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Heritage Ensnared by Ideology and Tycoons (or "Cultural/Architectural Heritage in the Jaws of Money")

I am going to tell you a story called

A High-rise Serenade

X number of years ago, my friend Marija - or Mary, to make it more international– who lived on the ninth floor of a high-rise building, was serenaded from the foot of the high-rise by one of today's most powerful marketing wizards in Serbia and the Balkans. It was his valiant attempt to steal her from another guy. Everyone came to the windows - except for her. She was in love with the other guy.

How is it even possible to combine the ninth floor of a high-rise, money and love? How come there are so many buildings with over 20 floors when man was born on the ground? To what extent are leaders who refuse to pay for expensive property sites responsible for the neglect and endangering of heritage - and of love - for the sake of their own profit?

New times require new building rules. I will use “Yugoslavia” as an example to highlight some mistakes that resulted from the ideology of the time.

Our country represented a specific system, based both on the Soviet model and the Western model. If communism cancelled out everything that

was before it, roughly speaking the same was true of cities which had to demonstrate the outstanding values and quality of the new society; “nothing prior to this time should be recognized”, “old values have become obsolete”, “we are creating a new city from the very foundation” – those were the beliefs. Such enthusiasm and impetus was most obvious in the new cities, which actually got the prefix *new* in front of their old name in order to make a clear distinction from the cities built before the socialist revolution. The capital of the former Yugoslav republic of Montenegro (Montenegro is today a country) was relocated from Cetinje to the war-torn and utterly destroyed city of Podgorica, which was then rebuilt and renamed Titograd (Tito’s city) as a symbol of the new system. Novi Beograd (New Belgrade), located on the right bank of the river Sava, across from the old part of Belgrade, was built with the help of mass youth volunteer campaigns by digging and drying and leveling acres and acres of marshland. These are extremely expensive works and impossible to get done for free today. Novi Beograd was built in accordance with the new matrix of civil engineering. It met contemporary urban planning standards popularized by French architects – the most famous of them was Le Corbusier – who were members of the International Congress of Modern Architect, CIAM. They stated and signed their principles in the Athens Charter, while traveling from Athens to Marseille by ship, and defined the standards for the New City and the New Society – they were no longer to be the old housing blocks without sun, without light, without air, without basic conditions for hygiene. At that time the rich lived on the first and second floors, the middle class on the fourth and fifth, and the poor in the basement or the attic. It was a city designed to meet the need of the contemporary man, firmly rooted in capitalism.

Our country was not the only one condemned to have leaders whose decisions were sacrosanct; as is very nearly the case even today, in times of transitional democracy. “In European Baroque...at its core this period of grand manner is closely tied to intellectual, political and technological advances such as counter-reform, new developments in astronomy, spectacular discoveries of far and still unknown parts of the world, and, most importantly, to the existence of total power in the hands of one person.” (dr Darko Reba).

It is amusing to find out that things never really change, that it did not start by destruction in the small, beloved towns that stand witness to our identity and heritage. *Semper idem* (Always the same). Might is right. The same is true in the animal world. However, animals do not attack their own

kind. Only man builds and destroys at random what he created. Why, then, should a leader be different and considerate to his subjects who chose him and support his ideology?! An authoritarian subjugates, commands, decides and answers to no one. The same authoritarian principle applies to the building of new cities. “The principles of absolute ruling explain the need for huge urban strokes typical of the 1930s totalitarian regimes, like Italy under Mussolini, Germany during Hitler’s rule, Russia under Stalin, as well as our host country Romania under Chaucescu...The enormous, visually threatening, overwhelming buildings with luxurious ornaments and with the use of high-cost building materials represented instruments of power.“
(D.Reba)

The act of creating majestic public areas by the country leader or the ruling party is not new. Those in power shape our living space. From the Greek *polis*, i.e. city state, to today it is easy to follow the politics of a country, how its policies are reflected on the society itself and all activities related to these policies. If the Greek *agora*, i.e. market place, represented democracy, a place for gatherings, a forum intended to represent democracy in the urban setting, it had to be of such size that all citizens had room on that square, or, at least, that they could be within hearing distance of the speaker.

During Tito in Yugoslavia, a magnificent library was built in Prishtina in Kosovo in the 1970s. It had very few visitors. There were no books in Albanian (which was what the majority of people wanted), because the great leader wanted to show that no expense would be spared even in the poorest part of the country. Nothing unusual. “To have and show off the biggest museum, the largest university, the largest hospital and shopping mall...were the main principles of a big city...in short, every big city institution is organized in such a way to fit in with this oversized, pointless whole“ (Lewis Mumford).

The serenade, luckily, managed to survive all ideological dictatorships, even the age of tycoons. It is, however, fragile, so we have to take good care of it.

This is the end of the story about the serenaded.

The period of socialist renewal and rebuilding, when cultural and historical heritage was either destroyed as a relict of times past or hidden from public eyes so that the communist elite could enjoy it, has been replaced by new rules governing liberal capitalism whereby, in essence,

those with money can buy anything, including cultural and historical heritage.

Conservation and preservation of heritage is always dependent on and supported by its usefulness to the society in general. It must not become an isolated monument with no general purpose, but rather a stage for the development of new intercultural and interdisciplinary creative activities of the various ethnic communities. It must also not be turned into a commercial good to be bought by anyone with enough money.

The city is the foundation of man's urban existence, and an old historical city creates a visual link to his heritage, guaranteeing his identity. Article 6 of the Treaty of the European Union states: "The Union shall respect the national identity of its member states". The role of heritage is, therefore, to unite and expand. The past is the first step towards a universal world of knowledge and understanding. The relationship towards heritage is an indication of the relationships towards democracy in the making. This way heritage becomes a sustainable resource for development.

Physical deterioration and selling off of heritage can be prevented through: constant and clearly defined activities, lobbying at all levels of state, consistent fighting for preservation of heritage (the right to heritage is in the corpus of human rights), transparent activities and joint action by experts and the non-governmental sector aimed at the political elite, i.e. at those who hold the power.

I am the representative of the Civic association "Suburbium" from Petrovaradin, a small town in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, in Serbia. "Suburbium" does not aspire to act as arbitrator in issues dealt with by conservationists, architects, art historians...but it does insist on swift, open and independent action regarding preservation of heritage. It will, therefore, continue to bring together particularly relevant individuals from the western Balkan region, with representatives from the governments of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and of Serbia. Most countries from this region, like Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary... are facing similar problems despite the fact that they are members of the European Union. It is to all our advantage that the European Union has allocated considerable funds for our joint, regional projects, but we have to know how to best utilize these funds. I believe that is one of the reasons we are here today – to meet and to decide together on the issues before us.

It is to our advantage that our differences are very small because the region of south-east Europe and western Balkans is, actually, a melting pot with intertwined destinies and shared cultural and historical heritage. We

need, however, to establish open and steady communication based on common-interest thematic meetings, like this one, and on small-scale multidisciplinary projects by both the government and the non-governmental sectors. The aim is to bring heritage closer to the citizens both as a public good and as something that belongs to each and every one, thereby making them understand that the only way to bring about a change is to get personally involved. The Great Leader or the Dictator do not exist anymore.

Countries, which have been fostering democracy for centuries, now have firmly established institutions and laws designed primarily to protect the citizen as an individual, the state, and the heritage we are talking about today. We do need the help from these countries, but it is up to us to create and implement concrete actions. Right now.