

”SKETCH, IT IS ME”

ON (AGREEABLE) IMPOSSIBILITY OF CLASSIFICATION

A B S T R A C T

The sketches of Bogdan Bogdanović are and are not associated with the designs of the monument entities. The architect would arrive to numerous conceptual solutions while conscientiously taking the side paths. Undoubted poetic multi-layeredness requires trans-disciplinary approach in studying this exceedingly rich chest of works. The study that follows points out to certain examples from the sketcher's practice, without the aspiration of setting forth the methodological guidelines.

KEY WORDS

SKETCHES
MEMORIALS
SYMBOLS INTERPRETATION
ECLECTICISM
LETTER

After Bogdan Bogdanovic (as abbreviated: BB) handed over his ample, formidable sketcher's archive to the collection of Vienna Architekturzentrum in 2005, I have been honored to analyze and interpret the same thus making it accessible to the so-called public of professionals and experts. Inspection and systematization of sketches, designs and architectural fantasies covered two-full-years'-long period, so that finally I could take pride in the fact that some 12,500 sheets, which in the meantime I have become closely attached to, have been put in order and the function of archive material completed. It was partly that I have been introduced by the architects into this mysterious language of inscriptions on paper, and partly I was forced to take a solitary journey through this bizarre world of pictorial metamorphoses; it turned out – this will still be written about in this or another way – that such journeys were of a formative character. Thereby, an issue would always be raised anew as to in what capacity BB's sketches had "to be put in order": whether in the capacity of the sketcher who in the first place cared for the sensual experience of the substance and who in a slightly innocent manner embarked upon interpretation of linear courses, or, however, in the capacity of the historian of art the subject of research of whom need not necessarily incorporate "history"? In other words, I have too often been in the position to ask myself what does a sketch actually represent? When on one occasion in the search for the answer I addressed BB, he replied in a sort of melancholic voice: "Sketch, it is me."

Some five decades have elapsed since BB in an article under a lapidary title "Sketch" pronounced the same as the essence of any architectural manifestation. "Sketch, it is that *something* in the forms which expresses the forms, which reveals them", was one of the maxims in the text.¹ I have no alternative left but to add what Gottfried Boehm said: "Sketch, therefore, as a discipline and as an instrument, has retained the closeness with all elementary processes of reality cognition and in that way stepped beyond the boundaries of art. Sketch has made the science of geometry possible, that beginning of the European epistemes, sketch marks the beginning of identity and socialization formation in the form of child's drawing, sketch contributes to the spiritual equilibrium by the therapy with sketching, namely in the works of mentally deranged persons, with the sketch the architectural thinking and sketching commences which ends with the computer techniques aided drawing, and it is understood that sketch marks the beginning of purely artistic processes, whereby it is not rare that it has to be resigned to its own disappearance, shall we say in the finished part."² From the text that follows, I believe, it will be derived that in the work and reflection of BB that disappearance of sketches is a priori impossible. Anyway, numerous are the cases in which the sketch by itself

creates a memory – whether as a testimony of the concept long ago rejected, or as an artifact of undisputable tactile values.

ON TECHNIQUE

If first we take a look at the techniques applied, our attention will be drawn by pen-and-ink studies from the fifties of the last century, mostly sketched on the yellowed, fragile, brittle tracing paper, in the conditions of utter scantiness and on the transparent, smooth butcher's paper; in doing so it should be noted that even in latter, more successful periods the background did not play any more significant role. At the beginning of the '60s there ensued the pioneer achievements in fiber-tip pen medium. In some of the works from that period one can notice the symptoms of actual nervousness of a painter which could be interpreted as breaking free from the utilitarian vices: in his sketches for the memorial buildings BB applies layer over layer in an uninhibited manner, without giving it a thought as regards the appropriateness of the technique just used – whether be it charcoal on his work, color pencil or ball-point pen. That much about “vertical” dimension of the sketch which will thereafter have few more lines dedicated to it. In “the horizontal” of the certain series, it, however, seems that the procedure applied makes the meaningfulness of the previous one questionable, and that the visual messages deny themselves. There, at least in indications, one can follow the phenomenon which the author on several occasions characterized as a graphic novel, indeed as many novels in one.

The line, however, was and remained the basic means of BB's expression, nota bene of the sketcher *and* the writer, already by the fact that it represents a basic unit of that intricate complex which we call alphabet. I have been led into temptation to point out also to the privileged role of line in secessionist graphic art, introducing BB's undisguised sympathies towards this artistic movement into play. I would even wish to draw the reader's attention to the legacies of the Far East and to the fact that Taoist conception of reality postulated the principle of unstoppable course, denying firmness, stability and eternal value to the manifested forms of the material world. It was just, anyway, that belief in universal ephemerality that was behind an accentuated linearity in the works of the ancient eastern sketchers - the linearity which materialistic West at the transition of two centuries adopted with huge enthusiasm, little or not at all taking care of the initial connotations. It is understood that the latter does not relate to BB.

ON ECLECTICISM

BB was often and rightly attested with “creative erudition”. I would like to note that it concerns a somewhat wrong semiotic pattern, since in his case the reception of the available repertory of forms and images, and besides also the legacy in the wider sense, happened first. Namely, surrealism was the driving force of his first poetic experiments, including therein also occupying himself with photography: surrealism, therefore, the “extreme” of which in respect to other modernistic phenomena of interwar period should particularly be emphasized here. Besides, BB would eagerly mention that the beginning of his studies of architecture at the Faculty of Engineering in Belgrade, which was abruptly interrupted in the spring of 1941 by Yugoslavia entering the War, was characterized by the study of classic styles; it should not be eliminated that it concerned one of the arguments in the function of individualistic self-positioning in the milieu of the fifties, permeated with another modernism and its recurrences. Finding himself in the time in which modernism was preserved and in the most diverse didactic levels promoted into academic canon, we could state that in the long run BB was right: the one who was not outrun by the fashionable trends, has the prospects to be pronounced truly modern one day.

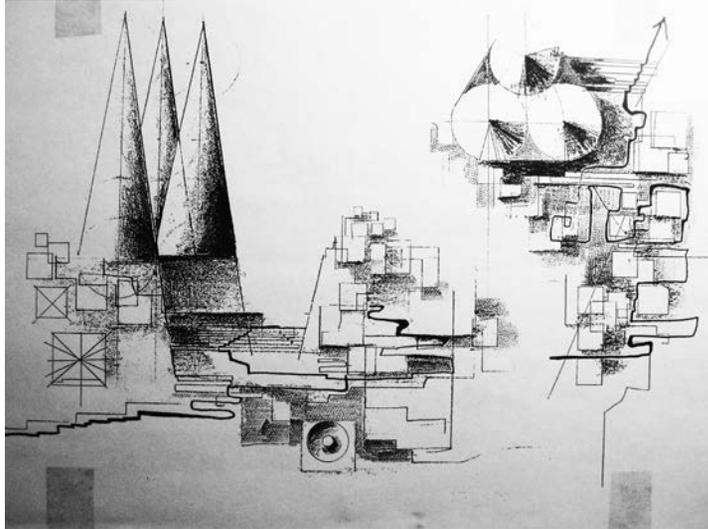
Being surrealist, however, means also to write automatic texts. Erudite as he was, exoterist of esoterics, in his texts BB could only here and there afford himself the luxury of such way of writing. His sketching activity was that much more anatomized, and therefore it would not be incorrect to state that *écriture automatique* actually consisted of sketching, but also of borrowings from the treasures of numerous collective memories, only seemingly frivolous. Exposing myself to the risk of pretentiousness, I will be happy to make a parallel with the whims of a Piranesi the inner paradox of whom was best expressed by Norbert Miller: “*His capriciousness in dealing with the contents is nothing else but enforcement of the law, and his eclectic exercise with citations a true imitation of the ancient times: did not the Romans in the glorious epoch of the emperors, did not Augustus or Hadrian, in their art adopt the Egyptian and Etrurian elements?*”³. And still, with a delicate difference: BB’s erudition is hardly conceivable without the specific gift to distill the motifs from the architectural legacy, simultaneously and in the most unconventionally possible way. Is it at all necessary to emphasize that in this manner the number of possible interpretations progressively increased?

BB's action, however, went beyond the frame of the pure citation, and further more also outside the frame of the prudent appropriations. The latter one comprises those creative relay races by means of which some adopted subject-matter could be fully assimilated. It concerns the procedures which Arthur C. Danto and Hans Belting interpreted in mid-eighties of the last century almost as the symptom of the end of the art. It actually seemed to those two authors as conceivable that one unique undertaking reached the ultimate point of its development, and that in the future only some cyclic repetitions of more or less the same type of play would be possible, i.e. "the continuous oscillation which meant the end of one enclosed energy system, which until then was considered open by everyone."⁴ BB, as if he had been finding several diverse artists in himself, made it possible for such assimilation processes in only one single place – within the spirit.

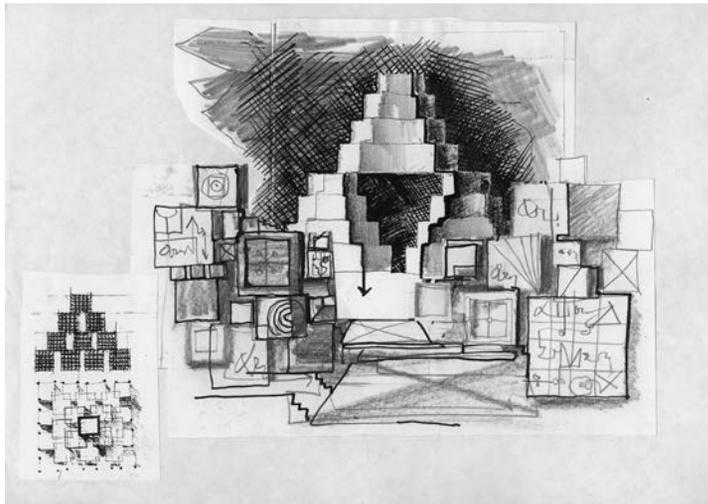
ON PROCESSUALITY

What, then, to start with? Is not the conception of an idea, which should have been elaborated, at the same time also some type of the finals, the point in which *before* and *after* would have to be considered as worn out categories? BB presented the energy system as rounded up continuum in which circle there came to paligenetic repetitions: we recall Ouroboros so dear to him, the Gnostic snake eating its own tail and thus symbolizing the Entity and eternal existence.⁵ To that effect it could be said that planning of a memorial entity could actually lead to numerous adventures, however, never beyond the jurisdiction of one higher, difficult to reach order. Since retelling such processes would take too much space, I will limit myself to few "episodes".

Encouraged by the Austrian officials, in mid nineties BB made a sumptuous quantity of sketches and designs for "the Monument of Peace" at the so-called the Danube Island in Vienna (Figure 1.). On one side, the auto-recursive motifs associated with the actual events could be seen in these sketches: not unintentional are the reminiscences of the memorial park to the victims of Fascism in Vukovar, ceremonially opened in 1980, and which was exposed to the frantic shelling only over a decade later. The fact that this group of cones in almost a prophetic way represents *pars pro toto* of the city, sunk and for the people lost forever, is not surprising; BB's worry about the destiny of the cities is well known and known to a sufficient extent, as well as his detailed theoretical dealing with the mentality of the city destroyers.⁶



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Figure 1

Study for the Monument of Peace at the Danube Island in Vienna, around 1994.
Photocopy, black ink and graphite pencil, 21 x 29,5 cm

Figure 2

Study for the Monument of Peace at the Danube Island in Vienna, around 1994.
Photocopy, black ink and graphite pencil, 21 x 29,5 cm

It is interesting to know that even in those difficult moments the architect did not give up his “joyful science” his ludic reception of the ancient secret learning could, and judging by all, should also have been included in the planning process (Figure 2). The Pythagorean *tetráktys*, the triangle the parts of which when summed up result in the magic number ten – figures - like in so many other BB’s works – in the bottom left-side corner being the presentation leitmotif. According to the Pythagorean interpretation, this number presents “a hidden value” of number four, which in further procedure was shown as the base consisting of the squares in 4x4 order, also at the sheet edge. Here, however, as can be seen, we come across something completely different: the motif of the magic square, present anyway also on the opposite side of the presentation. We could then ask ourselves which intellectual whim made the sketcher to deprive *tetráktys* of the grandeur of leitmotif, placing in the right place and at the right moment some emblematic *impromptu*.

Be that as it may be, we will find an additional support in interpreting this presentation if also the significance of the magic square, being one of the cognitive instruments present in Dürer’s allegory of melancholy of 1514., is taken into account. The German’s copperplate-engraving in almost painful way proclaims the futility of any aspiration for cognition, unless we assume (referring to the quattrocenta humanists) that melancholy is a natural condition of each contemplative, creative spirit. Besides, let us also ask this question: was the sketcher actually melancholic while from stone cubes he was arranging his “pyramidos” that “climax of contemplation”. Did he not in his imagination call some child to climb atop the unbuilt pyramid, exploring it through play? It seems, in the worst case, that *hilaritas* of the play hides in itself the *tristitiu* of reading. Let us observe also the use of alphabet on this detail: the animated scribbles as the undecipherable messages to himself or as protreptic stimulus intended for the observer? It will not be much wrong if it is stated that BB with the usual palindromes (limiting ourselves to that booming OPERA from the Roman magic square) presumed some type of parody of the secret alphabets.

The unrealized pyramid at the Danube Island is reminiscent to a great extent of some of the spectacular works of Robert Smithson, for example of *The Museum of the Void* from the second half of the sixties; I am accentuating that “spectacular”, since BB from the very beginning considered his work on the Vienna design experimental. Both sketched ziggurats, the Smithson’s and the BB’s, draw away the observer’s view into the depths of the dark opening flanked by the architectural stage scenery. Smithson’s interest in that which has not happened or which does not attract anyone’s attention⁷ „his fantasies

on the museum of the void, all that to some extent seems reformulated (and maybe even made more deepened) in BB's work who eagerly emphasized the significance between materially tactile building parts; it was actually in them, in those spaces which make the recomposition of the existing form on the theoretical plane possible, that he sought substantial supplement of that which eludes the eye.

It would not be amiss to devote few words to light staging as well. "The aura" which is radiated by the cubic forms on BB's sketch leads one to believe that between them and those famous quaders in sand by Friedrich Gilly there exists certain relationship. It seems that Gilly's spatial composition, which most probably served the didactic purpose, in somewhat bizarre way engages into dialogue with architectural-urban visions from "the heroic" epoch of European modern movement. I will not communicate anything new if I emphasize here that the monumentality is first the symptom of eternal simplicity; it would seem that Euclid's form devoid of ornaments arrived in our regions along some difficult to fathom by-way from the far away ancient times. BB's pyramid is in a similar way as with Gilly – maybe even with more affectation – the subject of staging, till the ultimate consequences defined volume, *architecture parlante*. There remains nothing else but to establish that the didactic objective has been achieved.

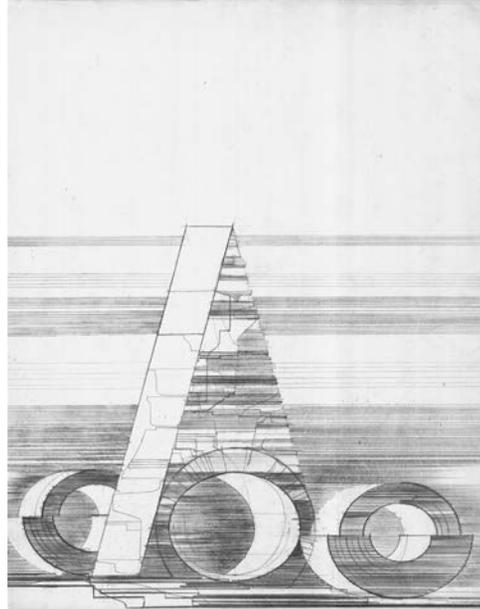
It would, however, be worth here, as regards the builder's practice, to mention something that is well known to the majority of the judges of BB's opus : the most simple form was realized at the Popina by Vrnjacka Banja. If it is compared to the previous memorials (only to think of the city abbreviations as realized in Mostar or in Knjazevac), it can be seen that this warrior mausoleum, completed in 1981., provides proportionally scarce repertoire of possible "tales". It could rather be said that the gigantic prism and pertaining omegas open a new chapter in the history of *alphabet*, unless the Popina memorial is opened and interpreted within the context of other buildings of the same period.⁸ "The sign in the free nature", BB wrote few years later, "is always a little similar to the voice of the pleading, intoxicated urban man. That voice, if articulated enough, does mean something, says something. **Semeion**, in the contact with the natural environment, becomes an energy substance of higher order. It even becomes, in a manner of speaking, a maieutical model, the means of intellect and cognition".⁹ In the Popina it is maybe just the variability of signs the one that calls for the search for cognition; that search need not necessarily present an effort if the fact that arbitrariness makes one whole raster of permitted analyses is taken into consideration, but also the space

of combinations in which the nature, on the level of primary impressions, is presented as it actually is.¹⁰

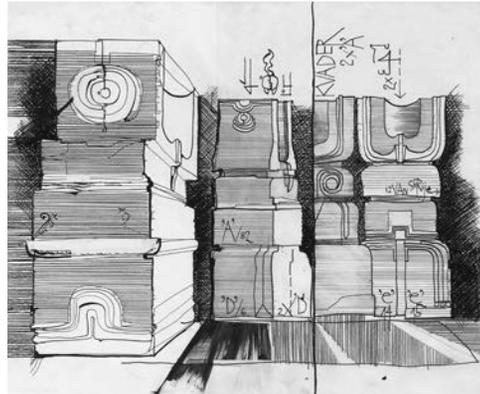
ON TRUE AND FALSE OPPOSITES

BB often and eagerly made use of Spiegelbild, that is of duplication. The famous Jasenovac flower (or the goblet, and according to some interpretations also the cupola, ergo *mundus*) cannot be imagined without the reflection on the small lake surface. The urn cut across in Sremska Mitrovica is somehow its own reflection, contained both in this-worldly and in otherworldly, here maybe as the stage property for mundane use, and over there as funeral primeval form.

Let us address also some more low-level opposites. At the presentation of the design for the Popina, BB reached out for a technique which must have seemed to the contemporaries as superfluous relict of the mannerism deserted long ago. Namely, he plated them, with shading, that ancient etching architrave (trim), and that being exactly within the context of his reversal to the rigid forms (Figure 3). There was, naturally, in this BB's "non-modernistic" orientation to the lapidary language of forms (I am deliberately and fully aware avoiding the prefix "Post-") also something subversive: the architect himself accentuated that ornamental moment was very much so present on the Popina, in the form of gigantic, and probably for that reason hardly noticeable ornament in space. On the other side, again, we deal with shading which makes it possible for the visual presentation to simulate traditionalism to a great extent; the notion of (copperplate) *engraving* occurs to me, but the copperplate engraving in the full meaning of the word, that which (according to Gaston Bachelard) the power of imagination is able to *engrave* in the memory of the observer. Subversion again? Only if one presumes that it concerns the parody of the old masters' practices. There is no way, however, that the sketcher with full awareness stirred up that conflict of affirmative with pejorative. If so, we could almost concede the point; is not the course of mind, and if we wish also the human spirit, already by itself some eternal movement between the extremes - not to measure and understand the entirety of the world (which is impossible), but to relatively "sketch" it? And is not consistent taking into consideration some omnipresent "otherness" the only reliable wisdom, even may it be also of short ranges? Refuting may at the same time also be an affirmation, at least from the point of view of the sketcher inclined to paradoxes who eagerly spoke about his "unskillful skills", and some of the sessions in his atelier described as "one-man-game", however with socially useful and catharsis effect."¹¹ BB's self-proclaimed *futile-building* presented a poetic deviation from mundane



3



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Figure 3

Design presentation of the Warrior Mausoleum on the Popina, around 1980.
Indelible pencil on cardboard, 75,5 x 59,4 cm

Figure 4

Structural study for cenotaphs to the Victims of Fascism at the Garavica by Bihac, around 1980.
Photocopy, black ink and pencil, 29,7 x 36,2 cm

architectural practice. There it goes, in that respect, again the shading, this time on the structural studies for cenotaphs in Bihac, which originated around 1980 (Figure 4). Why not assume that the prosaic aid from the everyday life of a builder, that is the study, is coated with thick screen exactly from escapism motives? Or one should go even further and state that it concerned the simulation of the study, given that those real ones mostly remained forgotten at the construction site? Be that as it may be, one cannot help feeling that the thick engraving film presents something just created and experienced as some type of illusion, maybe even from the long gone past.¹² The use of vectors here and there (on other sheets it could also be trajectories) surely has less connection with the planning process, and more with the optional sketching self-didactics; one might think of the borrowed items from the field of the natural sciences such as Paul Klee used in order to conjure up the feasibility of his two-dimensional utopias ;” *He demonstrated that if one can learn the statics of real world building, one can by analogy build a pictorial edifice.*” It is allowed to hope that here it does not concern only the empirical values.

FINAL OBSERVATION

If we are instructed to talk or write about BB and his work, we will in advance know that while tackling such an undertaking each path necessarily becomes a side path. However, the fact that we will not be disappointed is notorious; it could rather be stated that it concerns an agreeable challenge. To abandon oneself to the courses of those side paths, still non-trodden, means no more, no less than to take part in the heuristic games such as BB used to encourage his students to do. Therefore I will allow myself to make the following conclusion: it is just because we will interpret “wrongly” some sketch or some building, we will act immanently to that which they actually present.

NOTES

- N.B. All translations from the Serbian sources are by the author of this text.
- 1 „Crtež“ (Sketch) [section: *Small-Scale Urbanism*] rubrika Mali Urbanizam], Borba no. 273, year. 22, 4.10.1957, p. 2
 - 2 Translation from: Gottfried Boehm, *Spur und Gespür. Zur Archäologie der Zeichnung*, Friedrich Teja Bach, Wolfram Pichler (izd.), *Öffnungen: zur Theorie und Geschichte der Zeichnung*, München 2009, pp. 46–47
 - 3 Translation. from: Norbert Müller, *Archäologie des Traums. Versuch über Giovanni Battista Piranesi*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München/Wien 1978, p. 310
 - 4 Arthur C. Danto, *Reiz und Reflexion*, München 1994, p. 384
 - 5 Compare, especially Kurt Rudolph, *Die Gnosis Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion*, Leipzig 1980, pp. 76–98
 - 6 Compare especially Bogdan Bogdanović, *Die Stadt und der Tod*, Klagenfurt/Salzburg 1993
 - 7 *The Museum as Muse* (the catalogue of the exhibition in Museum of Modern Art, published by. Harriet Schoenholz Bee, David Frankel und Jasmine Moorhead), New York 1999, p. 88; for other parallelisms in the works of BB and Smithsona see under Ivan Ristić, *Romane ohne Worte. Einige Betrachtungen zu Bogdan Bogdanovićs zeichnerischen Strategien*, Ivan Ristić, *Bogdan*

- 8 *Bogdanović. Baumeister und Zeichner* (dissertation at the Vienna University, 2010), pp. 86-88
The architect interpreted the monuments in the Popina, in Vukovar and in Čačak in one of his
inspired self-exegeses as trinity; compare. Vlado Bužančić, Bogdan Bogdanović, *Tri mauzoleja*
(*Three Mausoleums*), *Arhitektura urbanizam* no. 90-91. g. 23, 1983
- 9 Bogdan Bogdanović, *Ponoćni monodijalog ili monodijalog o nemodernoj modernoj arhitekturi*
(*The Midnight Monodialogue or the Monodialogue on Non-Modern Modern Architecture*),
Arhitektura urbanizam, extraordinary issue, 1984, p. 40
- 10 Compare Michel Foucault, *Die Ordnung der Dinge*, Frankfurt am Main 1971, p. 96
- 11 Undated note
- 12 From the technical point of view, these palimpsests could be repeated in the infinite number of
variations; BB, during the period concerned made vast use of the medium of photocopy, re-
doing his own works in almost obsessive manner; compare. Ristić 2010, (note 7), pp. 82–89

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