

THE FUTURE IS IN THE BALKANS

By Marjetica Potrč

In 2003, the curator Harald Szeemann organised an exhibition of art from the Balkan region, which he titled 'Blood and Honey — Future's in the Balkans'. At the time, I did not like the words 'Blood and Honey' in this title and I took little notice of the subtitle. I still consider the notion of 'passion' in regard to the Balkans, to be a widespread stereotype that weighs heavily on the region. By identifying the Balkans as exotic and wild, it becomes too easy to simply dismiss the area, to cut it off from the rest of Europe. In a way, Szeemann's exhibition was locked in the past. But, on reconsidering his subtitle, 'Future's in the Balkans', I have to say that I agree with him: what I saw when travelling through the main cities of the Western Balkans half a year ago, was indeed the future. More precisely, I saw the future of the European Union being enacted in Western Balkan cities. I had already seen signs of similar strategies in the European Union, ranging from the formation of geopolitical territories to the creation of much smaller territories such as residential units; only now, in the Western Balkans, they were being much more clearly articulated.

Cities read like an open book. Architecture is, after all, the most immediate, most expressive and most enduring record of the human condition. I believe that some cities are faster-changing than

others. Often referred to as cities in crisis, such 'fast cities' as Belfast, Johannesburg and Caracas, among others, show strategies that slower-changing, supposedly more 'civilized' cities will themselves have to confront sooner or later. By the same token, a region in crisis such as the Israeli-occupied West Bank, is famous for developing infrastructural strategies that would be unthinkable in today's Europe — strategies such as the ring roads that divide Palestinian and Jewish-settlement traffic. As case studies, fast cities and fast regions show us the direction in which societies tend to move as they leave behind the principles of modernism.

During the 1990s, the Western Balkans rapidly collapsed. Today, the region is restructuring itself as a conglomeration of distinct and highly inventive societies that do not compete with each other but rather exist in parallel. Cities such as Belgrade, Prishtina, and Tirana not only attest to the dissolution of the social state and the prevalence of derelict modernist architecture and degraded public space, they also blatantly showcase strategies that other European cities deal with only timidly, such as a new emphasis on privacy, security and locally based solutions, as well as a preference for small-scale growth. These are small countries, where the desired form of coexistent habitation in cities is exemplified in

urban villas and urban villages — which we might also call gated communities or closed neighbourhoods — new architectural typologies. In modernism, a residential community usually meant some 10,000 people. Today, an urban villa is a residential community of 10 to 20 families.

Basically, what cities in other parts of Europe have in common with the Western Balkans is a restructuring of modernism. During the last half-century, both Western and Eastern Europe embraced modernist architecture and modernist ideas of the social state under the slogan 'equality and justice for all'. While modernism functions top down and thinks in large-scale terms, cities and regions in the Western Balkans today celebrate, and are the product of, bottom-up initiatives, fragmentation, adaptability and an emphasis on the local. As the recent rejection of the EU constitution by French and Dutch voters proves, citizens of the European Union wish to live in a more localized EU; similarly, the European Union explores a paradigm in which the regional acts as a counterbalance to nation-states. Local emphasis means that more decisions are taken on the local level; bottom-up initiatives increase, and state and local institutions become more adaptable. Fragmentation and parallelism, which I call 'Balkan' strategies, are already European Union strategies. In contrast to the United States, which is a more or less consolidated territory with a strong centralized government, Europe is a dynamic territory made up of several parallel governing bodies that demarcate different territories: there is a Schengen Europe, a fiscal Europe, an EU membership Europe, a NATO Europe, and so on. As a geopolitical entity, Europe is constantly

expanding. Inside its boundaries, the consequences of the slow dissolution of the social state and the ideology of multiculturalism are seen in consolidated territories based on ethnic or other kinds of communities. The state of 'transition' is accepted as a working model, and a civil society different from that of modernism is in the making.

In a kind of twist of fate, when we were in Tirana, my friend Kyong Park and I had the same taxi driver Harald Szeemann did when he visited the Albanian capital while preparing the 'Blood and Honey' exhibition. Kleidi was extremely proud of his city and proved to be an excellent guide. At one point, he stopped his car in a suburb and we admired the heroic constructions that were erected after modernist architecture stalled abruptly in 1990s. Kleidi had studied in Germany, but for him Tirana was a much more dynamic place than any German city. Germany, he said, was slow, while Tirana was on fast-forward. Indeed, today's Tirana is a completely remade city: what has not been physically rebuilt or added onto has been painted over, resulting in the mapping of a new society that is quite different from the modernist one.

BALKANIZATION — A DEFINITION

If 'globalization' stands for the increasing interconnectedness of peoples and places through the convergent processes of economic, political, and cultural exchange, then the term 'balkanization' might be understood as a counteraction to globalization. Perceived as a 'centrifugal' force that undermines or divides the state, balkanization recoils the 'centripetal' forces of a shared historical legacy and the unitary

economic system that augment political unity and the power of the nation-state. Balkanization breeds an ethnic nationalism that fuels identity politics in the absence of actual democratization. Originating from the Balkans, a region that has been historically contested through the periodic power shifts of different empires, balkanization emerged as a form of micro-nationalism — or ethnic, linguistic, cultural and/or religious separatism — and is a major source of geopolitical tension today. This negative image, however, has been tempered by other interpretations, such as a new form of religious freedom and an increased democratization, which stimulate the growth of group identities with agendas of self-rule from below. That is to say, globalization has conditioned balkanization through a revival of group identities. At the core of balkanization are fragmentary and decentralizing tendencies that lead to the pixelization of society, greater local adaptability and parallel states of existence.

ARCHITECTURAL CASE STUDIES

1. The Urban Village, a New Architectural Typology: *Haverleij, the Netherlands*

www.haverleij.nl

The Netherlands is currently experiencing the slow but steady dissolution of the social state. What was once 'multicultural Holland' is now moving away from multiculturalism towards a society with ethnically and economically defined consolidated territories. Current trends show a migration of the ethnic Dutch population from urban to rural areas; the cities, now labelled dangerous, are becoming negotiated territories between the remaining native and immigrant populations. By

2100, the ethnic Dutch are expected to be a minority within the current borders of the Netherlands. The concerns of the larger society are mirrored on the personal level by middle-class residents who pursue their own consolidated territories by moving out of the cities and into gated communities with clearly defined borders. Haverleij, a recent Vinex development in a rural area 100 kilometres from Rotterdam, presents a good example. On approximately 220 hectares of mostly untouched countryside, a number of separate gated communities have been built, each with 2,000 residents. These communities appropriate the aesthetic of a medieval fortress town, complete with moats. Fifty hectares of green landscape have been set aside for golf courses, one of the measures taken to preserve the idyllic green landscape. The winning formula here is a high-tech communications infrastructure combined with human-scale surroundings, privacy, safety, and the control of natural resources.

2. The Urban Villa, a New Architectural Typology: Cottbus, Germany

The Kajzerica Neighborhood in Zagreb, Croatia

The modernist model of the apartment block complex that houses 10,000 residents is being replaced by the urban villa, which houses around 15 families. Urban villas are homes to small communities with similar cultural values and standards of living. The accent is placed on personal values and concerns such as privacy and security.

In Cottbus, a shrinking city in the former East Germany, architects tried an experimental approach to the city's high proportion of vacant flats. When demolishing a residential apartment

block, one third of the prefabricated components were preserved to build five urban villas of two to three stories each.

Kajzerica is a neighbourhood in Novi Zagreb, which has become the site for a recent bottom-up planning effort. Urban villas that house several families replace one-family houses and eradicate the public space. The architecture studio Platforma 9,81 dedicated a chapter to Kajzerica in their book *Superprivate* (Zagreb, 2004).

buildings. These facades are hybridized twice, first by informal extensions that make it impossible for the facades to retain any coherent image, and second by colouration, which does not follow the structural language of the original facades but rather superimposes a completely different formal design.

3. Facades of Private Homes:

Peyton Place Neighbourhood in Prishtina, Kosovo

Kosovo is under the administration of three parallel governments: Kosovar, Serbian and the United Nations. People say that in fact no one governs, so individuals have become the smallest state, displaying their private territories — their houses — with great pride. New constructions show off richly ornate, diverse and highly accentuated facades. There is no single style, but rather multiple styles. Styles such as orientalism, modernism and historicism express the personal taste of the owner. Style is emphasized to such a degree that it turns into kitsch. In the process, authentic style is lost and hybridity gained.

4. Facades of Residential Building Blocks

Tirana, Albania

The painted facades of Tirana express in highly visual terms the balkanization of modernism, celebrating the new society born after collapse of communism in 1989 and its strategy of re-using the old. Initiated by Tirana Mayor Edi Rama, the colouration of existing buildings started out as a simple idea: to make the drab city more cheerful by painting the facades of communal apartment