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9th September Square : Spectacle of Communism

Tracing back the history of Sofia's urban core, one can clearly observe how the physical space becomes a manifestation of the cultural change in society. 20th century is an era of Modernism throughout Europe and the United States. Just as Corbusier, Mumford and Gropius write, the Modern period presents a break with the past and a vision of a "new spirit" coupled with a "new architecture" influenced greatly by the innovative methods of mass-produced pre-fabricated components[1]. The same chain of thought is present in Sofia from 1944 until 1989 but it was implemented through the lens of a utopian ideology. Socialism, or Communism, came to Bulgaria on 9th September 1944. It brought a new understanding of centralized power that would provide equality to the masses. The notion of the city became crucial in setting an environment suitable and representative of the ideology. Inspired by CIAM's principles of social architecture (1928), visionaries led a process of urban renewal which reconstructed the image and meaning the metropolis. What used to be a Western European-looking environment with small-scale urban fabric driven by capitalist principles transformed into a large-scale order of systematic integrated parts with organized infrastructure around a centralized core. This paper will follow how the downtown plaza of Sofia, renamed "9th September Square," became a physical metaphor for the spectacle of Communism. The square played a key role in two phases of urban renewal: during phase I (1944-1960s), the plaza represented a symbolic break with the past through the construction of grand ensemble of the party's headquarters and during phase II (1960s-1989), it became an important part of the infrastructural development of the city.

To understand better the physical transformation of Sofia, one must study the principles of Communism. The origins date back to the 19th century with writings by Karl and Marx. The two theoreticians explored the relationships between classes and labor and stated in their "Manifesto of the Communist Party" from 1898 that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle[2]". In order to bring equilibrium, Marx and Engels argued for the creation of a society as a whole without differentiation between people. They believed that competition has to be abolished and replaced with association. Production would be taken out of the hands of individuals and given to a system that guards over the community as a whole. Everything had to be for a common account and a common plan in which everyone took part. Centralization of all power that

[1] Le Corbusier, 1887-1965. 1976. *Towards a new architecture*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

[2] Marx, Karl, 1818-1883., Friedrich Engels 1820-1895., Friedrich Engels 1820-1895.Gründsätze des Kommunismus.English.1964., and Sweezy, Paul Marlor,1910-2004.Communist manifesto after 100 years.1964. 1964. *The communist manifesto*. Vol. PB-62. New York: Monthly Review Press.

would provide the masses with equal rights and opportunities was key. Communism incorporated these thoughts and turned them into a reality. The party gained complete power over labor, leisure and living every day practices. The city had to be rethought in order to address the new political model.

The arrival of Communism in Bulgaria coincided with a desperate need for urban renewal in the city. Sofia had suffered a tremendous destruction from WWII. The war left 10,000 flats, 1700 stores, 500 industrial buildings, 40 schools, 11 hospitals and 8 theaters and cinemas of the capital in ruins[3]. The first task of the new regime was to build an urban core that would align with the new era and the new vision. As architect Tashev explained, "The city had to develop as a large socialist industrial, cultural, administrative, scientific, academic, tourist center, which would unconditionally lead to growth of its population and territory[4]". Any symbols of the past had to be destroyed. The downtown City Garden with the Royal Palace became an immediate target. The name "Tsar's Square" was changed to "9th September Square" and the iron gates surrounding the palace and the garden were destroyed to expose any private properties to the public. The palace was stripped of its royal decorations and changed to the National Art Gallery[5]. Thus, any memories of the old monarchy were suppressed and any notion of privacy was abolished.

Competitions for the development of the communist headquarters in Sofia followed in 1944. Inspired by Modernist thoughts, the scale of the proposals drastically changed the notion of the city. Buildings were perceived as large objects, stripped of any ornamentation to project the spirit of efficiency and functionality[6]. A complex known as the Largo took several years to be completed (1945-1950s). Supervised by architects Grekov and Tonev, the masterplan included the House of Party, several Ministries, Central Department Store, and a Balkan hotel that were all connected to 9th September Square. The programs reflected the centralization of power. The intentionally constructed views of grand monumental buildings represented the party's overarching absolute control. Thus, the freshly cleared and vast 9th September Square provided influential vistas that defined the communal socialist identity. It served as a constant urban reminder of the all-encompassing regime. In addition, in 1949 a mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov, the first Communist leader in Bulgaria, was constructed in a neo-classical style on the square. The symbolic massive building represented the cult of socialism. Citizens were regularly brought to the site and encouraged to kneel with admiration, showing respect towards the leader and the system. The whole area, therefore, became a politically charged urban space that constructed a formal image of the communist ideology.

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[3] Tashev, Petŭr Angelov. 1972. *Sofiia˘–arkhitekturno–gradoustroĭstveno razvitie* . Sofiia˘: Teŭnika. pp 30.
[4] Tashev, 41.
[5] Wikimedia Foundation Inc. National art gallery (bulgaria). 2013 [cited 10/05 2013]. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Art_Gallery_%28Bulgaria%29.
[6] Tonev, Li˘u˘ben. 1984. *Gradoustroĭstvoto v narodna republika Bŭlgariia˘: Ni˘a˘koi osnovni problemi*. 1. izd. ed. Sofiia˘: Dŭrzh. izd-vo "Tekhnika".

In the 1960s, new construction methods of pre-fabricated panels were introduced from the Soviet Union. This factor together with the growing population in Sofia changed the focus of architecture towards the construction of numerous large-scale residential complexes. The systematic production of blocks, repeated typologies and spatial organizations that would provide equal living conditions for modern citizens was highly inspired by various CIAM architects of the 1930s such as Ernst May, Hannes Meyer, Corbusier and Hilberseimer. The growth of the city had to be supported by a well developed infrastructure, providing efficient links between the separate neighborhoods and microregions. Much like the Futurama exhibit in 1939, the understanding of spatial arrangement became inseparable from the development of highways and roads. The holistic vision of the city was crucial for creating a well-integrated and functional metropolis.

City plans of Sofia in the 1960s and 1970s captured the new interest towards infrastructure[7]. The capital city became encircled with ring roads, connected to the urban center by diagonal boulevards. A new train station in a brutalist style was built between 1971-1974 which further emphasized the significance of transportation and connectivity. Zooming into the urban core, 9th September Square was defined as a main boulevard, connected to the outer suburbs by ring roads. The space consequently took part of the larger infrastructural network which further underlined its key location in the city. Apart from a symbolic urban plaza, the square became also a transition zone where flow would be kept consistent throughout the city.

The notion of connectivity and fluidity was further presented by the international competition for Sofia's downtown area in 1964[8]. Although projects were not realized due to financial problems, they showcased a new sensitivity towards the urban scale. Rather than a singular ensemble of a few buildings, the drawings revealed the vision of large systematic and repeated complexes, organized along straight roads. The aerial pictures of models remind of discussions about Futurists and Modernists such as Robert Moses whose work contained a certain detachment from the city fabric. The humanistic aspects of the environment are replaced by grand visions of efficient neighborhoods. The city transformed into a mechanical system. Examples such as architect Siromahov's project illustrate the integration of 9th September Square into the overall matrix of functional infrastructure and architecture.

The period between 1944 and 1989 in Bulgaria clearly outlines a framework of thought driven by Modernist principles with a focus on social equality under a centralized oppressive rule. The transformation of Sofia's 9th September Square into a symbolic and transitional space continuously captured and projected the ideology of the regime. Everything in the city was believed to be done for the collective's benefit. The concept of the group had to be cherished and the urban plaza never stopped to remind its citizens of that

[7] Andreychin, Dimitar. Interview. 2013.

[8] Tashev, Petŭr Angelov. 1972. *Sofii˝a˜–arkhitekturno–gradoustroĭstveno razvitie* . Sofii˝a˜: Teŭnika. pp. 56.

obligation. The square was used for regular manifestations and celebrations of socialist holidays. It served as a platform for well organized spectacles that emphasized the group behavior. Space and social practices overlapped to capture the spirit of this time.