



# COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND SPATIAL LAYERING IN THE POST-COMMUNIST CITIES ON THE BALKAN PENINSULA

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**Abstract:** The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has been a crucial period for the Balkan Peninsula. It is known to be a time of transition moreover crossing from one regime to another, from the communist-socialist era to the modern capitalist one. Known also as the post-war, post-communism, or post-Yugoslav (this nomenclature is used only for the ex-Yugoslav countries) period has resulted in significant transformations in people's collective memory likewise in the city memory and its formation. After believing an ideology and being a part of it, the central problem of the nations was their identity. "Identifying" and "being identified" by others, and questions like "who we were before" who we are now?" started to emerge. The same steps are also visible in the cities' formation, especially the search for space identity in the public squares. Moreover, this was a period of remembering and forgetting. When evolving from one ideology to another, the main aim was to break from the old prototype model and adapt to trends that are more Western. In order to grow the monuments and buildings that reminded them of the old regime they needed to be destroyed and streets to be renamed. Aside from the monumental layering and architecture during this period, social memory was also being layered by imposing new ideas and ideologies. The idea behind this paper is to discuss the collective and the city memory of this transition period, how it influenced people's lives, and the cities' form withal the consequences of spatial and collective layering. Moreover, the Macedonia Square will be mentioned, its evolution after the communist period, and the layering matter. To conduct such research a literature review was been used that summarizes the topics of collective memory, city memory, and spatial layering.

**Keywords:** Post-communism, Space, Collective memory, Layering, The Balkans.

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## **Forgetting the past**

Every regime's traces are seen in the architecture and the built environment. They are the more resistant and visually the most important reminders of the past. Precisely for this reason, attempts to forget the past start from the visual. To forget intended to eliminate commemorative objects and change spaces or create new memories over old ones. According to Connerton, there are seven types of forgetting, which can be: repressive erasure, prescriptive forgetting, forgetting while forming a new identity, structural amnesia, forgetting as annulment, forgetting as planned obsolescence, and forgetting as humiliated silence (Connerton, 2008). The types mentioned are connected to the totalitarian or capitalist regime, societies, or groups, making them the main affecting element in memory and space creation. In this case, every memory change meant a new regime with new rules and different spatial arrangements. Such attempts led to spatial and memory stratifications.

In the example of the Balkan cities, obliviousness is noticed in the transition between ideologies. The most characteristic time to be analyzed in this regard is the transition from communism to post-communism.

Communism in some countries was known to be a complex ruling era filled with prohibitions. During this period, the state had the main power to make changes; the state was the rule, the power, and the religion. The main idea of the communist utopia was to remind through the material world the "good it brought"; therefore, immediately after its fall began the elimination of its traces.

Whereas in the Balkans, the fall of the regime was being celebrated as salvation from a totalitarian regime, Europe was marking essential events such as the destruction of the Berlin Wall (1990) and the velvet revolution in Prague (1989).

In the period 1980-1990, the Balkans became an area of mass migration because of the transition and due to the Yugoslav civil wars. Together with this, the number of internal and international migrations increased and, with it, also the number of beggars and crime. However, it should be understood that migration represents a long-term process on the Balkan Peninsula, and this did not just happen in this period or as a riot but coming out of the communist utopia for most states represented liberation and freedom.



On the other hand, post communism was a period of transition and was manifested as a sign of revolt after the long reign of the communist regime. It was felt the need to give an end to the past and open a new blank page with its beginning. The most significant changes started to be seen in the city arrangements, followed by state organization and the unequivocal collapse of the economic system. In the first period of post-communism, states started to reorganize and create their national symbols, rename public spaces, and change the way history was taught (Kuzmanić, 2008). A new interpretation was getting into shape, and what happened in the past was only part of the past and did not need to be remembered.

As a result of these acts, a vast social identity crisis suddenly started to emerge and the necessity to learn the past. Consequently, it increased the interest in memory studies and collective memory. This act resulted from “the rise of multiculturalism, and the politics of victimization and regret” (J. K. Olick & Robbins, 1998). Moreover, its rising value was affected by the development of the press and the digital evolution (J. K. Olick et al., 2011).

To remember the past was essential to construct a future and a sane collective remembrance (Karacan, 2016), but memories, in this case, were being considered only when a part of history reminding of them was left in the past (Jo, 2003), (Rossi, 1984).

## **Collective memory – experiencing the transition**

The transition era reflected a rupture in people’s memories and their traditions. The collective memory turned into social identity, public memory, or a historical one. Societies until 1989 were part of a communist country, they were part of a society, and communism had been their social identity. But, what about now? Who were these people after the change? While the world was experiencing a memory crisis, the Balkans were experiencing identity and national crises at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The process was a new experience in the Balkans, and still, for the newly ex-Yugoslav countries, it was even a more significant challenge. Countries that got free from communist rule were on the verge of creating new national states. For them, new perceptions for the past and the present were getting set, and reorganizing collective memory was a must. The newly created national identity had to remove its roots from ex-communism traces.



Most nations were into one cover during the time when being a communist state, but when one by one state started declaring their independency, new borders were being created, and nations started to name themselves, not like Yugoslavs, but as independent people. All of a sudden, a nationality begun to be necessary. On the spur of the moment, the minority groups became “the others” (Kokkali, 2015), whereas transformations influenced people’s behavior and affected inter-nation relations. For the Balkan states getting out of communism meant being a free independent nations, while for some,<sup>2</sup> it meant embracing a new reality. They were making desirable memory layering, as long as it had nothing to do with the old, but still, they were confronted with undesirable and imposed layerings.

Although aimed at forgetness, most of these memories were passed down from generation to generation, and remained alive among the population. This collective memory, is a social proceeding that is affected by different components of the social area, and is remembered and transmitted with the help of the groups (Kuzmanić, 2008). As members of particular communities, people access the past through the social context (Zerubavel, 2003); thus, people can experience things that happened to a group, where they belong, before they even joined them, similarly as if they were part of that event, known as “generational memory” (Mannheim, 1952; cited in Kuzmanic 2008). In a survey conducted in Slovenia (Kuzmanić, 2008) between different age groups, the outcome was as follows: the younger generations felt the transition as a good period, a time when things changed for the better, while the oldest ones experienced it as devastating because for them communism had been a period of ideals, brotherhood, and unity. People who lived under the regime, felt like they had lost a homeland or were becoming foreigners in their own country, while new rules and new traditions were being created as the recent period demanded. If in memories can be recalled and found in a society, (Halbwachs, 1992), in this example, they were being wiped out.

In the same survey, mentioned above, people were asked about the death of Tito (Kokkali, 2015), and even though not everyone was present in his time, most of the people remember it as an overwhelming period, just because they are part of the group who experienced that collective memory. Acquiring a group memories and identifying them with its collective past, means to adopt their social identity, even though it was not shared.

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2 Albanians and Romanians



A memory, especially a collective memory, is a group activity that can be specific to a group. Thus, the memories of groups differ. For some, the past was a must-go; however, history and communism were a golden era, still preserved with nostalgia (Jagiello-Szostak, 2013). Collective post-communism memory was manifested through trauma and nostalgia or, as a memory crisis, if put differently. A struggle to change an identity and a period of significant ideological confusion.

Besides the identity crisis and the feeling of not belonging, people in these areas experienced nostalgia, the sense of missing communism after it was gone. Nostalgia is a longing for the return home, something that cannot be achieved anymore, manifested as an estrangement from the past. People missed the space, the city, the borders, the feeling the communism gave, the spatial and temporal connotations (Malpas, 2012). The past was already inaccessible for most of them, a place from which they were irrevocably separated. They were longing for a time of stability and security, a time that could not be found in the present. The ones who never experienced any other rule, communism was their life and their memory. They missed the life and the security, that the socialist regime provided. These groups spent much time thinking about the past, because there was so little of it left (Nora, 1996).

Collective memory can't be thought of as objective, because not everyone had the same attachment with the past (Zerubavel, 2003). For the new generations, it wasn't all black and white. They were not longing for a past that they never experienced, but were eager for the future. This community's collective memory, included memories shared only by its members or groups; that's why the new inhabitants of the Balkans, though they never experienced the fall of the regime or the transition period, they'll always feel part of it because their community did. This feeling was reinforced by celebrating national holidays, the fall of communism, and the new independence national day.

## **Spatial layering and collective memory**

Memories are recalled mainly by thinking of material places and spaces (Hebbert, 2005) or by "imagining complex spatial images (a palace, a square, a city) where architectural items or statues are representing strange or terrifying facts" (Eco, 2013). Cities and spaces are becoming conglomerates of collective memories, emotions, traditions which make up their past and



future development (Mijatović, 2014). However, the main element that has influenced the formation of Balkan cities for a long time has been ideology. The long journeys that these cities followed during communism and post-communism, led to spatial and social changes.

By trying to erase the traces of communism and creating new traditions, mass confusion happened. Want it or not, by changing the communist places, the last memories were getting vague. The architecture and the built environment were the sites that reminded people of the past, and by destroying them, memories were being erased. The "*lieux de memories*" were transformed into new memory places (Nora, 1989). If people did not have access to these reminders step by step, even the most profound memories, were starting to fade away. Collective remembrances were linked with events, monuments, and spaces. Places, in this case, were linked to memories.

Places that were reminders of communism, had no value for the future anymore. Just like modernism had to clean all the proofs from the older periods, the transition meant to erase the communist remains. The one thing that suffers from such transformations is always the space, more precisely the public space. In time, the public spaces are known as memory keepers, where people connect, create memories, or accept the one being made for them.

During communism, every public space in the Balkan cities was very similar to each other. It was made of a vast area, surrounded by public buildings that served the communist regime, and a monument that raised the ruler of his time in the center. A form like this made the time of creation recognizable and emphasized the power of the rule and its ruler. The Communist ideology expressed its power mainly through statues and monuments, located in the center of these spaces. Essential figures, were put in the crucial parts of the cities, especially in the piazzas and squares; moreover, their mass and dimension expressed power along with dominance (Hristova, 2006). These were talking statues, expressing the idea and power behind the rule, whereas the memory created there was named urban memory (Rose-Redwood et al., 2008), (Boyer, 1996).

On the other hand, the monuments and architectural shapes built at the time, reflected "the happiness of communist society and the enormity of grief from battles lost to enemies of the people" (Wejnert & Zherebkin, 2001). However, the day of splendor came to an end, and the presence of such structures



was not needed anymore. The sites carried traumatic collective memories, thoughts of suppression, and control; that is why the first step of the transition was eliminating evidence of such existences. Transformation of the spaces and erasing of the unwanted, was a way of rebuilding people's memories.

However, the public space after the communism, experienced some layering. The old was substituted with new, and in the place of the monuments, other functions were planned, with the main idea to erase the signs of the past and create new ones. According to Forty, the monuments had the purpose of making an 'iconoclastic' move that meant making new memories in the place of the old (Forty, 2001). Doing such a step was aimed at the erasure of the collective memories as well. These public spaces were known as ceremonial models and sought to represent the success of "the public over the market" (Kurt, 1998) but are a fundamental part of any project attempting to 'put the public back into public space'. This paper compares four models of public space commonly employed by analysts of contemporary public space. Some of the models of 'good' public space are themselves inequitable and exclusionary in important respects. Iris Marion Young's "Justice and the Politics of Difference" (1990). Moreover, it symbolize the spaces, where important events and gatherings take place and are celebrated.

The public spaces, dominated by sculptures and monuments representing the socialist leaders during the post-communism period, were filled with temporary facades and structures such as the kiosk and the open market (Pusca, 2008). These "temporary evasions," the superficial facades, the improvised bars and the party streets become a permanent fixture of the city (Pusca, 2008). These new layering, were the most visited places by the non-workers, a remainder of the economic transition state.

Massive revolutions were being organized, and people demolished site memories, torn portraits, and changed names of buildings and streets. Socialism had finally ended. In Romania and Poland, Stalin statues were being removed. In the Albanian capital, Tirana, the statue of the dictator Enver Hoxha was destroyed by its nation, and in its place was designed a park with fountains as a symbol of a new beginning. In Bulgaria, in the center of Sofia, a mausoleum that was symbolizing the communist regime after many dilemmas, were torn down. The embalmed body of the Bulgarian Stalinist dictator Georgi Dimitrov and all that was of a socialist background was removed with it.

Post-communism changes were manifested in the urban forms and in the patterns of social segregations, as well (Andrusz et al., 1996). However, because urban forms were changing more slowly than urban diversity and architecture, it was hard to understand this kind of transition in a short time.



**Fig.4.** a) Statue of Dictator Enver Hoxha toppled down<sup>3</sup>, b) the mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov in Sofia<sup>4</sup>.

Another significant conversion in the cities was creating a temporary neighborhoods, which later became the slums and symbolized the economic struggle, during the change. The expansion of the new working class and the bourgeoisie, (Andrusz et al., 1996) caused the modification of the housing texture. During the socialist era, collective condominiums were trendy, whereas later private houses and villas were societies' new choices. The communist traces in architecture by the '90s were fading, and modernism was starting to show its prints.

Anyhow, the city is created with multiple histories and cultural layerings; thus, by removing a part of its history is being erased. However, this was not a characteristic of this period only, but every regime-changing era, and they were manifested, every time people were dissatisfied by a rule or ideology. They symbolized war's finales, salvations from occupations, and a symbol of a despot wrack creates an indelible moment in history.

On the other hand, new meanings and functions were given to the buildings. They were modified, in order to resemble something new, a capitalist idea. The facades were changing, they were layered with many architectural styles. But these styles were mainly based on the needs of the

<sup>3</sup> SIM David, "Good Bye, Lenin! Statues of Dictators Toppled around the World [PHOTOS] ", October, 2014, available from: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/good-bye-lenin-statues-dictators-toppled-around-world-photos-1467932>, (accessed 05.01.2018, 17:05).

<sup>4</sup> Nonument, Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov, available from: <https://nonument.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/mausoleum-3.jpg>, (accessed 24.07.2021, 22:00).



inhabitants, without following a given order. The public spaces started to be invaded and layered with commercial and housing functions (Németh & Schmidt, 2011). The line between the private and the public was fading, whereas functions were interpolated into each other. This new order made the consumer and the owner the one speaking.

Moreover, the lack of a specific identity was another problem arousing in cities. Be it national or spatial identity, it was reflected in the creation of the post-communist squares. Such an example is the city of Skopje and the overly talked about Skopje 2014 project.

If forgetting the past, makes a gap in the social and spatial structure, another equally harmful phenomenon is “excess of memory.” Excessive memorization of historical events leads to tragedy, according to Eco (Eco, 2013). Thus, it would be easier to forget what needs to be forgotten, than to be able to “remember everything that has been seen and heard.”<sup>5</sup>

After the fall of the communist empire, Skopje, such as other Balkan cities, was searching for a new identity or something that would symbolize a new beginning and sever ties with the past. Such a struggle was seen in searching for a unique architectural style, new spaces of remembrance, a new state, and a new name. In order to start from fresh, a new look was proposed for the main city square of Skopje, one that would remind of the glorious past of the state. For the first time, the mint was part of the past and not any kind of past. In the example of Skopje, a collective memory was revived, excessively remembered, and embodied in space to commemorate the glorious history of the Macedonian state. The lost “*lieux de memoire*” was relayered in the Macedonia square, into a new memory space that would remind, new generations of what this place used to be.

Even though criticized for its content, its aim was the same as the one shown to a space during every regime change. This time, to delete the traces of communism in “square Macedonia,” buildings were masqued with a new look to embrace the recent/old history or build something new to hide the old. This layering was primarily seen in space and buildings. To some, spaces were given new functions (Mijalkovic & Urbanek, 2011), which changes the memory people have of the place. It was understandable that some spaces in the square had undergone many layers in time or had changed in different periods. Mijalkovic and Urbanek have classified these changes as a memory

5 The expression is used to explain the case of Themistocles who was gifted with a great memory power. the same was cited by Cicero in De Oratore (II, 74).

(the one remembered), the wish ( what it's planned to be built), and the realization that turned quite different from the intended ideas.

The new memory layering was also named as a process of creating new narratives in space (J. Olick, 2016), (Graan, 2013), or a process to brand the Macedonian identity (Nikolovski, 2012).

However, this is not the first trauma of spatial layering that the city of Skopje is undergoing. Its history is filled with dualities such as filling and emptying, remembering and forgetting, creating and erasing. Spatial layering examples are visible in more Balkan cities and spaces.

On the other hand, the collective memory was changing as well. The inhabitants were reminded of what the city and the country had been, of a past when Macedonia had been ruling and not ruled. According to Halbwachs, the memories are recalled in societies and localized in them, but in this case, the new public space was the localizer of memories (Halbwachs 1992, p. 38), and instead of society, the creator of remembrances was the outdoor space. The square possesses layers of every political regime, of every century and architectural style; thus, it is easier to recall its historical evolution by walking by it.

## **Conclusion**

Memory is a necessary element for the creation of space and sane social structures. History, memory, or past events are all that make the basis of society and cities. By learning from the past, the present can be understood and the processes on which life and being have evolved. Just as Eco states, ignoring the past can not help in inventions, and “no culture can subsist and survive without a collective memory” (Eco, 2013); thus, life without collective remembrance is a lost cause. To maintain their identity, they first take for basis collective memories, and when the same goes through deletion processes, then the same communities go through cycles of identity loss (Eco, 2013). The mentioned processes have been crucial in the creation of the Balkan cities.

The transitions through which the Balkan cities have undergone in the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have been of significant importance for the later development of their spaces and nations. Even though the same period is characterized as a problematic one from a global perspective, the effect left in these lands is still visible today.



The transition from communism to post-communism brought not only regime changes, but forgetting and rewriting of memories. The main emphasis during these times was the past erasure and the creation of a new identity, that had no connection with the past.

Whatever happened, the city did not have to bear the consequences of such behavior. Monuments were destroyed, and borders were changed; even states' names changed, but some stories remained as part of the collective memories of the living communities. After all the tries, communism was there, and the evidence left of it should be preserved because places do not have importance only in the time they existed but, they symbolize a nation's evolution.

In this paper, of significant importance is emphasized the layering processed characteristics for the collective memory of the citizens and the spatial layering ones. With layering, the city forms and the public spaces were changed. However, the changes emphasized here did not end with the regime instead still continue. The forgetting and remembering are not a finished, but a never-ending process, that is most visible in the public spaces where the power is shown. Even though time moves on, the signs of such a duality are still visible in the Balkan city's public spaces. These spaces go through successive planning and implementation processes. The main change is that now space is in a constant fight to adapt to the user's need and the imposed one of the rulers.

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