The project of emptiness

Sovereignty, the weaponization of space and architecture in the Bosnian krajina

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Summary

This research posits and explores a relationship between spatial forms of ruination and sovereignty, supposedly the highest form of political power, from the purview of architecture as a practice. To do so, it suggests the methodological stratagem of the figure of emptiness. The figure underlines a spatial and concrete emptiness—a character pertaining to spaces of ruination—as well as a politico-metaphysical meaning of the emptiness, or void, of sovereign power. In this sense, positing the "figure of emptiness" is a deliberate move to linger on such a word while retaining its two-fold orientation and ambiguity. Put differently, by way of the figure, this work examines the void of power as much as the condition of "emptiness" of supposedly "empty" spaces of ruination and abandonment— although this emptiness, quite simply, is far from empty.

The figure of emptiness will be addressed by discussing a situated arrangement of sovereign power irreducible to that of the State: the differential sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Specifically, the research focuses on the northwesternmost corner of the country, contentiously known as the Bosnian krajina: a territory that straddles over the border with the central counties of Croatia, which has been determined historically and geographically as a frontier. In recent years, in the krajina, thousands of migrant and refugee people mostly from Africa, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent have faced violent bordering operations put in place by state and non-state agencies attempting to thwart illegal(ised) mobility along the so-called Western Balkan Route. The spatial configuration of migration management overlaps with that of the Transition, an ideological-teleological narrative of contemporary racial capitalism that has contributed to years of hardship and organized neglect for people living in the post-socialist Western Balkans. The work thus argues the relationship between sovereignty and emptiness in the Bosnian krajina determines the project of emptiness, that is, an active organisation and articulation of the ruination and abandonment of space: a project of violent domination predicated on and generative of emptiness.

More precisely, the introduction gives an outline and methodological discussion of the geo-historical context, stakes and aims of the relationship between sovereignty and emptiness from the purview of an expanded definition of architecture (chapter 1). Borrowing on philosophy and critical theory, the core argument is that sovereign power is founded on a void and operates in space according to a multifarious logic of rule predicated on the articulation of the human/nature divide, which in the Anthropocene has become ever more evident (chapter 2). The contingency and specificities of the Bosnian krajina highlight how the figure of emptiness is part and parcel of specific structures of regulation and domination, which are operated through a frontier logic, a more-than-human biopolitics and the ruins of the Transition (chapter 3). The research substantiates these claims by looking at the weaponization of specific geophysical, architectural and toxic environments legitimated by the figure of emptiness within the context of two overlapping forms of governance:

migration management and the Transition (chapter 4). In this sense, spatial figures of "emptiness"—
(i) the geophysical features Mount Plješevica and Lipa's karstic plateau's geophysical features; (ii)
the negation and evictions of tumbledown buildings, such as Kombiteks' industrial infrastructure and
Dom Penzionera; (iii) the extractive and toxifying conditions due to Explosive Remnants of War
(ERW)—are part and parcel of the project of emptiness (chapter 4). An archive of images,
documentation and graphic elaborations describing these spaces accompanies the text.

Following the first four chapters, chapter 5 will return to the figure of emptiness in order to highlight
the way in which a conflation between an abstract emptiness and the concrete specificities of space
has contributed to the connivance of architecture with power. Far from being an emptiness that can
be appropriated, on the contrary, the chapter elicits a negativity of the figure of emptiness that limits
and resists the domination of the spatial project of the Transition (chapter 5). Such a negativity is
conducive to an ethico-political orientation for the project of architecture at its many scales. In the
concluding chapter (chapter 6), in fact, the territorial exploration of the Bosnian krajina opens up to
the prospect of an empty ethics of the project of architecture and territory—one that beginning from
the an-arché of the project seeks to upend its ends and the clear-cut distinction between theory and
practice, in order to contest the solutionism and complicity to power of architecture in contemporary
racial capitalism. A final postscript picks up on such findings and outlines future research directions.