Freitag, 26. August: WEGE IN DEN KAPITALISMUS
15:00 Svetla Kazalarska: „A WYSIWYG City: The Case of Sofia?"

Abstract

WYSIWYG stands for "what you see is what you get". It is an acronym used in computing that connotes seamlessness between appearance and final product. One could imagine a WYSIWYG city as a city with a "user-friendly interface" that provides no big discrepancies between visual environment and urban structures. This presentation will focus on various aspects of the ongoing transformations in the visual environment of the city of Sofia in the period of transition and will eventually question the validity of the WYSIWYG metaphor. The city is indeed the venue where the clash between every-day urban realities and phantasms, between official representations of the city and "uncensored" perceptions of its residents and visitors, takes place and leaves an imprint. The built fabric of the city also stands as a physically constructed form of cultural memory—a tangible and visual record of what and how societies remember and forget. The presentation will focus on the manifestations of political power and capital both in the city center and the urban periphery where more than a quarter of Bulgaria's large-panel housing stock is located. Visual symbols and attributes of the communist past and their destiny in the period of transition will be discussed as well.

Introduction

I was asked to focus my presentation on the changes in the visual environment that the city of Sofia underwent (and is still undergoing) in the period of transition to post-socialism: how the outlook of the city changed and how this change was experienced and perceived by its residents. I would try to do this through telling you about the project I carried out as a fellow of the Visual Seminar because it is exactly these changes that provoked me to undertake this project.

Most present day descriptions and travelogues of Sofia usually gripe about the manifestation of urban chaos, kitsch and pollution not only in terms of the visual qualities of the urban environment, but also in terms of sound and motion. Sofia is often seen and experienced as a flamboyant, talkative and noisy, vibrant and aggressive city, a city where one needs always to be alert in order not to be run over by pedestrians, traffic, honked at, robbed, cursed and yelled at, stamped over, etc. A city that differs very much from the city it had been some 15 years ago or so.

I would like to start my presentation with a couple of images of Sofia that are posted on the Picture Gallery of the Sofia municipality's web site[1], because it was some of these images that provoked me to use the WYSIWYG metaphor. This on-line Gallery exhibits most of the updated "politically correct" representations of the city: we see images of religious diversity and tolerance (an impressive variety of places of worship – a Catholic church, an Evangelical church, a Russian and a Romanian Orthodox churches, a synagogue, and a mosque), as well as signs of multicultural urban life (Mexican restaurant, Chinese food week at McDonald's, etc.). A few European references are also noticeable (for instance, European Union flags hanging side by side with Bulgarian flags in the city's central covered marketplace). We see also images of a presumably "modern" business city with brand new lustrous banks, office buildings, hotels (Hilton, Downtown, Radisson), gas stations (Shell), supermarkets (Billa), casinos (Sheraton), and even a Disney-type amusement park, unambiguously named "Sofia Land". Certainly, the major cultural heritage and sightseeing sites have not been left out, but some of the new monuments and urban sites have also found their place in the gallery (the controversial statue of Sofia, supposedly patron of the city, the renovated book market on the "Slaveykov" Square, streetscapes, etc.).

However, some of these images really stroke me with the dimension of time and memory having been blatantly erased from the representation. The former Bulgarian Communist Party House is now presented simply as "one of the Parliament buildings", which is true as a matter of fact, but nevertheless... The caption under the photo of the former site of the former Mausoleum of the former leader of the Communist Party, Georgi Dimitrov, reads "flower gardens in front of the Palace of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom", when actually even the flowers aren't there any more. The "Palace of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom" isn't precisely a palace either. What seems to dominate in these cityscapes is the visual contemporaneity of the city, discreetly cleansed of its immediate past. And that is essentially what brought me to the WYSIWYG city metaphor.

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[1] www.sofia.bg

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The WYSIWYG Metaphor
What is WYSIWYG?

WYSIWYG is an acronym for What You See Is What You Get, and it is used in computing to describe an user interface that provides seamlessness between the appearance of the edited content and the final product. The phrase was coined in the late 1970s when the first WYSIWYG editor, Bravo, was created. The researchers at Xerox PARC were actually re-appropriating a popular catch phrase of the time, originated by *Geraldine*, a character on the Flip Wilson Show (1970 – 1974). Today WYSIWYG is counted upon, although questioned, for all word processors and in many other software applications, such as graphic design, web editing, etc.

The "visual interface" of the city

In the course of the Visual Seminar, the phrase "visual interface" often came out in the discourse in specific reference to the city. The artist Luchezar Boyadjiev used it in defining what he calls City Visual: a specific kind of visual thinking and analytical behavior by an artist that is a form of interaction with the visual interface of the city.
Thus the visual interface of the city seemed to have two basic connotations:
the first one, the broader one, overlaps with visual environment of the city;
while the other one, a more narrow one, implies the two-way process of interaction between the city and its "users", both residents and visitors, which in turn has an effect on the city, its visuality, and once again on its residents and visitors (input-output relationship).
This double-fold use of the phrase "visual interface" probably comes out of the ambiguity in the meanings of the term "interface" itself. In general usage, an interface is the point, area, or surface along which two substances or other qualitatively different things meet; it is also used metaphorically for the juncture between items[2]. The word interface also has a number of specialized meanings in electronics and computer engineering, telecommunications, chemistry, geology, linguistics, etc. What all these meanings usually have in common is the notion of "interaction", connection, transmission, translation, exchange of information. In its everyday use, however, particularly in reference to human-computer interaction, "interface" is more and more often used to refer to simply what you see on the monitor, interface is your screen.
This shift in the meaning of the word "interface" from interaction towards screen, from communication, translation, exchange towards a screen, monitor, projection, image, may not be accidental after all. It may be interpreted as characteristic of any modern technology, where we happen to be more and more the users, not the creators; it may also be attributed to the ever growing dominance of visual culture in postmodern societies.

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[2] www.wikipedia.com

What is a WYSIWIG city?

Now, if the visual interface of the city can be defined as the totality of all means (both for input and output) by which all urban actors (city users such as residents, visitors, investors, etc.) interact with the city, resulting in the production of a certain visual urban environment, then one could imagine a WYSIWYG city as a city with a certain interface that provides no big discrepancies between visual environment and urban structures that create it (between interior and exterior of the city, between the image and its representations, between the facades and the buildings, etc.).

My thesis is that WYSIWYG-ness is the currently governing urban policy applied in Sofia. I use WYSIWYG as a metaphor for the dominance of the visuality in the city, the consequence being that the dimension of memory of the urban environment is, if not completely erased, largely suppressed by the seemingly permanent contemporaneity. The end product is a city without memory, a city ever growing, but never aging.

Next, I will try to illustrate this with some examples both from the city center and the periphery.

The Case of Sofia

The city is indeed the venue where the clash between every-day urban realities and phantasms, between official representations of the city and "uncensored" perceptions of its residents and visitors, takes place and leaves an imprint. The built fabric of the city also stands as a physically constructed form of cultural memory—a tangible and visual record of what and how societies remember and forget.

The "shameful" heritage of communism

It does not come as a surprise that it is the "shameful" communist heritage that the city is trying at its hardest to erase. Let me come back to the three examples I started my presentation with – the former Communist Party House, the former site of the former Mausoleum, and the former Palace.

a) The Party House

Curiously enough, at present there are two buildings in Sofia that are designated as "National Assembly". The Party House, standing on the most prominent site of the so-called Largo, besides being presented as, you may recall, just "one of the Parliament buildings", is unquestionably one of the most conspicuous example of Stalinist architecture in the city center. It was built in the early 1950s and used to accommodate the Central Committee of the Party and the Party congresses. The story of the building after 1989 is of particular interest since it exemplifies the ways communist heritage is being re-appropriated through deliberately obscuring its historical context.

After 1989, public pressure increased to take the Communists out of the building. Following the anti-Communist demonstrations in August 1990 the huge red five-pointed star perched above the roof was removed. For some years the 18-meter high spike on top of the building stayed "beheaded", eventually a national flag was raised on top of it. The party was ousted from the building in 1992, afterwards the former Party House served briefly as a cinema and as a bazaar. Currently the building is used by the Parliament as offices and meeting rooms.

The latest Tourism Development Strategy of Sofia (as of February 2005) envisions that a sphere be installed on the spike on top of the former Party House, from which 27 beams of light would be cast in honor of the 27 EU member countries, and some 220 more beams – to all countries of the world.

Another episode in the history of the building might also be worth the examination. In the end of 2003, the Parliament was about to be relocated to the building of the former Party House, whereas there were some ideas to convert the "original" Parliament building (built 1884) into a museum. After an architectural competition for preliminary design for the renovation of the St. Sofia Hall in the Party House, a final selection had been made but the issue of financing the renovation could not get resolved.

There had been a heated debate "in favour" and "against" the relocation of the Parliament, in which in addition to the purely functional, budgetary and urbanistic arguments, some symbolic ones were implicated as well. For many, the building of the National Assembly was a symbol of parliamentarism and democracy, whereas the building of the Party House – one of totalitarianism and terror, and the major challenge for the competing architectural designs was how to visually achieve this symbolical conversion.

Of the four submitted projects, only three qualified. All three teams suggested modifications of the front façade of the Party House. The project of the Bulgarian architect Kamilarov that eventually won the competition, did not envisage drastic changes in the exterior of the building besides hanging a transparent "curtain" at the front. The second Bulgarian project by architect Bogdanov intended to mount a postmodern "umbrella" above the main entrance. The project of the Swiss architect Mario Botta got rid of the front façade, and put a leaning glass construction on its place, turning the plenary hall reverse (towards the courtyard). On the glass surface, trees were to be planted and thus the green area of the Largo would be visually continued.

According to the results from a nation-wide poll, carried out in January 2004, 26% of the respondents approved the relocation, 37% disapproved it, and 37% had no opinion whatsoever. Some 81% of the respondents, however, had no idea what the building of the former Party House was at the time being used for.

b) The Mausoleum

The case of the Mausoleum illustrates another extreme in the way the memory of the communist regime is being dealt with – by simply getting rid of the tangible signs that refer to it, in the case – by demolishing the structure.

The mausoleum was built to house the embalmed body of Georgi Dimitrov, the first leader of the People's Republic of Bulgaria. Following his death in July 1949 while on visit to Moscow, the mausoleum was constructed in six days and nights. The site where the Mausoleum was constructed was not accidental: it was facing the former Royal Palace, the former site of power.

In 1990, Dimitrov's body was removed from the mausoleum and cremated. A competition for the adaptive re-use of the former mausoleum was initiated in the early 1990s by the Bulgarian Union of Architects. Despite the proliferation of project ideas, none of them was implemented.

Here are some of the visions for re-using the building that piled up in the years the mausoleum stood empty: an art gallery and depository, a monument of the war casualties, an entertainment center called "Niagara" with a restaurant and a night bar, a physics laboratory (because of the low temperature inside the building), a cheese-making enterprise (for the same reason - good temperature for the maturing of the cheese); a pantheon of the builders of modern Bulgaria (1993), a wax figures museum, a pantheon of military glory where Bulgarian military flags are preserved (1995); in 1997 the mausoleum had been camouflaged as a Dalmatian for advertising purposes, etc. Meanwhile the mausoleum had been repeatedly covered with graffiti, and whitewashed over. For a couple of years it was used as a venue for open-air musical performances in the summer.

The uncertain fate of the mausoleum was finally put to an end in 1999 when a decision had been taken for its demolition with the Democratic Party in power at the time. It took the workmen almost a week of round-the-clock toil to demolish the mausoleum, after all, it had been designed to withstand a nuclear attack.

The story of the mausoleum was not over, however. In 2001 on the site of the former mausoleum "Gardens of the United Nations" Festival was organized, supported by the "Future for Bulgaria" Foundation (Mrs. Elena Kostova, wife of the Prime Minister at the time), the mayor of Sofia, Stefan Sofijanski, UNDP and the "Gradina" magazine. The project involved 22 diplomatic missions, present in Sofia, exhibiting garden samples characteristic for each country.

Nowadays, there is no sign that there had ever been a building at the site. Occasionally there are still open-air performances organized there, but most regularly beer festivals. Until recently it was the ad of Johnny Walker that had the most arresting visual presence at the site.

c) The Palace

The building of the "Palace of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom", formerly a *konak* (a Turkish administrative building), then a Royal Palace, and currently housing the National Art Gallery and the National Ethnographic Museum, presents a somewhat different story, another way of dealing with the past: through letting some "deeper" layers of the past come up to the surface and substitute the present, in this case through the "come back" of the monarchy since references to the monarchy happens to be a much more prestigious representation of the city nowadays. It is as if Bulgaria is presented as a traditional monarchy, it would automatically become part of the European royal family, and thus part of the European Union. Besides, it is the image of Sofia from the early decades of the 20th century that has most powerful presence in the city's contemporary representations.

d) Other examples

The obliteration of the recent past in Bulgarian cities, and Sofia in particular, is often times rather "visible". For instance, although classical "sites of memory" such as museum buildings had previous uses of certain significance in the past, this significance is intentionally rendered "invisible" nowadays. And this "invisibility" happens to be quite conspicuous. The most blatant example that comes to mind is the building of National Museum of History. In 2000 the museum was relocated to the former residency of Todor Zhivkov, head of the country under communism, in the outlying Sofia district of Boyana. This fact, however, finds no explication whatsoever in the museum. The paradox is that while the exhibition time-line ends at around 1946 - 1948, the building itself is a silent reminder of this gap in the historical narrative. So, what you see is ancient and medieval artifacts installed in huge marble-floor halls with impressive crystal chandeliers and wood-carved ceilings with "folk" motives, heavy doors and huge mosaics (all fashioned after the late 1970's socialism interior style).

Contrary to the official representation on the municipality's web site, the National Ethnographic Museum housed in the former Royal Palace, does not mention this fact in the interpretative texts of the museum, so one could only wonder about having "high" and "low" culture juxtaposed side by side: traditional folk culture displayed against the background of "royal" halls with gilded mirrors, marble fireplaces, stuccoed ceilings, etc.

Only recently, the new Tourism Development Strategy of Sofia (February 2005) envisions the founding of a Museum of Totalitarian Art (1927 – 1956) on the premises of the Monument of the 1300th Anniversary of the founding of Bulgarian State in front of the National Palace of Culture. After 1989 the monument has been left to progressively dilapidate, and only in the recent years it was used as the venue for annually organized Graffiti Festival. Once again the graffiti serve merely as a screen for the monument, a layer of contemporaneity that makes an attempt to render the past invisible.

The National Palace of Culture itself is a quite notable reminder of the climax in the national fabrication process pursued during socialism. This monstrous "palace" nowadays, however, besides being one of the most desired advertising screens in the city, serves mostly as a huge bazaar with huge trade fairs organized there all year round.

Despite the ongoing debates on getting rid of the Monument of the Soviet Army standing prominently in the very center of the city, for most of Sofia's youth it is basically the skaters' domain. This is also the site where Techno Parades take place.

Is there is something that's completely absent in the current representations of the city, these are the large prefabricated housing estates built in the 60s and 70s. Still, one fifth of the Bulgarians (1,758,248) live in panel apartment blocks. The largest number of *panelki*[3] is to be found in Sofia – 201,020 apartments in 2,564 blocks of flats. About half a million people (502,571) live in the panel housing estates of Sofia today.

The housing complexes were originally characterized by wide boulevards, vast green areas, and plenty of playgrounds. Following the changes in 1989, the original visual character of the estate changed immensely. The lack of sufficient commercial and parking space spurred the mushrooming of haphazard kiosks and bazaars, with some of the larger shopping facilities built in socialist times standing obsolete. Indications of urban sprawl processes are nowadays visible in the outer complexes situated close to the city's ring road. In-fill construction of commercial and residential nature grew up on the sites of the once-playgrounds and green areas.

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[3] Bulgarian slang for a concrete panel apartment block.

Piecemeal rehabilitation of single apartments took place all over the place, thus breaking the monotony of the socialist-type standardized housing on the one hand, but also adding to a feeling of visual dissonance and blight on the other.

The advent of the "wild" capital

While the "shameful" memory of communism is being gradually deleted, re-appropriated or concealed behind screens, the "shameless" manifestation of capital resolutely steps into the city. New hotels, banks, office buildings, gas stations, casinos, advertising billboards, etc. have already left a lasting imprint on the visual landscape of the city. Nobody questions the positive aspects of the market invasion into the city, but while some consider the logic of the market standing behind these developments as part of a natural "neoliberal" urbanistic philosophy, others are rather alarmed by its disconcern for the city (the ways it disturbs the living environment of the city), and argue for the need for external non-market regulators (civic and community-based regulators). The Visual Seminar itself served as one such regulator.

"On Route 76" Project
Project Idea
The title of my project was "On Route 76: Gazing at the City from the Window of the Public Transport Bus". The analogy I had in mind was that with the Historic Route 66 in the United States.
The original project idea was quite simple: to "imagine" the route of the public transport bus as a tourist route, as a way of gazing, reading and understanding the city, similar to the "classical" cultural heritage trails. The pilot project had to develop the content and the design of ten panels interpreting the urban history and visual culture of Sofia which were to be installed at ten bus stops of a single public transport route—that of bus line number 76.
It is one of the relatively old and familiar bus lines in Sofia; launched in 1972, *sedem-shes'* has already become a common noun for the frequent public transport commuters in Sofia. It crosses the city far and wide—starts from one of the outlying residential districts (*Mladost* IV), runs through the center of the city (Eagles' Bridge, National Palace of Culture), and reaches another outlying district—the *Gotse Deltchev* district. And besides, it's my bus.
This "invented" heritage trail was intended most of all for the residents of Sofia, not as much for the tourists, although the latter could benefit from it as well. The main objective was to train a conscious gazing upon the city and to enhance the visual literacy of the city residents through awakening their curiosity about the history of their own city, their own neighborhood.
The interpretative panels would combine scientific and popular information by mixing oral histories, historical sources, photographic materials, various interpretations and re-writings of urban history, even jokes and yellow press articles. The panels were to focus not only on the past, but also to reflect upon the events of the day, such as life stories of neighbors and citizens, ongoing urban construction, neighborhood news, infrastructure improvements, changes in the names of streets, etc. The themes covered by the trail were very diverse, encompassing culture, architecture, history, politics, sports, industrial heritage, folklore, every day life, etc.

The interpretative panels were to be installed on the <u>bus stops</u>, thus making use of city infrastructure already in place, i.e. there would have been no need to make new interventions in the visual landscape of the city. Besides, a good number of people anyway hang out at the bus stops at least for a couple of minutes every day, while waiting for the bus, which in fact partially solves the problem faced by most urban heritage trails, which is that people very seldom if ever stop by to look at such information panels.

The essential idea, however, behind my project was to try to fill in this gap in the memory of the city that I perceived in the images of the city. The intent was multi-fold: first, to challenge the traditional museum concept – the "four walls" museum, and to experiment with the decentralized open-air museum concept, the museum as a gateway; second, to train the viewer's eyes and thus to enhance the visual literacy of the residents; and last but not least, to uncover some of the shadowed (by WYSIWYG-ness) layers of urban memory imbued in the urban structures, and thus to make people aware that what you think you see is not always what you think you get. There's always more to it, and it's up to each one of us to open up our eyes and minds to "get it".