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Images of War.
War in Memory, Space
and Visual Culture

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The Ruins of Memory. Dissonance and Conflict at the Partisan Cemetery in Mostar

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This article analyses the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar as a paradigmatic case of dissonant funerary heritage in a post-conflict context. It examines its architectural, urban, and funerary dimensions, emphasising the centrality of burial and memory. Particular attention is given to post-1990s transformations, including vandalism and the 2022 destruction, interpreted as an attack on the cemetery's funerary core and its ethical meaning.

KEYWORDS
dissonant heritage; funerary heritage; Partisan Cemetery Mostar; Bogdan Bogdanović; post-conflict memory; heritage conservation; vandalism; Yugoslav memorial architecture; memory and conflict; architectural restoration

FUNERARY HERITAGE, MEMORY AND CONFLICT

Among the various domains of heritage studies, funerary and commemorative heritage stands out for its particular sensitivity and complexity. Cemeteries are not merely architectural artefacts or symbolic constructions, but socially and culturally constructed spaces shaped by specific practices of burial, regulation, and memory, which define them as distinct socio-spatial institutions.[1] Unlike other forms of cultural heritage, funerary sites embody an ethical dimension that precedes and transcends their historical, architectural, or artistic value. They are spaces where collective narratives intersect with individual biographies, where political interpretations confront personal loss, and where the past is not only represented but physically inscribed in

1 Julie RUGG, *Defining the Place of Burial. What Makes a Cemetery a Cemetery?*, Mortality 5, 2000, No. 3, pp. 259–275; EADEM, *Turismo del patrimonio funerario: definiciones y principios*, Revista Murciana de Antropología 28, 2021, pp. 31–58; EADEM, *Further Remarks on Modern Sepulture*, Eastern and Northern European Journal of Death Studies 1, 2022, No. 1, pp. 16–46; Mattias FRIHAMMAR — Helaine SILVERMAN (edd.), *Heritage of Death. Landscapes of Emotion, Memory and Practice*, London 2017; Helena NORDH et al., *Disrespectful or Socially Acceptable? — A Nordic Case Study of Cemeteries as Recreational Landscapes*, Landscape and Urban Planning 231, 2023.

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names, dates, and bodies. For this reason, cemeteries constitute one of the most fragile and contested categories of heritage, particularly in societies marked by political rupture, ethnic conflict, or unresolved historical trauma. In such contexts, they often become dissonant heritage: a field in which competing memories coexist without reconciliation, and where acts of conservation, neglect or destruction acquire an inevitably political meaning.[2] The notion of dissonant heritage[3] has been widely employed to describe those heritage sites whose meanings are contested by different social groups and whose values are neither universally recognised nor shared. While this concept has been applied to monuments, urban spaces, and landscapes associated with uncomfortable or violent pasts, its implications are particularly acute in relation to cemeteries: funerary sites resist easy reinterpretations because they are grounded in the irreducible reality of death and memory.[4] The presence of architecture, graves and tombstones limits the possibility of symbolic abstraction and exposes the violence inherent in attempts to erase or marginalise certain pasts. In this sense, cemeteries function as ethical thresholds within the heritage field, revealing the limits of political manipulation and the fragility of institutionalised memory.[5] This perspective has been developed in recent studies on Bosnia and Herzegovina, which interpret urban and memorial landscapes as the result of the process of sedimentation and erosion of historical, religious,

2 Laurajane SMITH, *Uses of Heritage*, London 2006; Rodney HARRISON, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, London 2012; Kynan GENTRY — Laurajane SMITH, *Critical Heritage Studies and the Legacies of the Late-Twentieth Century Heritage Canon*, International Journal of Heritage Studies 25, 2019, No. 11, pp. 1148–1168; Emma WATERTON — Laurajane SMITH — Gary CAMPBELL, *The Utility of Discourse Analysis to Heritage Studies*, International Journal of Heritage Studies 12, 2006, No. 4, pp. 339–355; Emma WATERTON — Laurajane SMITH, *The Recognition and Misrecognition of Community Heritage*, International Journal of Heritage Studies 16, 2010, No. 1–2, pp. 4–15; Tim WINTER, *Clarifying the Critical in Critical Heritage Studies*, International Journal of Heritage Studies 19, 2013, No. 6, pp. 532–545.

3 The main references for the study of dissonant heritage, which at the same time reflect the openness of this field to multidisciplinary interpretations and methodological approaches are: John E. TUNBRIDGE — Gregory John ASHWORTH, *Dissonant Heritage. The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*, Chichester 1996; L. SMITH, *Uses of Heritage*; Sharon MACDONALD, *Difficult Heritage. Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, London — New York 2009; William Stewart LOGAN — Máiréad Nic CRAITH — Ullrich KOCKEL (eds.), *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, Chichester 2016; David LOWENTHAL, *The Past Is a Foreign Country — Revisited*, Cambridge 2015.

4 A brief bibliography on the topic: Kami FLETCHER — Ashley TOWLE (eds.), *Grave History. Death, Race and Gender in Southern Cemeteries*, Athens 2023; M. FRIHAMMAR — H. SILVERMAN (eds.), *Heritage of Death*; R. HARRISON, *Heritage*; J. RUGG, *Defining the Place of Burial*; EADEM, *Turismo del patrimonio funerario*; EADEM, *Further Remarks*; A. V. SEATON, *Guided by the Dark. From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism*, International Journal of Heritage Studies 2, 1996, No. 4, pp. 234–244.

5 Emanuele MOREZZI — Alessia ZAMPINI, *Dissonant Heritage and War. Identity as a Negative Value in Contemporary Heritage Conservation Debates*, Città in controluce 43–44, 2024, pp. 167–190.

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and political layers over time.[6] Within this framework, monuments and burial sites are not understood as stable entities, but as dynamic configurations whose meanings shift according to changing social and cultural conditions: as palimpsests of different temporal strata and also of tensions and conflicts that emerge when these layers are reinterpreted, suppressed, or reactivated. In this sense, the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar can be read as a particularly dense site of sedimentation, where socialist, pre-socialist, and post-conflict meanings intersect and compete.[7] The case of the city of Mostar, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and its Partisan Cemetery, exemplifies these tensions with exceptional clarity. Conceived as a universal funerary and commemorative monument in the context of socialist Yugoslavia, the cemetery has progressively become a site of conflict, abandonment, and vandalism, reflecting the transformation of collective memory in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. Instead of treating the site solely as an architectural masterpiece, this paper examines the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar as a paradigmatic case of funerary heritage affected by dissonance. Rather than treating the site solely as an architectural masterpiece or as a political symbol, the paper approaches it primarily as a cemetery, emphasising the centrality of burial and mourning within its conception and subsequent history. This paper reconstructs the genesis of the cemetery, analyses its compositional structure, and examines its post-war trajectory, arguing that its current condition cannot be understood without acknowledging the specific role that funerary sites play in contexts of contested memory. The destruction of the cemetery's gravestones in 2022,[8] in particular, represents not only an act of vandalism against architecture and a historic site, but a direct attack on the funerary core of the monument and on the individuals it commemorates. Through this lens, the Partisan Cemetery of Mostar becomes a critical case for reflecting not only on the limits of heritage protection, but also on the broader ethical and practical challenges involved in the conservation and safeguarding of cemeteries affected by conflict, war, and dissonant memory. The site reveals how funerary heritage, when embedded in fractured social and political contexts, resists conventional models of preservation and requires approaches capable of addressing material vulnerability, contested meanings, and the enduring presence of unresolved trauma.[9]

6 Monika PALMBERGER, *How Generations Remember. Conflicting Histories and Shared Memories in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina*, London 2016.

7 Robert M. HAYDEN — Mario KATIĆ, *Introduction to Thematic Issue. Spatializing Sedimentations and Erosions of Time in Urban Landscapes*, Geoadria 29, 2024, No. 2, pp. 151–160; Mario KATIĆ, *Palimpsesting Martyrs. Graves of Shahids within the Sedimentations and Erosions of Time in Banja Luka and Zenica*, ibid., pp. 207–226; Vladan VUKLIŠ, *Pieces of Contested Memories. The History of Monuments in Banja Luka*, ibid., pp. 227–258; Bogdan DRAŽETA, *Monuments in Mostar as Markers of the Symbolic Border and Post-War Memorialization*, ibid., pp. 259–282; Mirza DŽANANOVIĆ, *Wandering Monuments of Zenica*, ibid., pp. 29–67.

8 Emanuele MOREZZI, *Distruzione, vandalismo e rifiuto del patrimonio costruito: la difficile tutela e conservazione del Partisan Cemetery di Mostar di Bogdan Bogdanović*, in: Francesca Capano — Emma Maglio — Massimo Visone (eds.), Città e guerra. Difese, distruzioni, permanenze delle memorie e dell'immagine urbana, Napoli 2023, pp. 951–961.

9 Janina FISHER, *Trasformare l'eredità del trauma. Un manuale pratico per la vita quotidiana e per la terapia*, Sesto San Giovanni 2021.

YUGOSLAV MEMORIAL PROPAGANDA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FUNERARY LANDSCAPES

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During the twentieth century, Mostar developed as a multi-ethnic urban centre shaped by the coexistence of Bosniak, Croat, and Serb communities. Under socialist Yugoslavia, this diversity was reframed through the ideology of *Brotherhood and Unity*, which promoted a shared antifascist narrative. The conflicts of the 1990s disrupted this framework, producing both physical destruction and a deep fragmentation of memory. In the post-conflict city, space has acquired a strongly symbolic dimension, reflecting divided interpretations of the past. Within this context, the Partisan legacy is no longer universally recognised and remains deeply contested.[10] The genesis of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar must be situated within the broader memorial culture developed in Yugoslavia after the Second World War.[11] The end of the conflict confronted the new socialist state with the challenge of consolidating political unity across a territory characterised by profound ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity. The partisan struggle against Axis occupation was elevated to the status of a foundational myth, capable of transcending internal divisions and legitimising the new political order. The ideology of *Brotherhood and Unity*[12] was not merely a rhetorical construct, but a comprehensive cultural project aimed at reshaping collective memory through education, ritual, and spatial practices. Within this framework, architecture and landscape played a crucial role in materialising the narrative of resistance and sacrifice. From the late 1940s onwards, Yugoslavia embarked on an extensive programme of monument construction, resulting in a dense network of memorials, monuments, and cemeteries distributed across its territory. These sites were often created in locations associated with battles, executions or mass fatalities, transforming landscapes of trauma into spaces of collective remembrance.[13] At the same time, this memorial

10 M. PALMBERGER, *How Generations Remember*; Helen WALASEK, *Bosnia and the Destruction of Cultural Heritage*, London 2016; Robert BEVAN, *The Destruction of Memory. Architecture at War*, London 2007; Susan FORDE, *Movement as Conflict Transformation. Rescripting Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina*, New York 2019; Antonio Giuseppe VIOLANTE, *Quando le macerie parlano. I segni della guerra nella città di Mostar*, in: Alice Giulia Dal Borgo — Emanuele Garda — Andrea Marini (eds.), Sguardi tra i residui. I luoghi dell'abbandono tra rovine, utopie ed eterotopie, Sesto San Giovanni 2016, pp. 219–236; Camillo BOANO, *Lo spazio costruito e i confini urbani. Il ruolo dell'architettura nelle città divise*, in: Gian Matteo Apuzzo (ed.), Le città divise. I Balcani e la cittadinanza tra nazionalismo e cosmopolitismo, Roma 2005, pp. 75–86.

11 Vladimir KULIĆ, *East? West? Or Both? Foreign Perceptions of Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia*, The Journal of Architecture 14, 2009, No. 1, pp. 129–147.

12 IDEM, *Building Brotherhood and Unity. Architecture and Federalism in Socialist Yugoslavia*, in: Martino Stierli — Vladimir Kulić (eds.), Toward a Concrete Utopia. Architecture in Yugoslavia 1948–1980, New York 2018, pp. 27–55.

13 Sanja HORVATINČIĆ, *Between Creativity and Pragmatism. A Structural Analysis and Quantitative Survey of Federal Competitions for Yugoslav Monuments and Memorial Complexes (1955–1980)*, in: Leonida Kolesnik — Sanja Horvatinčić (eds.), Modern and Contemporary

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landscape did not emerge in an empty cultural field, but was superimposed onto pre-existing religious and historical layers, producing a complex interaction between older and newer meanings. Funerary architecture occupied a central position within this programme, as the burial of fallen partisans provided a tangible link between the abstract ideals of socialism and the concrete reality of human loss. Cemeteries for the war dead were conceived not only as places of mourning, but also as pedagogical instruments, intended to transmit a shared historical narrative to future generations.[14] Within this context, Yugoslav memorial architecture gradually moved away from the figurative and monumental language characteristic of early socialist realism, as architects and artists were increasingly granted the freedom to experiment with abstraction, symbolism, and landscape integration. This shift allowed for the emergence of a distinctive memorial culture that combined political intent with formal innovation.

Bogdan Bogdanović and his work played a key role in this process. Born in Belgrade in 1920, Bogdanović was trained as an architect in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, graduating at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade under the supervision of Nikola Dobrović.[15] His early professional years were marked by a search for an autonomous architectural language, developed through small-scale urban experiments and projects in Serbia and Montenegro, as well as through an intense engagement with writing, theory, and artistic practice. This formative period coincided with a broader cultural shift in Yugoslavia following the country's break with the Soviet bloc in 1948, which allowed for a gradual emancipation from the rigid constraints of socialist realism and fostered a climate of formal and expressive experimentation.[16] Within this context, Bogdanović developed an approach to memorial architecture that deliberately distanced itself from explicit ideological iconography. Rejecting heroic statuary, figurative realism, and overt political symbolism, he sought instead to construct spaces capable of engaging visitors on an experiential and existential level, addressing memory through spatial sequences, symbolic landscapes, and carefully choreographed paths rather than through didactic representation.[17] Bogdanović's work occupies a unique position within Yugoslav memorial culture: while operating within a state-sponsored programme of commemoration linked to the ideology of *Brotherhood and Unity*, his

Artists' Networks. An Inquiry into Digital History of Art and Architecture, Zagreb 2018, pp. 124–165.

14 Christian FUHRMEISTER — Kai KAPPEL, *Introduction to the Special Issue "War Graves, War Cemeteries, and Memorial Shrines as a Building Task (1914–1989)"*, RIHA Journal, 2017, No. 8.

15 Vera GRIMMER — Sonja LEBOŠ (eds.), *Bogdan Bogdanović. Ukleti neimar*, exhibition catalogue, Split 2013.

16 Aleksa KOROLIJA, *Di pietra e di piuma. Bogdan Bogdanović e lo spazio memoriale*, Torino 2023; Aleksandar IGNJATOVIĆ, *A Flower for the Dead. The Memorials of Bogdan Bogdanović*, Slavonic and Eastern European Review 92, 2014, No. 4, pp. 758–760.

17 Emanuele MOREZZI, *Architetture della memoria divisa. I memoriali di Bogdan Bogdanović tra eredità e frammentazione*, Restauro Archeologico 33, 2025, No. 1, pp. 100–105.

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projects consistently resisted reductive political interpretation.[18] Drawing on mythology, archetypal forms, and the spatial logic of ancient cities and necropolises, he developed an architectural language that aspired to universality. References to prehistoric, Etruscan, and Mesopotamian cultures, together with a consciously surrealist attitude, informed his formal vocabulary and allowed his memorials to evoke a sense of timelessness detached from specific national or ideological narratives. His monuments were conceived not as isolated objects to be contemplated from a distance, but as environments to be traversed, experienced, and internalised, in which the visitor becomes an active participant in the construction of meaning. Gates, thresholds, terraces, and changes in level recur throughout his work, structuring a ritualised experience of movement and encounter with memory. Between the early 1950s and the 1980s, Bogdanović designed and realised approximately twenty major memorials across the territory of the former Yugoslavia, including the Sephardic Jewish Cemetery memorial in Belgrade, the Monument for the victims at Jasenovac, and numerous partisan memorials in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and other Yugoslav republics.[19] Despite their differences in form and scale, these works share a consistent concern for the relationship between architecture and landscape, as well as a refusal to employ symbols that could be directly associated with specific ethnic, religious, or political identities. This approach enabled his architecture to transcend the immediate ideological framework of socialism while still participating in its commemorative agenda.

When Bogdanović was commissioned in the early 1960s to design the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar, he fully integrated these principles into the project. The cemetery was intended to accommodate the remains of hundreds of partisans who had died during the liberation of the city in 1945. Yet from the outset, it was conceived as more than a burial ground: Bogdanović envisioned the cemetery as a "city of the dead" and wanted it to be in dialogue with the living city of Mostar.[20] This concept reflects both the Yugoslav ambition to integrate memory into everyday life and Bogdanović's own interest in the relationship between urban form, landscape, and remembrance. The cemetery was thus designed to function simultaneously as a funerary site, a monumental landscape, and a civic space, blurring the boundaries between mourning, memory, and daily use, and establishing a lasting dialogue between the material presence of the dead and the evolving life of the city.[21]

18 Senadin MUSABEGOVIĆ, *Symbolic Significance of Monuments in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, in: Daniel Brumund — Milica Radulović (eds.), Monumenti. The Changing Face of Remembrance, Belgrade 2012, p. 18–21.

19 Vladimir KULIĆ, *Bogdanović by Bogdanović. Yugoslav Memorials through the Eyes of Their Architect*, London 2018.

20 E. MOREZZI, *Architetture della memoria divisa*.

21 Ivan RISTIĆ, *Bogdan Bogdanović — The Practice of Architecture under Changing Political Regimes in Yugoslavia*, Vilnius 2013.

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THE PARTISAN CEMETERY OF MOSTAR: FUNERARY TYPOLOGY, URBAN DIALOGUE AND SPATIAL MEANING

The full significance of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar can only be understood when it is analysed not simply as a memorial monument, but as a cemetery in the strict sense of the term. This distinction is crucial, particularly within contexts of dissonant heritage, where memorials and monuments may be reinterpreted, reframed, or even symbolically neutralised, while cemeteries remain stubbornly anchored to the presence of death and burial. Unlike other memorials, cemeteries confront visitors with the irreducible reality of individual lives lost, inscribed in names, dates, and graves. In Mostar, this funerary dimension is not a marginal component of the project, but its semantic and ethical core.[22] The destruction of the cemetery's headstones in 2022 must therefore be understood as an attack directed precisely at this core, rather than at the monument as an architectural object alone.[23] The act of smashing the plaques was not merely an act of vandalism against a cultural artefact, but a deliberate attempt to erase individual identities from the landscape of memory, transforming a place of burial into a field of anonymous ruin. This becomes even more evident in the urban and social context of Mostar.

Mostar is a city marked by deep post-conflict divisions. Within this fractured situation, the *Partiza* legacy is no longer universally recognised, and the cemetery itself becomes a site of contested meaning. From an architectural perspective, Bogdanović's project reinforces this funerary and urban ambivalence.[24] The cemetery is structured as a sequence of terraces ascending the hillside, organised around a clearly articulated path that guides the visitor through the landscape. This path is not neutral: it imposes a bodily experience of ascent, effort, and progression, transforming the act of visiting the cemetery into a ritualised journey. The gradual revelation of the burial terraces reinforces the idea that remembrance is not immediate but requires engagement and time. Water, flowing from the upper fountain through the terraces towards the lower basin, introduces a further layer of meaning, connecting the elevated realm of the dead with the everyday life of the city below. In this sense, the cemetery establishes a continuous dialogue between death and life, memory and present, rather than isolating the dead in a segregated space.[25] The relationship between the "city of the dead" and the "city of the living" is particularly important in Mostar, where urban space itself has become a marker

22 Iskra DURIĆ, *Memorials without Memory. Bogdan Bogdanović and Yugoslav Memorial Architecture in the Changed Social and Political Context*, PhD thesis, Faculty of Architecture, Sapienza — Università di Roma, Roma 2015.

23 E. MOREZZI, *Distruzione*.

24 IDEM, *Memoriali e monumenti in ex Jugoslavia come sfida contemporanea alla conservazione. I restauri e la tutela della Necropoli di Novi Travnik di Bogdan Bogdanović*, in: Gentucca Canella — Paolo Mellano (eds.), Monumento memoriale. Figurazione e tensione plastica come istanza morale, Milano 2024, pp. 190–201.

25 Mateo GOSPIĆ, *The Partisan Memorial Cemetery in Mostar*, Pro Tempore 15, 2020, pp. 185–191.

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of division.[26] The cemetery's elevated position overlooking the city was not chosen merely for its scenic value, but for its symbolic potential. From the terraces, the city unfolds below as a fragmented landscape, a reminder of the community for which the partisans died and which has since been profoundly transformed. This visual and spatial dialogue reinforces the civic dimension of the cemetery, positioning it not as a marginal or peripheral space, but as an integral component of the urban system.[27] In this respect, the cemetery functions as an urban analogue, mirroring the city's structure while simultaneously offering a critical perspective on its history. The material language of the cemetery further strengthens this connection. The use of local stone and river pebbles embeds the monument within the geological and cultural fabric of Mostar, while the reuse of material from destroyed buildings introduces fragments of the city's past into the funerary landscape. This strategy blurs the distinction between monument and ruin, between construction and loss, reinforcing the idea that the cemetery is not an isolated artefact, but a palimpsest in which different temporal layers coexist. In a city marked by destruction and reconstruction, this quality acquires particular resonance, transforming the cemetery into a condensed representation of Mostar's twentieth-century history.[28] This palimpsestic condition is not merely a metaphor, but reflects the coexistence of multiple historical sedimentations that have been variously reinforced or eroded over time. As recent studies on Bosnia and Herzegovina have shown, these processes involve not only material transformation but also shifting symbolic interpretations linked to changing political and cultural frameworks.[29]

POST-CONFLICT TRANSFORMATIONS, VANDALISM AND THE FAILURE OF PROTECTION

As outlined above, the post-war condition of Mostar is characterised not only by physical division, but by the coexistence of parallel and often incompatible memory regimes embedded in the urban fabric. The history of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar reveals the structural limits of institutional heritage protection in

26 B. Bogdanović, letters (1968; 1997), published and disseminated through the website https://partizansko.info. In these texts, the author formulates and re-elaborates the idea of the cemetery as a "city of the dead" in dialogue with the "city of the living", conceived as a foundational symbolic and urban device in the design of the Mostar memorial; see also E. MOREZZI, *Architetture della memoria divisa*. See also Kristina ILIĆ — Nevena Škrbić ALEMPIJEVIĆ, *Cultures of Memory, Landscapes of Forgetting. The Case Study of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery in Mostar*, Studia ethnologica Croatica 29, 2017, No. 1, pp. 73–101.

27 Andrew LAWLER, *The Memorial Works of Bogdan Bogdanović. Their Condition and Situation as of 2012*, PhD thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven 2013.

28 Faruk BORIĆ, *Bosnia-Herzegovina Social Briefing. Partisan Cemetery: Systematic Destruction of the Anti-Fascist Past*, Weekly Briefing 52, 2022, No. 3.

29 R. M. HAYDEN — M. KATIĆ, *Introduction to thematic issue*; M. KATIĆ, *Palimpsesting Martyrs*.

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contexts of dissonant memory, particularly when a funerary monument is embedded within a city profoundly transformed by conflict. The cemetery sustained damage during the wars of the 1990s and the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It now reveals the structural limits of heritage protection: while it did not suffer complete destruction comparable to other areas of Mostar, it became the target of vandalism, graffiti, partial demolition, and symbolic desecration, especially during the period of Croatian nationalist control, when Yugoslav socialist memorials were increasingly perceived as remnants of an unwanted political and ideological past. In these years, the cemetery ceased to function as a shared civic and commemorative space and entered a prolonged phase of neglect and abandonment, reflecting both the broader post-war emergency and a deliberate hesitation to engage with a monument associated with contested narratives of anti-fascism and Yugoslav unity. This situation persisted throughout the late 1990s, when the absence of systematic conservation efforts mirrored the lack of social consensus surrounding the monument's significance. A turning point occurred in the early 2000s, when shifting cultural policies began to acknowledge the architectural and historical value of socialist-era heritage, leading the Commission to Preserve National Monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina to designate the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar as a National Monument in 2006.[30] This designation established a formal legal framework of protection, including buffer zones and restrictions on surrounding development, and explicitly recognised the inseparable relationship between the cemetery, its landscape, and the urban fabric of Mostar, while affirming the funerary function of the complex as a defining element of its identity. Subsequently, works were undertaken to repair war-related damage and restore the monument's original legibility. However, these interventions were conceived primarily as top-down, expert-driven actions and were not accompanied by sustained processes of social mediation or community involvement. As a result, despite its elevated legal status, the cemetery's situation remained fragile socially, as it was subject to recurrent minor vandalism, extremist graffiti, and intermittent neglect, revealing a persistent gap between institutional recognition and local acceptance. This unresolved tension culminated in the systematic destruction of the cemetery's headstones in 2022, an event that marked a critical rupture in its recent history: unlike earlier sporadic acts of damage, the coordinated smashing of approximately seven hundred plaques constituted a targeted attack on the funerary core of the monument, deliberately erasing the names and identities of the dead and transforming the cemetery into a landscape of absence by undermining its primary function as a place of burial and remembrance. This episode should also be understood within a broader pattern of destruction, neglect, and reinterpretation affecting cultural heritage and memorial sites across Bosnia and Herzegovina and the post-Yugoslav space. As several studies have shown, acts of damage directed at monuments and symbolic places are often linked not only to physical violence, but to processes of political redefinition and selective memory construc-

30 Commission to Preserve National Monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Decision Designating the Architectural Ensemble of the Partisans' Memorial Cemetery in Mostar as a National Monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, No. 07/1-2-924/03-4, Sarajevo 21 January 2006.

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tion, in which certain pasts are actively marginalised or erased.[31] The institutional response to this devastation further underscores the complexity of the situation, as strong condemnation at national and international levels was not matched by immediate and decisive intervention, leaving the site in a prolonged condition of suspension in which any attempt at restoration risks being interpreted as a political endorsement of a contested historical narrative, while continued inaction tacitly accepts the erasure of funerary meaning. This dilemma exemplifies a broader issue inherent to dissonant heritage: when memory is contested, conservation becomes an inherently political act and neutrality becomes impossible, a tension that is further intensified in the case of cemeteries, which cannot be repurposed, reinterpreted, or neutralised without raising profound ethical concerns. The destruction or neglect of graves constitutes a violation not only of cultural heritage but of the basic principles of respect for the dead, demonstrating that in contexts of dissonant memory the protection of funerary heritage requires approaches capable of addressing dignity, mourning, and responsibility alongside material preservation, rather than relying exclusively on legal frameworks.

RETHINKING CONSERVATION: CEMETERIES, RUINS AND NON-INTERVENTION

The current condition of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar invites reflection on the role of ruin and non-intervention within heritage discourse. In recent years, the concept of ruin has been increasingly employed as an analytical category, highlighting the aesthetic and symbolic potential of decay. However, the application of this framework to funerary heritage is deeply problematic. While architectural ruins may be reinterpreted as testimonies of time and history, the ruination of cemeteries raises ethical issues that cannot be resolved through aestheticization. In Mostar, the transformation of the cemetery into a ruin is not the result of natural ageing, but of deliberate human action and political neglect. To accept this condition as a legitimate state of heritage would be to normalise the erasure of burial and mourning. At the same time, the prolonged absence of intervention at the site reveals the emergence of non-intervention as a de facto strategy. This strategy, whether intentional or not, functions as a means of avoiding political responsibility. By leaving the cemetery in a state of suspension, institutions effectively defer the question of how to address its contested meaning. Yet this suspension is not neutral. It allows the effects of vandalism to persist and reinforces the perception that the cemetery's funerary function is no longer recognised or valued. In this sense, non-intervention becomes an active contributor to the transformation of the site's meaning. The challenge posed by the Partisan Cemetery of Mostar is therefore not

31 H. WALASEK, *Bosnia and the Destruction of Cultural Heritage*; R. BEVAN, *The Destruction of Memory*; Francesco MAZZUCCHELLI, *Urbicidio. Il senso dei luoghi tra distruzioni e ricostruzioni in ex Jugoslavia*, Bologna 2010; JoAnne Marie MANCINI — Keith BRESNAHAN, *Architecture and Armed Conflict. The Politics of Destruction*, London 2015.

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simply one of restoration versus abandonment, but of how to acknowledge and address dissonance without erasing the funerary character of the site. Any future intervention must grapple with the fact that the cemetery cannot be reduced to a symbolic monument detached from its burial function. Restoring the headstones is not merely an architectural operation, but an ethical act that reaffirms the legitimacy of the dead and their place within the city's memory. Conversely, refusing to restore them effectively endorses their erasure.[32]

CEMETERIES AND DISSONANT HERITAGE IN DIFFICULT CONTEXTS

The case of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar demonstrates with particular clarity the critical role that cemeteries play within contexts of dissonant heritage. Unlike other heritage categories, funerary sites confront societies with the irreducible reality of death and burial, limiting the possibility of symbolic abstraction and exposing the ethical implications of memory politics. In post-conflict cities such as Mostar, cemeteries become spaces where unresolved tensions are materialised, and where the struggle between remembrance and forgetting is enacted in concrete form. The fate of the Partisan Cemetery reveals the inadequacy of heritage strategies that rely solely on legal protection or aesthetic appreciation, without engaging with the social and ethical dimensions of burial. At the same time, it highlights the potential for cemeteries to function as spaces of critical reflection, where the limits of political narratives are confronted by the persistence of the individual lives lost. Recognising cemeteries as a distinct and particularly sensitive category of dissonant heritage is a necessary step towards developing more nuanced approaches to conservation in difficult contexts. In this perspective, the preservation of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar is not only a matter of safeguarding an architectural work of the twentieth century, but a test of how a fragmented society chooses to confront its past, acknowledge its dead, and negotiate the transmission of memory to future generations.[33]

32 Caitlin DESILVEY, *Curated Decay. Heritage Beyond Saving*, Minneapolis 2017.

33 Svetlana BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2001; Emanuele MOREZZI, *Una (im)possibile universalità del patrimonio? Il ruolo di UNESCO nei processi di conservazione e ricostruzione nei Balcani*, Restauro Archeologico 30, 2022, No. 2, pp. 62–68; Mirjana RISTIĆ, *Architecture, Urban Space and War. The Destruction and Reconstruction of Sarajevo*, London 2018.

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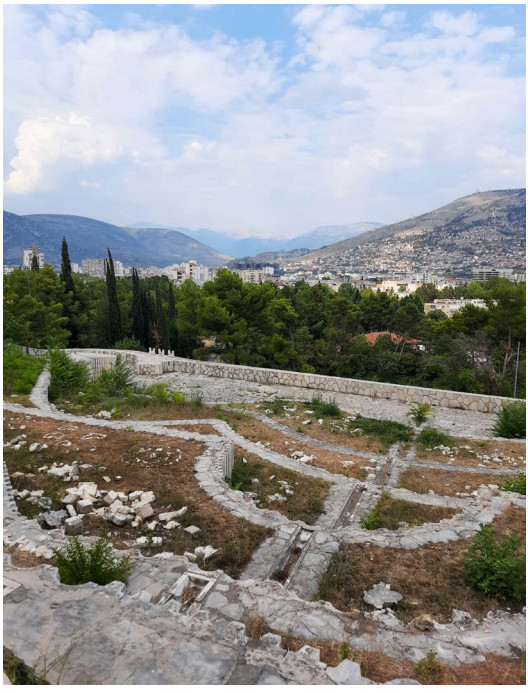
Terraced burial levels of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar, showing the stepped funerary landscape integrated into the wooded hillside and the progressive encroachment of spontaneous vegetation following years of neglect.[34]



View from the burial terraces of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery towards the city of Mostar, highlighting the intended visual and symbolic dialogue between the "city of the dead" and the "city of the living".

34 Images: © author.

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Detail of damaged burial terraces and displaced stone elements, evidencing the material consequences of vandalism and the erosion of the cemetery's funerary function.

Central upper retaining wall and sculptural stone relief of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery, illustrating Bogdan Bogdanović's abstract language and the integration of architecture and landscape.

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Descending path and terraced circulation system within the cemetery, emphasising the ritualised movement through space and the experiential dimension of remembrance.

Lower entrance area of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar, where the monumental gateways frame the ascent towards the burial terraces and the commemorative core of the site.

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SUMMARY

The conservation of funerary heritage represents a particularly critical field within contemporary heritage studies, especially in contexts shaped by political rupture, conflict, and contested memories. Cemeteries associated with war differ from other heritage categories in that memory is inseparably linked to burial, individual names, and human remains, conferring upon them a specific ethical dimension. This article analyses the Partisan Memorial Cemetery of Mostar, designed by Bogdan Bogdanović and inaugurated in 1965, as an emblematic case of dissonant funerary heritage in post-socialist and post-conflict Europe. Conceived within the Yugoslav memorial programme after the Second World War, the cemetery was intended as a universal funerary landscape capable of transcending ethnic, religious, and political divisions through spatial experience rather than explicit symbolism. This paper reconstructs the historical and cultural context of its creation, examines its architectural composition and urban role, and emphasises the centrality of the burial area within the overall meaning of the site. Since the 1990s, the cemetery has undergone a trajectory marked by war damage, institutional protection, social rejection, and the systematic destruction of its headstones in 2022. The research argues that this violence must be understood as an attack on the funerary core of the monument rather than on architecture alone. By focusing on Mostar, this paper reflects more broadly on the role of cemeteries in difficult contexts of dissonant heritage, highlighting the limits of conventional conservation tools and the need to address ethical, social and memorial dimensions alongside material preservation.

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