

Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007, but its reputation is far from impressive. Evidence of corruption and nepotism in the country is overwhelming, yet it is difficult for the EU or any other international organization to get a hold of the situation. In response, the Bulgarian people took to the streets one year ago. They have been protesting ever since, though no longer on a daily basis. The endless energy and pride of Bulgarian citizens is reflected in the nation's young architects, who translate it into their profession. This instalment of Eurovision shows how, slowly, this proactive group is finding ways to regain public territory while never losing sight of their independence.

Bulgarian architecture revised

TEXT: BOYKA OGNJANOVA

Putting together *Eurovision: Bulgaria* for A10 is an honour and a responsibility, and the editorial team took it as such. Its focus was carefully discussed with friends and colleagues, among whom most notably were A10 correspondent Aneta Vasileva, from What Association, and Ljubo Georgiev, the new Director of One Architecture Week, Plovdiv, an annual international festival. Both also participate as authors and present their own pieces of the puzzle.

Eurovision: Bulgaria

In this section, our goal is to present a fair, complex and up-to-date view of the Bulgarian architectural scene. This is inevitably connected to the complicated political, economic and social environment of today, and explains why, while trying not to emphasize currently problematic questions, it could not simply avoid mentioning them. Nevertheless, the articles present the pride and joy of new Bulgarian architecture: the biggest event in architecture (now seven years old), ten of the best young practices and their world-class projects, ten buildings that have defined Bulgarian architecture during the last decade, the joint efforts of architects, artists and citizens to change public spaces for good, and last but not least, the socialist heritage that is part of what makes us who we are and now receives well-deserved attention after years of neglect.

The public realm

The profession of the architect in Bulgaria is still considered elitist. Architecture is thought to deal mainly with aesthetics, and there is a vast understanding that architectures'

aesthetic requirements are far too high to be met. The key word in all this is now 'competitions', as for many years these have been non-existent, and attempts to hold them unsuccessful. Today, both municipalities and the private sector put effort in creating a 'competition culture'; some more eagerly than others, but all far from the public focus of urgency. It became clearer than if, in the years after 1989, the main effort was to create good contemporary examples for the professional community, today the focus has shifted towards bringing a broader audience to the architectural and urban paradigms.

Being an architect

Being an architect of new architecture in Bulgaria turns out to be a highly dynamic concept. During the socialist times (1944–1989) the architects worked in huge state design agencies, such as Sofproekt and Glavproekt, the new era brought the challenges and uncertainty of the private sector. It was not until the late '90s when the younger generation of architects could join the process, mainly by managing to slide through the door of construction, or finding the right private investor to begin with. At the beginning of the 21st century, and with the perspective of joining EU construction, investors flocked to architecture, assuming business would flourish and tourists would come flooding in – and how they built! Architects became draftsmen of the new concrete image of Bulgarian mountain and seaside resorts – built quickly and cheaply, and unsympathetic towards nature. Still, there were others who managed to use the energy to create

some of the first contemporary architectural images, differentiated from the mass production. This was possible mainly by working with 'boutique' investors with an understanding that quality brings added value, and consequently, higher profits. Thus the construction boom collapse ended the mass production of average architecture and lessened the invasion against nature, but the 'boutique' architects continued working. The economic crisis was, in a way, beneficial.

A new attitude

Five years later, it is not easy to be a young architect anywhere in the world, including Bulgaria. For the first wave of post-socialist architects, the time had come to turn back to public spaces and raise the question of quality, including safety, the competitive selection of projects and public dialogue. For those fresh from the university it became a necessity of survival to expand the concept of being an architect by joining fields like product and furniture design, programming, modelling and visualizations, arts and installations, critique and journalism, event and project management, and so on. That necessity, however, is combined with curiosity and enjoyment, as discovered in our conversations with the up-and-comers.

Altogether, this created a new kind of architect – much more versatile, conceptual and adaptive – and the expectation is that it will also create a new kind of architecture and public environment in the same spirit. Until then, we present some of the active players in the process and invite you to join forces with them. ◀



LJUBO GEORGIEV became director of One Architecture Week in February 2014. It is his second major encounter with the event after curating, alongside Hans Ibelings, the 2011 edition of Sofia Architecture Week. Ljubo graduated in 2007 with a Masters degree from TU Delft, while also having studied previously at the IUAV in Venice. He has worked as an architect at Manzelle Studio di Architettura (Venice), LP Group (Sofia), Claus en Kaan Architecten (Amsterdam), MVRDV (Rotterdam), and Turenscape (Beijing). Ljubo has also initiated various exhibitions, actions, workshops and debates on topics often closely related to the heritage of Modernist housing in Europe.



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ANETA VASILEVA graduated M.Arch. at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy (UACEG), Sofia, in 2003. She has worked as architect, journalist for a business weekly and blogger. Presently, she is a Ph.D. candidate conducting research on post-war Bulgarian architecture. Since 2007, Aneta has been writing and speaking tirelessly on architecture as a co-founder and blogger at What Association (www.whata.org/blog); contributor to several print- and web magazines, and speaker at architectural seminars; co-author and editor of the Architectural section of *Bulgarian Nouvelle Vague* (2012), which outlines the best of contemporary Bulgarian artists; teaching researcher at UACEG (Preservation of Architectural Heritage major) and urban enthusiast.

One Architecture Week

TEXT: LJUBO GEORGIEV

One Architecture Week was launched under the name Sofia Architecture Week by Edno, an NGO platform for contemporary culture, in 2008. It was the year that saw the end of the Bulgarian building boom, which had left parts of the country with a large number of buildings and urban environments of very questionable quality. The event, slightly elitist in its original concept, was aimed at 'enlightening' Bulgarian investors and decision-makers in the field of architecture and the urban environment by presenting them with examples of progressive international architecture.

It did not prove very successful in this task, and from the next year its focus shifted towards 'enlightening' the Bulgarian architecture world as a whole: practitioners, students, critics and administrators. The event's educational character was the reason that, in its first years, most of its programme was relatively didactic, comprising lectures, exhibitions and debates. With time, it started becoming more interactive, and very soon each successive curatorial team began proclaiming the primary goal of opening the event to society as a whole. Ever since, the word 'opening' has often been repeated at Edno's office. Opening towards a larger audience, towards regional collaboration and towards more interaction.

In the six years of existence of One Architecture Week, the awareness of those involved in Bulgarian architecture has changed in a positive way, thanks to other events and developments as well. It seems that a mass of relatively well-informed, open-minded and critical professionals is starting to emerge. A group, as opposed to isolated individuals, that has always existed. In this sense, the educational task of One Architecture Week has become less urgent and the question of what the new role of the event can be has risen.

The desire for a shift towards greater interaction with society forms the base for our future actions. Now that we have seen that we managed to help the birth of a critical mass of professionals, we have begun dreaming of doing the same on a larger scale, with society as a whole. Our future actions will be marked by our ambition of one day having a large group of citizens who are capable of performing well-informed decision-making regarding their urban environment. Instead of using didactic methods, we imagine a more interactive approach, one where we



continuously engage with citizens and make use of the power of the crowd, be it in terms of financing, discussing or decision-making.

Through such interaction, One Architecture Week seeks to become a factor for urban change: a machine for experimenting with different models for urban development and the creation of an active society, responsible towards its environment. In order to do so, the event needs to become site-specific and to engage with the particular issues of Bulgarian cities. It also needs to begin initiating activities year-round. And instead of providing only an overview of architectural achievements, it must start being responsible for the creation of a product: a tangible change in Bulgaria's urban environment.

As of 2014, One Architecture Week, alongside the two other major Edno festivals, One Dance Week and One Design Week, is moving to Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second-largest city and a place with a long architectural tradition. All three festivals will concentrate their efforts and programme on a specific part of the city, with the intention of bringing the respective areas back to life. This will require a deeper collaboration among the three events, and between the events and various local and national institutions, not to mention our sleeves up and achieve visible change. ◀

Info www.edno.bg/onearchitectureweek, www.ljubogeorgiev.eu



End of the game: Bulgarian (post-)socialist architecture

TEXT: ANETA VASILEVA

Writing about socialist architecture in Bulgaria is still a tricky job nowadays, even though 25 years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Communism continues to be an uneasy topic of discussion, and architecture (as its most visible manifestation) falls amongst the first victims.



† The Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia. It was guerrilla-painted blue and yellow in February 2014 to show support for the Euromaidan in Ukraine.

The inner conflict

Contemporary Bulgarian architecture cannot be understood without the context of its near past. What we are witnessing today is a coexistence of two opposites: politically biased denial on one hand, and nostalgically coloured revival on the other. Both equally challenge the unbiased analysis of the period, and so we basically end in a no-win situation. While some are still arguing whether or not to pull down the controversial Monument to the Soviet Army, standing 50 metres tall at the centre of Sofia, others are secretly painting it pink at night to commemorate 45 years since the Prague Spring.

There is one thing that suffers from this unresolved inner conflict: Bulgarian architecture from the socialist period. Even today, there are still no buildings completed between 1944 and 1989 listed as cultural heritage and placed under state protection. Some buildings are demolished, while others are ridiculously restored with béton brut painted yellow and wooden overhangs clad in aluminium. To understand the situation, a brief historical review of Bulgarian socialist architecture should be made, covering the basic trends from 1944 to 1989.

Stalinist socialist realism

Stalinism took its toll on Bulgaria (similar to the greater part of the former Eastern Bloc) between 1944 and 1956. Nowadays, main boulevards in cities remain flanked by massive, ornate buildings with small windows and a huge impact on the urban tissue. The 'style' covered everything from single, key buildings (Fig. 1) to serious urban interventions in the heart of the historical city (Fig. 2), and from residential blocks to a brand new town (Dimitrovgrad, built from scratch to serve the booming socialist industry).



Fig. 1 Mausoleum of communist leader Georgi Dimitrov (1949), demolished in 1999



Fig. 2 Largo government ensemble, Sofia (1950–56)

Socialist modernism

In April 1956, the Bulgarian Communist Party held a key congress, the April Plenum. It marked the start of Bulgarian de-Stalinization and put an official end to the 'cult'. At the time when the Wall divided Berlin, Bulgarian architecture had already departed from the period of Stalin's cult of personality and felt free (and almost encouraged by the state)

to find a new, locally reconsidered version of the dogmatic International style. The change started with the construction of the first coastal resorts on the Black Sea in the late '50s (Fig. 3, Fig. 4), with their eerie, white restaurants making an obvious and respectful nod to Bauhaus, and with the defiant sports halls (Fig. 5). Finally, a reinterpretation of traditional Bulgarian architecture was achieved, a form of peculiar Bulgarian socialist modernism.



Fig. 3 Glavproekt developed Sunny Beach in the '60s, led by Nikola Nikolov



Fig. 4 Nikolay Nenov's Albena later in the '70s



Fig. 5 Universiada Hall (1961) by Alexander Barov, Ivan Tatarov, Doncho Vladishki and Ivan Ivanchev

Defining the 'new' local

The quest for identity in the global context is an incessant process for the peripheral Bulgarian culture. Bulgarian architecture is no different. Reinterpretation of Bulgarian vernacular tradition was the safe choice throughout the entire period of socialism, and became a must in the '70s, and especially in the '80s, when centrally altered cultural priorities led to attempts at international export. Local culture in general, and local architectural tradition in particular, were exploited by combining a skilled interpretation of national characteristics with late modernist tools of expression.

Some architects managed to build in a distinct, 'pro-Western' style with ironically formalized and arrogantly quoted vernacular architecture (Fig. 6, Fig. 7). Although the buildings were in fact seen either as an original review of this very same tradition (the only possible discussion at the time), or were criticized as pointless formalism, today they remain one of the strongest examples of the universal architectural language used by architects in the second half of the 20th century,

no matter on which side of the Iron Curtain they resided.



Fig. 6 Hotel Veliko Tarnovo (1967), leading architect Nikola Nikolov



Fig. 7 Residential blocks by Stefka Georgieva, Sofia

Recharging socialism

The change of authority after the end of communism deprived architecture of its ideological background and formal public approval. As a result, for over two decades Bulgarian society has been unable to formulate a consciousness of the value of socialism's architectural heritage.

As Emilia Kaleva, leader of the Bulgarian team of the EU project, ATRIUM (Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the 20th Century in Urban Management), points out, lack of such consciousness puts that legacy at risk, and a lack of public consensus leads to a similar lack of courage in public authorities to impose formal protection. Society is left to be the decision-maker, and it still cannot formulate its unambiguous position.

ATRIUM is one of the projects that first initiated expert research involving socialist architecture, connecting key buildings into an international route of totalitarian architecture throughout South-Eastern Europe. The project was officially completed in October 2013. Kaleva states that it managed to pinpoint the fact that polarized opinions towards this period of architectural history are not solely Bulgarian, but shared across the region.

Apart from the formal side, however, in recent years socialist architecture, and especially its controversial monuments, have become the scene of various informal actions, performances and interventions that regularly provoke society and make spectacular newspaper front pages.

ReVision is an initiative of Transformatori for temporary artistic provocations in urban context. In the autumn of 2013, the team organized a competition, followed by a workshop for 3D-mapping on the surface of the notorious (and probably most loathed) Monument to 1300 Years of

Bulgaria, located next to the National Palace of Culture (Fig. 8).

The Monument to the Soviet Army in the centre of Sofia is one of the best examples of the desacralization of the socialist past. Designed to serve as a grand place for the symbolic demonstration of totalitarian power and ideology (Fig. 9), today this part of the city has totally lost all elitism and is a centre of spontaneous informal activities, which reached their peak with 'Moving with the time', an act of graffiti by an informal organization, Destructive Creation. In June 2011, the entire part of the monument's sculptural group situated on its western side was painted like popular superheroes and comic book characters. Since then, the monument has been repeatedly used as canvas for political and social expression: hoods placed over the heads of the figures in favour of Pussy Riot in 2012 (Fig. 10) and the central soldier painted yellow and blue to express support for the Ukrainian Euromaidan (opposite page) are just a couple examples.



Fig. 8 Monument to 1300 Years of Bulgaria (1981)



Fig. 9 Monument to the Soviet Army, Sofia (1954)



Fig. 10 Painted in support of Pussy Riot (2012)

It turns out that despite lack of consensus about the future of the Monument of the Soviet Army it has gradually been turned into a creative field for alternative art and urban subcultures, which are actually preserving it thus far by generating an enormous amount of attention. This might as well be the right path towards re-thinking and recharging Bulgarian socialist architecture after all. ◀

Monday guys: Boutique architects

TEXT: BOYKA OGNANOVA

It became our private joke as we scheduled interviews with the young generations of Bulgarian professionals in two consequent days and groups – ‘Monday architects’ and ‘Tuesday architects’, the young masters and the apprentices. But as much as it was humorous, it is also the truth that the five studios interviewed here (I/O Architects, Aedes Studio, OBIA, Bureau XII and ZOOM Studio) set the tone of contemporary Bulgarian architecture.

The two generations of young architects in Bulgaria have a lot in common. Most notably, creating a modern, sharp and fresh urban image while dealing with an unregulated, highly corrupt and aesthetically challenging environment. Both groups formed as professionals during the so-called ‘Transition’ period – the messy times between the end of the socialist era and the difficult, thorny path to democracy. They are among only a handful of studios who work on a conceptual level, beyond simply facilitating the functions at hand. Still, there are also distinct differences between the two groups, which have much to do with when they began their practice, the kind of work they could get their hands on, and their access to information and mentors at the time.

Establishing a contemporary practice

All five ‘Monday architects’ started their practice after a ten-year generation gap in Bulgarian architecture, a result of the widespread notion that everything before 1989 had no value whatsoever. According to Georgi Katov, founding partner of I/O Architects, ‘There were really good professors at the universities, but 1989 was followed by a vacuum of not working together with the seniors. Architects got their education in spite of the university, not because of it.’ Even so, all five studios had the chance to work during the nation’s construction boom, speeded by its 2007 accession to

the European Union. At the point of the shrinking market back in 2008, the studios had managed to establish names as the authors of top-quality contemporary architecture, and many of them still work with the same investors. Still, being called ‘established architects’ makes them laugh. ‘There are much more established architects in the country, who build a lot. They form the image of the urban environment today, not us,’ claims Katov.

The five studios got their lucky chance in the late ‘90s when the economy slowly gained pace and investors were eager to take up building as a business – most of them by specializing in a particular building type, and many of them aiming at the quality of architecture they had seen abroad.

Plamen Todorov of ZOOM Studio took advantage of the situation by starting a construction company, offering the architectural project as a bonus. ‘It took two or three years for my brother, Teodor, and I to get our first solely design-based commission, and we were still a construction company when we finished the interior of Ugo restaurant in Sofia.’ The interior is arguably the first publicly accessible contemporary architecture in the city, together with their black concrete residential block in the city centre. Thanks to these and private commissions like the Dekko and Italfood factories, as well as single-family houses like the one in Boyana, today ZOOM is known for its minimalist architectural gestures and sharp detail.

‘We had the luck to start with an investor that was also in the beginning of their career. They got us working on residential buildings and interiors, and even today that’s the better part of our practice. We are still working with the same investor,’ says Plamen Bratkov, founding partner of Aedes Studio. Indeed, the collaboration of the studio with Sofbuild brought some of the most recognizable residential and office buildings in Sofia: Jaclyn, Urban Model and Red Apple. Another rewarding partnership led to the nearly finished Hilltop residential building in Lozenets, with its characteristic volume, textured facade and everything but traditional apartment plans.

‘At those times there were a lot of opportunities for young architects,’ confirms Peter Torniov, partner of Bureau XII, together with former A10 correspondent Milena Filcheva. He started the practice back in 2003 by winning a competition for an office building in Vienna. ‘After finishing it, we were commissioned for another one in Bucharest, and after a while office buildings became our main type of works.’ Another example is the TAO office building in Sofia, with its exact details and defining contemporary style.

For the rest of the party, things look no different. The three partners of OBIA – Ostrev, Baylov and Ignatov – began in 2007 by working on small projects. ‘We were intensively participating in competitions and strove to make a difference,’ says



↑ ItalFood factory, Shumen (ZOOM Studio)



↑ TAO office building, Sofia (Bureau XII)



↑ Red Apple, Sofia (Aedes Studio)



↑ Swimming pool terrace (I/O Architects)



↑ Oaks House, Vitosha (OBIA)

Vladislav Ignatov. Today their works are famous as good examples of Bulgarian mountain resorts, with key projects like Bansko’s ice rink and ski-rental centre a welcome relief among the queer, multi-style urbanscapes of overbuilt mountain slopes. Recently, OBIA finished 2 Oaks House on the outskirts of Vitosha Mountain, just next to Sofia.

The fact that wealthy citizens choose to live close to Vitosha is probably the reason why so many of the five studios’ works are situated there. I/O Architects are no exception, as Katov recollects. ‘We started with small private projects ten years ago; our first investor, a young couple prejudiced against working with established practices. There was the chance to work on four or five bigger projects, but we are much more interested to work on smaller ones, in smaller villages, outside of the capital. Unfortunately nowadays, even in Bulgaria this type of context simply disappears.’

Indeed, similar to the situation in many developing countries, Bulgarian villages are depopulated by people moving to bigger cities or abroad. The capital of Sofia is gasping under the consequences of a fast-growing population: traffic jams, parking problems, air pollution and the quantity and quality of urban sprawl, to name a few.

Rediscovering public spaces

‘Context is changing in a rather peculiar way; it’s been 20 years of lack of control,’ says Katov. The

notion of ‘them’ and ‘us’ is sneaking between lines in all the interlocutors, ‘them’ being state and local authorities, ‘us’ being the active professionals and citizens. Things are let to the extreme in the capital – the focal point of interests for the state, municipality and business, as well as for power games between the political parties. The most visible effect is the lack of regulated urban planning, accompanied by the lack of architectural competitions, and recently, purposefully poorly organized competitions legitimizing private interests. ‘Bulgarian competitions have a bad reputation,’ agrees Vladislav Ignatov from OBIA, as his colleagues explain that, for a small practice, it’s very difficult to spare additional resources on them. But as Peter Torniov notes, ‘Even though they are very unreliable and disappointing, we are stubborn and continue trying.’

In difficult times for private business, architects turn to opportunities in the public sector, which has been neglected for years. Three of the five participating studios (Bureau XII, Aedes and I/O) are also part of the newly established Grupa Grad (City Group), an initiative for bringing attention to the low quality of the urban environment and the lack of transparency in decision-making by authorities. The other two studios support their efforts.

‘A few years ago, we had a lot of work with private investors, but the big challenge now is dealing with public spaces. Everybody today recognizes

they have been terra incognita for years now,’ says Torniov. ‘One of the main reasons for this is the lack of discussion on architecture and urban planning in Bulgarian society as a whole. We don’t have a culture for the cities, which is odd because centuries ago, when we were supposed to be much more restricted and didn’t have traditions in the area, we invited professionals from Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic to design our cities. Now, when we have all the technology at hand, we are much more secluded in some strange kind of protectionism.’

Katov adds, ‘This is protectionism, not only from foreign architects but from us as well,’ while Vladislav continues, ‘If the taste was good, it wouldn’t be that big of a problem. Being oppressed now exploded into kitsch.’

Still the architects look on the bright side while continue their efforts to proclaim contemporary images, create new scenarios and challenge new attitudes. Just as importantly, they managed to escape the lack of succession in the architectural scene by influencing a large group of younger professionals. Some of these had the opportunity to work for them, others were their students, and still others were inspired by example. All of this gives hope for the development of Bulgarian architecture and the urban environment. Learn more about the up-and-comers of the Bulgarian scene on the following pages. ◀

Monday architects, from left to right: Plamen and Teodor Todorov (ZOOM Studio), Milena Filcheva (Bureau XII), Georgi Katov (I/O Architects), Vladislav Ignatov (OBIA), Plamen Bratkov (Aedes Studio), Petar Torniov (Bureau XII)



Ten buildings that define a decade of Bulgarian architecture

TEXT: ANETA VASILEVA



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THE BLACK BLOCK, SOFIA (2003)

ZOOM Studio are responsible for many 'firsts' in Bulgarian architecture, and the first apartment block with an external wall painted in black is amongst them (see A10 #14). There is an urban legend that the residents of the neighbourhood were so shocked and angry that such a bulky building should appear right in front of their windows (with a black wall, at that) that they organized street protests during construction. The violence of protests escalated, resulting in a number of eggs and rotten tomatoes being hurled at the hateful black wall. Nevertheless the building remained unchanged.

Architect ZOOM Studio

2

STONE HOUSE, GLOZHENE (2006)

In 2006, I/O Architects revealed one of the most philosophical single-family houses in recent Bulgarian architecture. Situated in the small village of Glozhene, the house manages to 'talk' to the rocks and the grass surrounding it, and also to accommodate the antique collections and colourful hobbies of its owner.

Architect I/O Architects

3

VILLA ROKA, BANSKO (2004)

If we can speak of Bulgarian boutique architecture that emerged amidst the excesses of the construction boom, then I/O Architects must be at its fore. They actually began with the reconstruction of an old socialist hotel in the now overcrowded ski resort of Bansko, which turned out to be the first attempt at a boutique hotel in Bulgaria. Mixing Japanese minimalism with a Zumthor-like spa centre, and with the whole exterior clad in cheap local laths, proved one of the best things to have happened to Bansko in the past ten years.

Architect I/O Architects

4

ICE RINK, BANSKO (2007)

OBIA are an unexpected mix of architects from three different generations who have managed to construct truly 'European' buildings at a Bulgarian ski resort, which have exaggerated certain interpretations of traditional architecture beyond recognition. The ice rink is a rare example of CAD/CAM architecture in Bulgaria, and OBIA should be praised that they were able to push it through to completion (see A10 #39).

Architect OBIA

5

RED APPLE, SOFIA (2013)

Aedes Studio does it again, this time with another residential building set between a park and a socialist-era mass residential district. The building neglects its environment and aims at New York, the vision of the 'loft' and peculiar materials and details. Nevertheless, it is key to the development of contemporary Bulgarian residential architecture and actually looks quite good from every part of the city.

Architect Aedes Studio

6

SOPHARMA TOWERS, SOFIA (2011)

The three identical (though slightly rotated) office blocks might look a bit dull at first sight, with their perfect details, top energy efficiency and cold facades. But they are amongst the very few large-scale new buildings to perfectly fit into the urban skyline of Sofia. Pure urban harmony that is best perceived when approached from far away.

Architect Architectonika Studio

7

JACLYN, SOFIA (2007)

This residential block on one of the main boulevards in Sofia stirred emotions from the first day of its completion. Some liked it at first sight; others rejected it as 'import' and 'ugly shoe boxes stuck together'. The building's PR campaign was exceptional, and one thing is for certain: Jaclyn changed the perception how a very large residential building on a very busy street might look like. From this moment on, the path to normality in contemporary residential architecture was open.

Architect Aedes Studio

8

ITALFOOD FACTORY, SHUMEN (2007)

Besides their popular Sofia projects, ZOOM Studio have also created a series of meaningful buildings scattered in the country from Harmanli to Kremikovtsi. You can easily recognize them by the sharp detail and the black colour. One of them is ItalFood's factory in Shumen, which is probably the first black industrial building with béton brut in recent Bulgarian history. It proved that such manufacturing buildings can both function and look good at the same time.

Architect ZOOM Studio

9

URBAN MODULE, SOFIA (2012)

This building is the next attempt of the architects to fit a very large building (this time an office block) into a very tight urban fabric (see A10 #46). Again, both successful and quite sensitive to the context.

Architect Aedes Studio

10

PALEONTOLOGICAL MUSEUM, DORKOVO (2013)

This small museum is situated in a tiny village hidden somewhere up in the Rhodope Mountains (see A10 #55). But the simple building is an exception, not because of its architecture (which is good, of course), but primarily because of the fact that quality architecture like this has started to appear in the most unusual places. Which is perhaps the reason why today the small parking in front of the museum is filled more with architecture lovers than with paleontology enthusiasts.

Architect Yavor Yordanov

Urban interventions

TEXT: BOYKA OGNANOVA

The urban spaces in Bulgaria, most notably in the capital of Sofia, have become both a battlefield and a canvas for contemporary architects, artists, political and social activists. Most city centres are formed by heritage from the pre-democratic era, with typically vast, empty squares in the hearts of the bigger cities and wide, paved streets with no programme. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, there is a sense of excitement in proactive groups who try to change the urban environment in different ways – politically, practically and artistically.



↑ **GRUPA GRAD**
The group was founded by six architectural studios – I/O Architects, Aedes Studio, Bureau XII, Architectonika, A&A and 10am; all part of the first wave of contemporary architecture in Bulgaria – with goal of working for positive change in Bulgarian public architecture. They started on 25 November 2012 with a provocative act, the 'Vitosha boza', against the poor quality and lack of transparency in the reconstruction of one of the most popular pedestrian streets in Sofia's centre, Vitosha bul (boza is a sticky-sweet Balkan drink with a undefined colour – much like, they said, the new boulevard). The group's official statement claimed that 'the basic process of the distribution of responsibilities between investors, architects and constructors is compromised.' Ever since, the group has been actively involved with the urban environment and competitions.

www.grupagrad.com



↑ **DESTRUCTIVE CREATION**
This artistic group was featured in Bulgarian and international media with their first urban intervention: the painting of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia. On 17 June 2011, they 'dressed' the Soviet soldiers as American comic book heroes and characters, with a caption underneath that read, 'In pace with time'. It provoked controversial reactions. Since then, the group has realized over 40 projects in different cities; some, like '20 years of circus' in front of the National Court House, as a political response to current events, others as artistic projects, the creation of new public spaces, in honour of public holidays, or even commercial commissions. The average age of the more than ten artists is 20.

www.destructivecreation.com



↑ **TRANSFORMATORI**
Probably the most popular urban activist group, Transformatori was founded in 2009 as an architectural practice of several young architects. One of the founders, Valeri Gyurov, describes those times: 'Soon after Transformatori started, the crisis hit the market, I quit my job and decided to focus only on our work. Little by little, we started conducting projects funded by private clients, and recently, by the municipality of Sofia.' Indeed, Transformatori gathered huge publicity with projects and workshops such as 'Park at green' for World Environment Day, TabloID (a reconstruction of a billboard), and lately, a competition for the reinvention of one of the signatory monuments in Sofia, followed by a 3D mapping. Their newest project is the first Fab Lab in Bulgaria, supported by the America for Bulgaria Foundation.

www.transformatori.net

Tuesday guys: Up-and-comers

TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER

The latest generation has different ideas about defining what architecture is, what makes an architect, how to deal with clients and how to involve the public. This becomes especially apparent when comparing their projects. Although they learned the trick from the 'Monday guys', it is also true that Funkt.eu, Don't DIY, Cache Atelier, Studio 8 ½ and Conveyer all have a sense of independence and humour that really works for their design endeavours.

What should a young architect do, when the 'Monday architects' have grabbed the very last private and independent clients in Bulgaria, the economy is lagging and confidence in public commissions is way below zero? 'Well,' begins Ilyan Hadjin (Funkt.eu), who was also one of Bulgaria's best freeride skiers, 'we try simple things that work; it's a kind of freestyle architecture.'

The results are right in front of us, as we converse in +Tova Bar, which Ilyan co-owns. It is decorated with furniture from young Bulgarian designers and art by a neighbourhood painter. It's a lively place, with a Berlin-chic that shows his ability to create clever combinations of various programmes in a vibrant social context. Hristo Stankushev (Don't DIY) agrees. As architect of site-specific installations and curator of One Architecture Week, he feels they work differently from the Monday guys. 'They still have a classical approach to architecture, to process and to client relations; we doubt ourselves. What could an architect be? How can we add value? We don't know the answers yet, so we experiment. We don't even have a proper business plan.'

Tsvetomir Pavlov (Cache Atelier) does workshops with children and inhabitants. 'By making projects in the neighbourhood, we involve people. We explain about how architecture works. By doing symbolic acts, we can raise awareness. We focus on the questions, not the built results.' It's not only out of conviction that they act this way. 'The easiest way to start is by doing temporary stuff,' admits Vladislav Kostadinov (Studio 8 ½). But it's also a way to stay out of commercial commissions from bad clients.

The up-and-comers have no building commissions, nor building experience, which leads to a different set of democratic and economic values. This shows, for example, in the approach they have with their clients. It is not the traditional architect/client relationship, in which the latter commissions and the former designs, but based on a mutual appreciation of experiment. Hristo claims, 'If you want to keep your moral values in Bulgaria, you can't go searching for a client, as this will corrupt you. We wait for the client to come to us.'

'Our clients have the same questions, and together we go about finding answers; we are not the architects that know everything,' says Ilyan. Angel Savlakov (partner of Conveyer, along with Ivaylo Andreev) adds, resignedly, 'And when there are no clients, we do product design.' Ilyan laughs, responding, 'We began a carpentry workshop – fancy and good looking, and easy to produce, as we were not that experienced, and gradually we learned the skills. The crisis is good for us, as it allows us to do things that cost nothing.' Hristo continues, 'The situation is really open; it's much easier to change things now, at economic low tide.'

Vladislav agrees, but he is less light-hearted about why they are in this situation. 'I am pessimistic about the quality of commissions by municipalities. The culture of competitions is really bad. It's corrupt and unfair. That's why we prefer competitions by foundations, or temporary projects like festivals. There we find our audience, not only colleagues but also citizens and clients.'

Hristo explains, 'At One Architecture Week, we will centre our programme around Kapana, which



↑ Raketa Rakia Bar, Sofia (Funkt.eu)



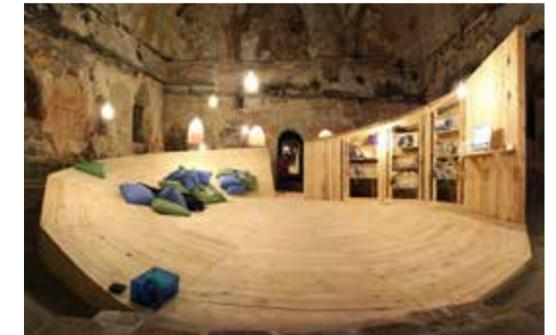
↑ House at the Top, Plovdiv (Cache Atelier)



↑ Conveyer office, Sofia



↑ Yavlena offices, Sofia (Don't DIY)



↑ Temporary library in a 16th-century ruin (see A10 #50), Plovdiv (Studio 8 ½)



↑ Tuesday architects, from left to right: Angel Savlakov and Ivaylo Andreev (Conveyer), Vladislav Kostadinov (Studio 8 ½), Ilyan Hadjin (Funkt.eu), Tsvetomir Pavlov (Cache Atelier), Hristo Stankushev (Don't DIY)

used to be a vibrant neighbourhood that became neglected during the 20th century. By turning Kapana into the main focus of the architecture festival, the neighbourhood profits from the efforts and debate of architects.'

'Five years ago, there wasn't any of the stuff we do today: the temporary thing, the furniture, Raketa Bar. It's a hard way to do architecture, but it's our way,' adds Tsvetomir.

This deep mistrust of public clients, however, is something they share with the Monday architects. Public clients want a traditional product. Take what happened in Vitosha Street. The way they turned this famous shopping street into a neglected area with shopping malls raised a lot of anger among architects. 'We don't fight hard enough for our public places,' sighs Hristo. But things seem to be improving slowly. 'In Plovdiv, the municipality is opening up to the public; they ask for the approval of society, which really is a big step forward.'

Also, as Ilyan points out, 'To have good ideas is good for society, we need *visible* innovation in process, style and funding. That's why the answer

is, in the end, not in commercial clients, as the results stay behind fences. We need to go into the neighbourhoods.'

There are so many battles to fight in Bulgaria that they must choose them carefully. Says Ilyan, 'We can't fight corruption, because we don't have any political connections. But we try to do beautiful things and raise awareness of the importance of good public space.'

'We all went to the protests, and we do have a public opinion, but that's not enough. We have to do things and change things in a more transparent way. Take Evgenia Peeva, for example,' says Hristo. Peeva is the founder of the non-profit Step for Bulgaria Foundation, which has offered education and professional training to underprivileged Bulgarian youth since 2007. 'She can change things, not through politics but through bottom-up events. She went from writing blogs to writing requirements for competitions.'

Another way to change the system without political power is educating the following generations of architects. According to Angel, 'Nowadays, students learn more interesting

stuff and get more freedom to experiment than we got while at school.'

Thinking further, Vladislav remarks, 'The university system needs to be reorganized. We have 500 architecture graduates every year and there's no work at all. We need more progressive teachers that have decent architectural training – meaning, not in Bulgaria. We need the Architects' Union to start worrying about public space, sustainability and bottom-up principles.'

'We need to re-evaluate the communist ideas; they at least had clear visions on health care and education for all. Our bubble now is slow and small, but we will expand,' observes Hristo.

And to expand, to develop, to change things, these young architects will have to stay in Bulgaria. Although most of them participate in international competitions and sometimes work outside Bulgaria, none are thinking of emigrating. This is not only because there are no job offers from abroad. 'We have to stay to show the difference,' declares Vladislav.

'In the end,' muses Ilyan, 'we are happy architects, and part of being happy is paying the price.'