRASS

The traveller who happens to find himself in Travnik might one day decide to take a walk through the fields separating the old town from the new town. In doing so, he may come across the cenotaphs in memory of the victims of fascism, large stones engraved with strange primitive symbols that recall those of the Bogomils or other inhabitants from the mysterious past of these lands. All around are green hills. There is no explicit sadness, no words of suffering or glory. It is a pleasant place in which to lose one’s way.

Travnik, which means “meadow”, lies deep in the heart of Bosnia; it is a small town but it used to have four religions: Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim and Jewish. The Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić portrays it well in *Bosnian Chronicle*<sup>1</sup>:

“You only have to dig down one foot into the ground to find the tombs and relics of bygone ages. Every meadow here is a cemetery, and many times over at that. It’s just one necropolis on top of another, an exact

record of the birth and death of successive generations of various native races down the centuries /.../. And burial mounds are proof of life, not wilderness. ...”<sup>2</sup>

With time, Bogdanović gained in prestige. He went to the United States and was appointed as director of the School of Architecture in Belgrade. Before he received the commission for Travnik in 1971, he had already designed thirteen memorials. When Bogdanović received a call from the mayor of Travnik, the site had already been decided. It measured 2 kilometres square and was on high ground between Old Travnik and New Travnik. A great many people had been shot there during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. The idea was to build cenotaphs. It was a place surrounded by uncultivated country, an almost primeval landscape with an “airy” quality as Prilep.

Bogdanović soon met two old men there. One of them had been shot. He did not die but was badly wounded in the head. He was left among the dead on the mound and waited all night to be rescued. Bogdanović thinks that it was because of this story that the figures in Travnik have that frightened, hypnotic look.

Andrić also wrote about the silence and the looks in people’s eyes in Travnik: “From the day he had left Split [...] he found [silence] in everything around him: in the architecture of the house, which turned its true face to the courtyard and a mute, windowless back wall to the street; in the bearing of man and woman; in their looks, which were eloquent because their lips were sealed.”<sup>3</sup>

The figures of Travnik<sup>4</sup> reflect Bogdanović’s own dreams more than anywhere else. He had a dream box in which he kept the dreams that he noted down - a surrealist practice. Travnik, as Goya put it, shows once again that the dream of reason creates monsters.

In the first sketches of the cenotaphs there were no eyes; later came the sunken eyes with their hypnotic gaze. Bogdanović always drew a lot when he travelled. He would park the car – which was a Citroën 2CV – in some pretty spot and start drawing. It was during this period that his mother died, and this was the first time he had personally come face to face with death.

He worked with a team of stonemasons from Pirot. They came from the hidden mountains of Eastern Serbia, in the heart of the Balkans. They were not educated people but they knew how to shape the local sandstone into the 3-4m

high cenotaphs. The ten or so men from Pirot were very skilled craftsmen. They lived there throughout the construction of the monument in a tent erected nearby. They only went home twice, for the Slava (the saint's day of the father of the family) and for the Orthodox Church's Christmas.

As Bogdanović was already quite famous, nobody dared make any adverse comments, not even the sculptors. In fact, in that country nobody was ever surprised, nobody protested, for they all knew that the government did things that nobody understood. There were no comments or any wish to add anything.

On one occasion, a group of Italian hikers approached the Travnik memorial. "Oh, we didn't know there had been Etruscans here." "Of course there were," replied Bogdanović. "This was one of the highest forms of praise I had ever received," he said to us later. "It made me think I had lived for two thousand years." He also commented to us after: "There is a great difference between the made up tradition and the nationalistic pastiche. My architecture is not eclecticism, but a reinterpretation of the spirit of ancient forms."

The last Balkan war left a profound imprint on Travnik and on the memorial. Close beside it ran a line of trenches that divided the zone controlled by the Croats from the area under Muslim control. The figures are riddled with bullet marks. Two of the blocks of stone are broken. Bushes and weeds have overrun the place. Bogdanović liked it even better like that: a ruin is the sweetest death for architecture. However, it is not advisable to leave the road for there may still be unmarked minefields in the area.



Figure 3 Travnik in the 1970s



Figure 4 Travnik in 2004 (Photo by Urša Komac)

Removing the mines around the monument could therefore be a civic act of great symbolic value. The monsters which seem to have been there forever can help remind the people of Travnik that they have common roots. Now they lie wounded or dead, half smothered by the vegetation that in a few years' time may engulf them altogether. The bushes could be prevented from growing further but the figures should not be repaired.

#### VUKOVAR: NEEDLES PIERCING THE MULBERRY WOODS

Large stone cones crowned with bronze pinnacles emerge from the tree tops of a mulberry wood. This is a monument to the victims of fascism. It was partly destroyed during the recent Balkans war. The weeds and trees have overgrown the place as if they wished to take possession of it, creating a green tunnel.

The town of Vukovar stands on the right bank of the Danube, in Croatia. On the opposite side of the river is Serbia. Before the Second World War, five languages were spoken there: Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, Slovakian, Ruthenian and Ukrainian. Among others, many Hungarians spent their holidays in Vukovar in the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Turks had burned it without a fight when retreating from their defeat in Vienna. Vukovar was badly affected during the last Balkan war.

The history of the monument in Dudik Park began in 1978 when Bogdanović was telephoned by the mayor of Vukovar on behalf of the town council and the association of partisan ex-combatants. The place where the monument was to be built was on the edge of the town. It was there that people had been taken to be shot during World War II.<sup>5</sup> It is a quiet, secluded spot. Despite being on the plain, the large mulberry trees offer shelter. It used to be a meadow.

Bogdanović went to see the site and took some photographs. At first, he had no specific ideas but he liked the place. It was the plain and the large mulberry trees that suggested to him the position of the monument.

He worked with the stonemasons from Pirot who collaborated with him since the days of the Knjaževac monument. They built stone boats and conical towers using Bosnian diorite.<sup>6</sup> These boats – called *šajke* in Serbian – can still be seen on the Danube and have always played an important role in the area. The diorite was cut by hand in order to build the base of the conical towers. The copper roofs crowning the towers were made by the craftsmen who did the roofing for the local Catholic churches. The armature for the cones, beneath the copper covering, is made of wood.

Two classes from the local school helped Bogdanović get an idea of where to place the boats that form part of the monument. It was a bit like a theatrical show, in the manner of the happenings of the 1960s. He brought along the children and “made them in stone”, transforming them into his boats. He told the children: “Boys and girls. Here something terrible happened that should never be forgotten. Look at the boats. They are the boats of your future.” As a young boy, Bogdanović thought that to reach Vienna you only had to cross the Danube by boat. In his imagination, Vienna was a clean, orderly city with lots of delicious cakes. One day he went out in a boat with his mother. The people were singing about Belgrade, the clean, white city. In fact, Beograd (Belgrade) means *white city* in Serbian. Bogdanović asked his mother why, since it is such a grey, dirty city.

Vlado Bužančić, a critic from Zagreb, was emphatic about the Etruscan interpretation of Vukovar. He said that the cenotaphs in the park were very similar to the descriptions by some Roman writers of the mythical mausoleum of the Etruscan king Lars Porsen. Many architects wanted to reconstruct this tomb. One of them was the Romantic architect Friedrich Weinbrenner, who was a contemporary of Schinkel and who went as far as drawing a design for the mausoleum. Bogdanović made several drawings in which his cones appeared alongside boats, spirals, strange letters and other Etruscan motifs. He always liked far-fetched interpretations of his work, and the more fantastical the better.

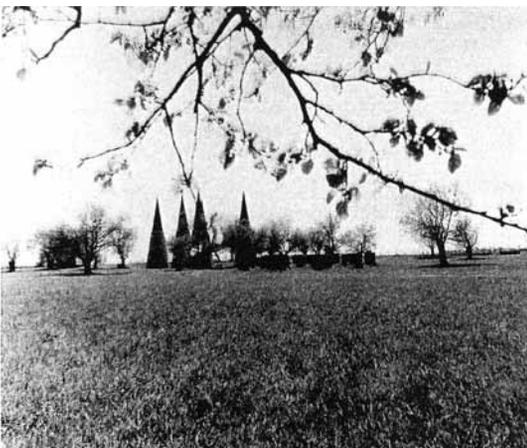


Figure 5 Vukovar in the 1980s



Figure 6 Vukovar in 2004 (Photo by Urša Komac)

The Vukovar monument took two years to complete. “I would often sleep in the car. Everything seemed so quiet, almost idyllic. I could never imagine that what came later could ever happen.”

Bogdanović would very often draw the ruins of his architecture, like an intellectual game that sometimes turned out to be clairvoyant. As a lecturer of urban history, he taught his students that every city will eventually become a ruin. He imagined the Vukovar cones as the pinnacles of a buried Gothic city. A couple of years before the 1990s war the cover of Slovenian architectural journal *Arhitektov Bilten*<sup>7</sup> showed a photomontage of a Bogdanović’s sketch in red ink superimposed to a black and white picture of the monument. The sketch is made of stains and droplets. It gives an impression as if the monument is bleeding. The Vukovar memorial was indeed badly damaged during by the Serbian militia. They did not know that it was a monument to victims who were basically Serbs. Some of the wood and copper copings on the five cones, originally 18 metres high, were destroyed. The local council did not cut the grass for a long time after the war for fear of landmines. When talking about the disaster, Bogdanović became a bit sad and remembered an idea that he had constantly repeated to his students. The rise and fall of civilisations is explained by the struggle between those who know how to appreciate the city and those who full of hatred want to slaughter it in a ritual way. He elaborated it in his famous essay *Ritualno ubijanje grada*.<sup>8</sup>

In the words of the jury for the Piranesi prize, which was awarded to Bogdanović in 1989<sup>9</sup>, the Vukovar memorial is based on the universal tradition of a simple mound of stone that both frames and protects a tomb. The same jury highlighted the expression of solitude, silence, death and victory over death, an architectural sign in nature, such as Stonehenge. An aphorism that Adolf Loos coined in 1909 refers to the stone mound as no less than the definition of architecture: “If we were to come across a mound in a woods, six foot long by three foot wide, with the soil piled up in a pyramid, a sombre mood would come over us and a voice inside us would say, ‘There is someone buried here.’ *That is architecture*.”<sup>10</sup>

#### AS A SUMMARY

Bogdanović’s work is related to the eternal issue of the essence and the meaning of death. His monuments, according to him, are an answer to this awesome event – an answer that consists in conquering death with memorials that aim to be a comforting message for future generations. In his own words: “My fantastic nocturnal cities and my necropolises have never been necrophilic. On the contrary, my works have always opposed death. All were happy and playful.”<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

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- 1 One of the English titles of *Travnička hronika*.
- 2 Ivo Andrić, *Bosnian Chronicle*, trans. Joseph Hitrec (New York: Arcade, 1993), 114-115.
- 3 Ivo Andrić, *Bosnian Chronicle*, 125-126.
- 4 Each cenotaph is about 3.5m high.
- 5 Many people from different countries died, among them a lot of Serbs. They were shot by the Croatian fascists, the ustaši.
- 6 A fairly inexpensive type of granite that is frequently used for paving.
- 7 *Arhitektov bilten (AB)*, 105-106 (1990): front cover.
- 8 Bogdan Bogdanović, "Ritualno ubijanje grada," in *Grad kenotaf*, (Zagreb: Durieux, 1993), 36-41.
- 9 Josip Kostelac, "Protocol of the Jury for the Piranesi Award," *Arhitektov bilten (AB)*, 105-106 (1990): 53-55.
- 10 Adolf Loos, *On Architecture*, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside: Ariadne, 2002), 84.
- 11 Tomaž Brate, "Interview. Bogdan Bogdanović." *Piranesi* 2/1 (1992): 25.

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