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# Belgrade (de)Void of Identity: Politics of Time, Politics of Control, Politics of Difference

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# Belgrade (de)void of identity: Politics of time, politics of control and politics of difference

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## Abstract

This paper examines the complex entanglement of national and international violence and control in Belgrade. In particular, the ways in which the identity of the city has been affected in the aftermath of NATO's 1999 Operation Allied Force as manifest in the hollowness of the unreconstructed Generalstab complex. Precisely, the void being an opportunity to reformulate the identity of Belgrade and Serbia as well as proffer openness towards reconceiving post-war reconstruction.

## Keywords

Belgrade, Identity, War, Reconstruction, Generalstab

## Framing identity

The focus of this article is to explore the potential of thinking Belgrade's urban and Serbia's national identity re-construction through the dishevelled state of architecture. Architecture hollowed out, this article argues, proffers openness to contemplate not only other ways of approaching re-construction, but also deploy hollowness to put forward an argument that the current (inter)national politics in Serbia is in a state of violent suspension. This position will be assisted by utilising Paul Virilio's thinking on the 'negative horizon' where space is perceived through a glimpse of a flattened media screen, in order to discourage depth and complexity in perception. By screening out past and future events, there is an attempt to establish focus on the present, which in turn facilitates the construction of some spaces as 'void-in-meaning'. To permeate this state requires a critical engagement with not only history, but also memory and perception in order for the present to move beyond the current frame of suspension. The means to penetrate this frame will be through an analysis of Nikola Dobrovic's 1964 Generalstab complex – the Military Headquarters and the Ministry of Defence.

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The complex, specifically the Military Headquarters (Building 'A') that won the highest Yugoslav award for architecture – October Prize – was targeted twice during North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) 1999 Operation Allied. Despite the building currently undergoing further destruction for alleged structural stability reasons, the extent of overall demolition including questions to do with re-construction have still not been determined. The noted uncertainty is further intensified due to a contrast in opinion among the dominant views of Serbian architects/academics (re-construction by rebuilding to what was there before), and the dominating power(s) of the Serbian Government of the Property Directorate and the Serbian Army (demolition, re-construction, and potential change of use through privatisation). What is largely missing in these opposing positions is a politics of difference that was prevalent during the 1953–1954 design of the Generalstab complex. It was designed by entangling theory and history. In terms of theory, it utilised Henri Bergson's conceptualisation of the 'cone' in terms of matter and memory with the idea that matter cannot be perceived as being separate from other objects in space, but oriented towards multiple memories and constantly varying horizons. In terms of history, the complex was designed by utilising the event of the Sutjeska Offensive in Bosnia-Herzegovina during World War II (WWII). The offensive not only marked a shift from Nazi to Yugoslav Partisan power, but was later used to construct the narrative of Yugoslavs as a nation who despite historically undergoing significant suffering always remained resilient, strong and wilful to stand to any super-power. Bergson's thinking about the 'cone' and the historical event of the Sutjeska Offensive are both contingent on memory, history and identity permeated with leaps, which in this article is the politics of difference.

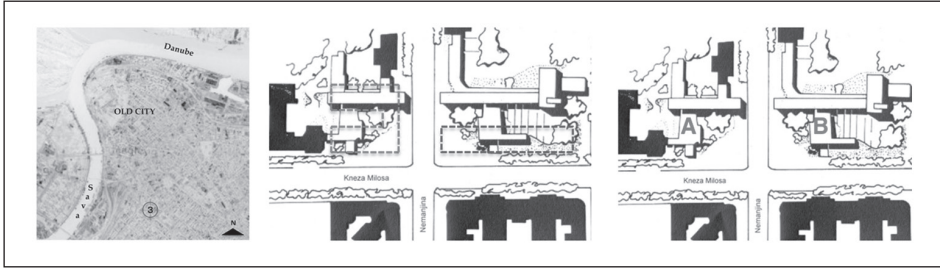
### **Politics of time: Entangled histories**

The Generalstab is a product of several entangled conditions (Bobic, 2012): Belgrade's marginal and complex historical re-formations; the history of the site and the competition by invitation only for the complex, which to this day denies transparency to do with all 10 invited entries; process of building impregnated in dispute as reflected in Dobrovic not staying till project completion with the larger Ministry of Defence (Building 'B') built on the basis of his 1:100 plans; and, more recent geo-political and economic dispositions. Indeed, both the city and the complex are entwined in events that cannot be reduced to a single common denominator.

The area in which Belgrade today is located has been a long-standing zone of contestation. From its first Neolithic settlement in 7000 BC, Belgrade has been under the domination of numerous groups: the Illyrians and Thracians, the Celts, the Romans, the Ghepids, the Huns, the Sarmatians, the Slavs, the Avars, the Goths, the Franks, the Macedonians, the Bulgarians, the Byzantines, the Serbians, the Turks and the Austro-Hungarians. Its strategic importance began to take shape after the Western and Eastern division of the Roman Empire in 395AD, when Singidunum (now Belgrade) became a north-western border zone in the Eastern Empire of Rome. From that time period, Singidunum/Belgrade was not only exposed to diverse cultural influences, but its history was also regularly punctuated by wars, destruction and new beginnings. The city has been destroyed and rebuilt over 40 times in the common-era (Norris, 2009). In the 20th century alone, Belgrade suffered extensive periods of bombing (1914, 1915, 1941, 1944, 1999).

The immediate surroundings of the Generalstab were significant when it comes to signifying Serbia's break from the five century long rule of the Ottoman Empire (Bobic, 2012).<sup>1</sup> In the mid-19th century, the Serbian Prince (*Knez*) Milos Obrenovic purchased the land surrounding the current day Generalstab complex from the Ottoman Marasli Ali-Pasha (Kovacevic, 2001). With the distancing from the Orient in 1878 as a result of the Congress of Berlin, Serbia's development was laden with Western Occidental values. The late 19th century also saw the city of Belgrade transformed from a border town separating the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires to become the capital of a newly formed Serbia. The expansion of Occidental values was marked with the arrival of the architect and mathematician Emilijan Josimovic in Belgrade. Josimovic's 1867 urban plan proposal brought about the reformation of the city, guided by the objective of regularising the congested and labyrinthine city streets, and creating a more uniform plan (Blagojevic, 2009). It is not coincidental that the 19th-century regulation of Belgrade involved erasure, and that Josimovic was a contemporary to the famous French urbanist Georges-Eugene Haussmann. Unlike Haussmann's violent intervention in Paris which attempted to clean out Paris and suppress the tendency of the lower economic class to revolt,<sup>2</sup> Josimovic's objective was predominantly to eliminate memory of the centuries long Ottoman Empire. However, 'even when radically erasing the Ottoman urban structure, Josimovic left significant traces of past histories while projecting the new one' (Blagojevic, 2009: 41). Nevertheless, with the associated change of values, the cultural and religious markers of the Orient were left to decay. The site of the current Generalstab complex was used as a military base from the mid-19th century (Bobic, 2012).

The desire for national unification heralded by the break from the Ottoman Empire came only after the Yugoslavia's secession from Soviet Russia in 1948. Straight after the split, a competition that had been won by the architect Branislav Marikovic for a Generalstab complex sited in the same area was abandoned due to the ensuing political and economic crisis (Kovacevic, 2001). It took another 3 years before actual changes started to take effect. The year 1951 was catalytic for the construction of an alternative identity, which was imagined by enshrining the rights of different classes and nations through the concept of Yugoslavia as a Federation where – in theory at least – social, cultural and linguistic rights were given to its constituent nations (Woodward, 1995). Funding provided by a World Bank grant, and global placement of Yugoslavia as a viable political force not aligned with the Cold War politics of Western Europe or Soviet Russia were of importance in establishing and strengthening Belgrade as a cultural, architectural and political centre. According to Franke Wilmer (2002), the new post WWII Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's (SFRY) identity was enveloped in several agendas: anti-imperialism, partisans' heroism, and the formation of an alternative socialist programme that attempted to evade 'the alleged excesses and extremes of both Soviet-style communism and Western capitalism' (p. 88). Dobrovic's Generalstab complex – design that arose as the winner of the 1953 closed competition organised by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA)<sup>3</sup> – was one of the first architectural buildings indicative of this new identity formation (Bobic, 2012). The politics behind the closed competition was inclusive of professional reputation and, perhaps more significantly for the establishment of the new identity heralded by the narrative of equal rights of different classes and ethnicities (Milošević, 2015). Out of 10 entries submitted from architects and urban planners



**Figure 1.** Location of the Generalstab complex in Belgrade (marked red); pre-WWII: approximate location of the School of Artillery (marked red) and the Ministry of Army and Navy (marked blue); 1960s location of the Generalstab complex, that is, Military Headquarters (marked A) and the Ministry of Defence (marked B). Please note that the map and drawings are not to scale.

All maps and diagrams were done by the author.

from Serbia and other Yugoslav republics selected by a panel of JNA representatives, the only publicly announced competitor's name was that of the internationally recognised Slovenian architect Josip Plecnik (Kovacevic, 2001; Perovic and Kronic, 1998). While Plecnik was the 10th contender, his name was not officially entered into the competition registry largely because his role was more of an advisor (Weiss, 2000–2001).

Despite the jury unanimously deciding that no proposal resolved the brief in its entirety, the initial nine entries were narrowed down to four and given code names 'X', 'JNA', '33374' and 'SNO' (Kovacevic, 2001). These four projects were then reduced to two: 'X' and '33374', with project 'X', the entry by Dobrovic described the most meritorious as it provided a holistic proposal for the complex (Perovic and Kronic, 1998). It must be noted that Dobrovic's entry was pronounced the winner after '33374' – credited to the Croatian architect Rikard Marasovic – withdrew from the competition. Dobrovic's proposal was driven by the desire to address urban and architectural competition requirements, as well as to put forward the image of a future Belgrade as a dynamic space (Bobic, 2012). This vision was narrated in 16 pages of technical information, a sheet titled 'list of works' and nine drawings each measuring 1000 mm × 700 mm (Kovacevic, 2001). Since the site was at the intersection of two streets, this led to the proposal for two buildings on either side of the intersection joined together by a void – the Military Headquarters (Building 'A' located on 35 Kneza Milosa Street) and the Ministry of Defence (Building 'B' on 37 Kneza Milosa Street) (Figure 1). Dobrovic's drive to implicate a new vision for Belgrade through the design of the complex was supported by referencing the city's immediate surroundings; the city's shifting horizons facilitated by flat horizontal ground and vertical topographical points broken and brought together by the rivers Sava and Danube (Lazar, 2002). On an urban level, Dobrovic not only 'resolved the problem of the traffic artery at the corner of Nemanjina and Kneza Milosa Streets [...but also...] raised that relatively narrow space to the level of city landscape' (Lazar, 2002: 218). Architecturally, the idea of dynamism was orchestrated with Dobrovic designing a narrow volume measuring 250 m in length. The volume was set back from the street and stretched across one end to the site to the other. This move not only facilitated a 270-m-wide field to spatially orchestrate his vision of space as a series of shifting

horizons, but also allowed breathing space for the surrounding historical buildings (Bobic, 2012). Corridor was used to establish a connection to the adjacent Baumgartner's Generalstab and the Barracks of the VII Regiment.

Considering that the JNA selected Dobrovic's competition schema as the winning entry, one would think that there was an alignment in thinking between the two parties. However, the differences that soon emerged between Dobrovic and the JNA meant that Dobrovic did not stay until the project was completed. It seems that the symbolic motif in the form of the void invoked disagreement in opinion as it could not be comprehended how the void could be seen first, as a dynamic element, and second, as a dynamic element that brings the two buildings together (Matejic, 2012). The smaller Building 'A' – the Military Headquarters whose approximate area was 12,600m<sup>2</sup> – was completed under Dobrovic's direction in 1961 (Kovacevic, 2001). The larger Building 'B' – the Ministry of Defence measuring approximately 38,500m<sup>2</sup> – was built in 1964 on the basis of Dobrovic's 1:100 plans (Kovacevic, 2001). With Dobrovic's departure, the tower of Building 'B' was altered from the initial 12 storeys to 18 (Kovacevic, 2001). Seemingly, the lack of a unified approach was because of or despite the building of the Generalstab and the formation of identity also built on a history of intersecting and overlapping cultural, linguistic, religious and national entities.

Geographically, Belgrade is part of south-eastern Europe and Western Balkans, economically it is synonymous with the economic 'South' in transition towards consumer neo-liberalism, culturally it is perceived as straddled between the West and the East, while Serbia as a country is still not operating in ways considered agreeable to join the European Union (EU). The complexity of such an identity is also manifest in architecture. In the past 15–20 years, previous identifications to do with the Generalstab complex have been concealed through a process of erosion and demolition, both of which are seemingly contingent on negation and forgetting. Immediately after the targeting, the complex (un)intentionally became a memorial and a cultural artefact associated with the Operation Allied Force by remaining one of several unreconstructed buildings since the NATO strikes.<sup>4</sup> More recently, the identity of the complex in its past, present and future has been reduced to a state of eliminating any exerting forces that deviate from the politics of somewhat corrupt control found within the Serbian Government of the Property Directorate and the Serbian Army.

The more recent political dispositions facilitate a time of perpetual present; time that is politically different to the event and motif embedded within the Generalstab complex. In 1960, Dobrovic indicated that the void symbolised the memory of the Sutjeska Offensive; the fatefulness of the battle for the future of Yugoslavia was brought to the capital city of Belgrade (Milošević, 2015). This is significant since in the West post WWII there was an attempt to delete memory from architecture. With Dobrovic drawing the relation to the Sutjeska Offensive, he brought together the thinking behind Bergson's 'cone' with a historical event. The relation being that an event transforms identity in time through becoming; in this instance, the imminent leap in history with the formation of Yugoslavia as an alternative brand of Socialism (Titoism) not aligned with the agenda of Cold War politics. In terms of the actual 1943 battle, the memory of the event is enveloped in the narrative of 120,000 Germans failing to break the Partisan formations of 16,000 soldiers (with another 3500 sick and wounded) or capture then commander, Josip Broz Tito. The battle in south-eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina lasted for a whole month and

was directly vested in re-aligning the morale, position and unfolding of the events-to-come in releasing the Fascist grip. Considering the disproportionate number of soldiers, it is not odd that this event took on epic proportions in the narrative of the new SFRY identity; the narrative framed by bravery, strength and will. According to Vladimir Kulic (2010), were it not for the symbolism of Sutjeska as the key element of the Generasltab complex, the void would have no meaning. However, the more important focus, and one that largely remains unexamined, is not whether the void within the complex was a literal insertion of an epic offensive that occurred in the Sutjeska 'V' shaped canyon, but that the offensive is a signifier that the event was transformative not only of that particular moment, but also memory and history since history was opened up by the event. History as a preconditioned matter was altered through an act of insertion in time. Not only that the transformative nature of this event has slipped the radar of mention post 1999, but there is a strange subversion to all that arose and that was prevalent during the period of Socialist Yugoslavia; it is largely portrayed in terms of mere nostalgia, backwardness and what prevented the lifestyle of choice and 'freedom' associated with the English-speaking Western world. The lack of criticality and awareness directed towards the image of the Sutjeska Offensive as an event that affirms life and facilitates a creative leap in history is a signifier of Serbia's current passive and stagnative identity. Ironically, the stagnation has been strengthened post 1999 political changes: the October 2000 democratic elections, rapid privatisation of land, property and infrastructure and the introduction of a consumer culture (Bobic, 2015a). The new democratic government also meant a shift in the country's foreign policy toward European integration, including questions related to security measures by following the scripture determined by Europe, that is NATO. The changes are geared towards globally eliminating any difference in political opinion; a new type of Iron Curtain being pulled is framed by the push to absorb any political difference. It is veiled with the perpetual present that eliminates any rifts, meaning that the individual and social are the ever-passive audience; to live and to think is to observe time as a condition of habit, rather than as a condition of movement between contemplation and action. The latter is suggestive of Bergson's thinking on matter and memory in relation to the cone; 'pure memory' found on a plane at the base of the cone moving forward into singular images.

For Bergson, the relation of memory and perception is found along two axes; one being where memories 'coincide with or diverge from "present"', and the second being perception which is understood as 'attentiveness to the external sensation and events' (Crary, 2001: 317). The first movement is based on rotation; it fragments clouds of interpenetration. The second is based on concentration, which is a reverse movement from singular images to generalities, which invite action. Within this configuration based on elastic expansion/contraction/rotation, one is no longer a mere observer of life, but an active creator since identity and life are constituted through multiple layers of memory in extension, with no layer having a clear beginning or an end (Bergson, 2005). The significance of Bergson's philosophy to Dobrovic's architecture is summed up in Dobrovic's (1963) assertion that 'Bergson's thought on the dynamic schemes [...] is not some idealist wandering of an idealist philosopher of Western decadence, but a base for a true conception of modern architecture and a supplement to its theory' (p. 59). That Dobrovic was influenced by Bergson's thinking was also made evident in the competition plans for



the Generalstab complex which were presented as four options called 'Bergson dynamic schemes' (Perovic and Kronic, 1998: 115). All four diagrams were volumetric schemes replete with visual dynamics expressed by Dobrovic as four different 'void tensions' (Perovic and Kronic, 1998: 117). The first of these 'void tensions' was 'symmetrical', the second 'asymmetrical', and the last two 'extravagant' (Perovic and Kronic, 1998: 121). Due to economic difficulties, the symmetrical void tension was built (Bobic, 2012). Relating Bergson's thinking to Dobrovic's 'void tensions', it is not only that Dobrovic brought parts of the Sutjeska Offensive to Belgrade in the form of a void, but also offered an opportunity to re-imagine the identity of that site and make transformation an active part of Belgrade and the new Yugoslav identity. While he had a vision for the new formation, Dobrovic strongly felt that individual visions required translation into something solid and actual, with a social imperative. While a dose of abstraction and ambiguity are required, '[v]isions that remain visions mean nothing for architecture' (Dobrovic, 1963: 232). Similarly, Dobrovic was interested in the idea of urban architecture accommodating soft revolutions along the lines of the assertion that '[s]ocial revolution is not necessary, it is possible to achieve it with urbanism' (Lazar, 2002: 33). The idea of soft revolution may be seen in the Generalstab's void, which was framed by a sense of will and force as evident in the Sutjeska Offensive. Post 1999, identity is also to be found in nonmatter, however, the more recent void has been eroded of Bergson's thinking on matter and memory through rotation, contraction and expansion. More recent framing of the complex has been an attempt to not only flatten and freeze the succession and diversity and movement of events, but also eliminate the complexity of memory.

According to Krystin Arneson's (2013) thesis on the Generalstab complex, questions about memory are largely enveloped in Belgrade and its citizens not taking ownership for the traumas enacted onto other ethnic groups during the disintegration of Yugoslavia and more recently Kosovo, and the ways in which the ruinous site of the complex is prefigured in a narrative of victimisation by the Serbs. To support her claim, she cites the Serbian professor Milan Prodanovic. He was noted saying that during the course of the Operation Allied Force, 'Belgrade's citizens became victims of a campaign waged against their city by national regimes indifferent or hostile to their plight, and the 'collateral damage' they suffered – the literal as well as figurative fallout from the bombardments – was undertaken with full foreknowledge of the results' (Arneson, 2013: 31). It is not that the veil of victimisation when addressing questions about violence, memory and identity is not prevalent in Belgrade and Serbia. It is more that Arneson (2013: 41) positions European identity as somehow more moral when it comes to addressing questions of violence, history and memorialisation, prompting her conclusion that Belgrade/Serbia should rid the marginal/Other identity of the Balkans and become absorbed by the identity of Europe. It is this point that is somewhat troubling as it seems to view the politics of NATO's 1999 targeting and the 1990s disintegration of Yugoslavia from the inverted lens she seems to be critiquing Belgrade, post 1999. The binary and simplistic set-up of victim and perpetrator comparable to Hollywood blockbuster production movies does not disclose the thinking that the NATO's Rambouillet Agreement was nothing short of 'a provocation, an excuse to start bombing' (Bancroft, 2009 citing Kissinger, 2009). The binary thinking also does not take into consideration that the disintegration of Yugoslavia was contingent on violence not being uni-directional, as neither side operated with much restraint. However,



during the dissolution the Western media cleansed particular dimensions of the historical narratives' complexity in which the West itself was historically a part (Johnstone, 2002). The simplistic narrative of victim/perpetrator does not take into account that the international 1995 Dayton Agreement further perpetuated the establishment of homogeneous enclaves in a historically multi-ethnic region, exacerbating the potential for more violence within the region as well as causing dependence on the international community in the form of NATO, the United States, the World Bank and the EU (Faber, 2000). Even in the lead up to the war, and during the conflict, '[b]y accepting the principle of national self-determination for the independence of states-without regard to the Yugoslav conditions of multinationality and the shared rights to national sovereignty of the Titoist system [...] Western powers were making war over territory inevitable' (Woodward, 1995: 83). Taking into account that the SFRY dissolution occurred during, and in the wake of, the Cold War, where the power transition shifted from bipolar to unipolar/hegemonic, the dissolution of the SFRY was possibly also an attempt to create the conditions of the Dayton Agreement that allowed the control of the once non-aligned and Balkanist region. NATO's 1999 targeting was possibly the tail end of the noted agenda. Thus, the advocacy for the marginal zone of Belgrade/Serbia to mould itself into the centralised – and somehow more moral – identity of Europe is suggestive of a new colonial agenda. It is the process by which the possibility to consider any European/NATO act of violence is eliminated from the start as the Other is positioned as somehow less moral when it comes to questions of memorialising and constructing narratives to do with violence and trauma. Similarly, it also provisions the distancing and air-brushing of violence/memorialisation of countries that are now a part of the EU. The noted discursiveness is suggested in Virilio's politics of the 'negative horizon', where there is an attempt to deplete the event of complexity by establishing a single frame of information; time is measured against space in limbo.

### **Politics of control: Negative horizon**

Belgrade's current political situation is indecisive because of and in spite of a number of political frames: former Slobodan Milošević's regime, NATO's targeting of Belgrade in 1999, Serbia's status of a transitional country (from a socialist to a democratic country that is still not meeting the criteria to enter the EU) and more recent 'political dialogue and cooperation with NATO on issues of common interest [including supposed ...] democratic, institutional and defence reforms' (NATO, 2015). Interestingly, these political changes have been reflected in the Generalstab's recent signifying process. From an unintentional memorial associated with the NATO strikes, the more recent clean-up of the complex seems to be – ironically – guided by the necessity of Serbia to form contractual relations with NATO. The clean-up is not only a sanitary clean-up of the complex but also sanitation of history. The sanitary agenda may be framed via Virilio's thinking on the 'negative horizon', which involves acceleration of speed to discourage depth, volume and complexity in perception and memory. It is the surge towards eliminating the horizon line, which is a negative horizon. According to Virilio (2000), the negative horizon is geared towards delimitation of the image: from the frame of the screen, to framing of news broadcast to the duration of each particular frame. The media frame, image and extent of information presented are all prefigured by the reduction of volume and in the

flattening of events (Virilio, 1997). The negative horizon is the elimination of duration in the attempt for absolute conquest of speed (Virilio, 2005), and the 'gradual dematerialization of the earth's horizon' (Virilio, 1997: 43). The understanding of the horizon along these terms is the complete opposite to Bergson's thinking in time through heterogeneous and varying horizons as it is directed towards elimination of the 'horizon line' through 'the progressive desertification of various surfaces (territories, bodies, objects)' (Virilio, 2005: 136). Here, there is an inflection to Stephen Graham's (2004) understanding of a city under siege being 'much more than just the backdrop or environment for war and terror' (p. 166) in that NATO's 1999 incursion treated space (architecture and the city's geo-political and socio-economic context) as a 2-dimensional target since the negative horizon is associated with the reduction of complexity and depth. The relation between the military target as seen on a frame of the 'drone' and the way the event of that targeting is presented on a media screen may be said to be reminiscent of the photography of Andreas Gursky, seamlessly connected to create an image based on tenuous justifications in order to politically achieve the desired aims (Bobic, 2015a; Virilio, 2006). When viewed in this way, NATO's strikes do not appear as acts of violence. Despite NATO destroying

the countryside, bridges, electric power plants, etc., [...] the official figures claim that [...] they destroyed only thirteen tanks, twenty tank transporters, and some fifty or so vehicles – all that for a bombardment that lasted seventy-eight days with one thousand sorties – four hundred in the beginning and one thousand in the end. (Virilio and Lotringer, 2002: 138)

Thus, the elimination of the horizon is a sanitary flattening of perception and vision by eliminating the diversity of information despite current societies' claims to having an 'open' network of information sources. The acceleration of speed and the extermination of perspective (negative horizon) have facilitated the elimination of the foreground and background. If one accepts Virilio's thinking, then past and future have been eliminated and one is living in a time of perpetual present, which is the negative horizon. The way that we engage with this present is through a frame that acts as both limit and confinement.

Since it is likely that the 1991 destruction of Vukovar, the 1991 bombings of Dubrovnik, and the 1992 siege of Sarajevo were in some form generated from Belgrade's Generalstab complex, then the complex was predictably a prime NATO target (Weiss, 2000–2001). It is peculiar that it took well over a month from the first NATO strike on the 24 March 1999 for the complex to be targeted (Bobic, 2012). One of the first targets of NATO's 78-day campaign was an empty factory just outside the city (Arkin, 2000). During that same night, three empty schools were partially destroyed as well as a nearby monastery in suburban Rakovica (Beograd, 1999). A more relevant and 'justifiable' target on that first night was the military air base in the Belgrade suburb of Batajnica (Beograd, 1999). NATO's campaign continued with this asymmetric targeting, where 'justifiable' strikes on military, army, and police buildings were followed by – apparently – unjustifiable strikes on buildings such as primary and high schools, hospitals and residential buildings. The Generalstab complex was targeted twice, on the nights of 29 and 30 April, and 7 and 8 May (Beograd, 1999) (Figure 2). These two nights saw the most forceful strikes in terms of the overall urban infrastructure damage caused in Belgrade.



**Figure 2.** The Generalstab complex in (w)hole after 1999.

All maps and diagrams were done by the author.

The delay in the targeting of this complex, despite its strategic importance, is perplexing, considering that NATO's initial strategy was presented as being proportional, meaning that only military and police institutions associated with the Milosevic regime were to be targeted (NATO, 1999). The swift change of strategies from proportional and military, to disproportional, such as targeting buildings of social and cultural importance, is likely due to the simulation of media, speed, and war. The negative horizon as manipulation of what is visible on a screen – achieved through processes of editing, cutting and commentary – meant that NATO's targeting of urban architecture managed not only to flatten the city of Belgrade but also suppress the violence and the consequences of NATO's attacks. The flattening is not the complete destruction of cities as was seen during the Allied carpet-bombing of some German cities during WWII, but that this was the first war that was simultaneously 'a humanitarian intervention, coercive diplomacy, the first information war, and the first war won by airpower alone' (Tolbert, 2006: 2). The 1999 'humanitarian' agenda was strangely heralded with 210,000 people who up lived in Kosovo until NATO's 1999 becoming displaced (Petkovic, 2011). Similarly, despite NATO stating that it was not waging war per se with the Serbian people, but out a 'humanitarian' agenda spurred by the violence between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, it was odd that overall in Serbia, 500 civilians were killed (Weizman, 2011). In Belgrade, of the 34 who died as a result of NATO targeting, only 1 had military ties, the security guard who was outside the Generalstab complex, which had already been evacuated when it was hit (Savic et al., 2001). Eyal Weizman (2011) writes that the killing of 500 civilians and no combat fatalities among NATO forces 'was understood by many international law scholars as an indication of a breach of the proportionality principle' (p. 14). In other words, for Weizman (2011), the NATO attacks 'demonstrated that the balance expected in proportionality has a territorial dimension' (p. 14). More so, with NATO using the euphemistic term 'collateral damage' to describe both the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's (FRY) infrastructural destruction and human lives lost/harmed, the evidence of NATO's breach of the principle of proportional humanitarian attack was concealed. One may further say that the military operation on the historically complex city of Belgrade was also done in an attempt to reform this zone so that it conforms to a Western ideal (Bobic, 2015a), and second, as an example of European/Western violence where the violence of the attack is extenuated. The impact of the NATO incursion was lessened by media



**Figure 3.** The Ministry of Defence – building ‘B’ in 2010, with the entry foyer removed and replaced with the billboard in 2015.

All maps and diagrams were done by the author.

constructed stories, which were accepted as accurate given the occurrence of certain violent events construed as the naturalised violence of that region (Bobic, 2015b).

The flattening through removal of limits of perception (negative horizon) is still present, though its visibility is perhaps less pronounced and therefore arguably more coercive. Post 1999, this is suggested in Serbia seeming to be joining NATO. Curiously, the once nationally condemned NATO attack is now used as a draw card to join the operational forces of this pact. The deception orchestrated by politics and media is apparent on the front façade of the Ministry of Defence (Building ‘B’). The façade is currently veiled in the Serbian Army Forces’ banner where a quote by the late 19th/early 20th century Serbian Field Marshal Zivojin Mistic – who is seen as the most effective Serbian commander who participated in all of Serbia’s wars from 1876 to 1916 – reads ‘Who can, may. Who doesn’t know fear, advances forward’ (Mucibabic, 2014) (Figure 3). The time period of Mistic, while no doubt violent, was an attempt to forge an autonomous way forward. The quote itself was used during a time associated with the distancing from the Turkish rule, and the overthrow of various foreign strongholds. Today, this quote is deployed in a very different political context; the period of *then* to suit Serbia of *now* is a manipulation of ideas used to drive a political project of gridlock. Cooperation with NATO is, most likely, an indicator of Serbia losing a political right to various national decision-making processes to do with the country and international relations. While signs of this were apparent for the past 15 years, its spatialisation was clearly marked in 2006. That year NATO’s Military Liaison Office was opened in Belgrade and Serbia joined the NATO’s ‘Partnership of Peace’. The pretext behind this move was for NATO (2015) ‘to provide advice and assistance to the Serbian authorities on reform and modernisation of Serbia’s armed forces, and to build a modern, affordable, and democratically-controlled defence structure’. There is a strange alliance of words here: democracy, control and defence. The acceleration of control has particularly picked up momentum since 2011. The list of NATO provisions are nothing short of a lengthy shopping list. Notable key ‘purchases’ include Serbia’s Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Training Centre in a city of Krusevac turned into a Partnership Training and Education Centre in 2013.<sup>5</sup> The change of ownership and use has also come with the provision to make transparent all activities within the centre to NATO’s Allies

and partners. Additionally, work begun on decommissioning ‘Serbia’s stocks of approximately 2,000 tonnes of surplus ammunition and explosives’ (NATO, 2015). Serbia has further agreed to NATO’s Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), which ensures ‘that Serbian military personnel are able to work effectively and safely within the United Nations (UN) and EU missions in which they serve ...’ and ‘... develop the capacity of its forces to participate in UN-mandated multinational operations and EU crisis management operations. These are areas in which NATO and individual Allies have much expertise to offer’ (NATO, 2015). One of these ‘expert’ operations was undoubtedly NATO’s Operation Allied Force in 1999. Despite the situation, the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has repeatedly been noted as saying in Serbian media that Serbia will remain military neutral and that it is not going to join NATO (Keetch, 2016). The business end of political deceit seems to be paramount in this media construct.

With the contractual relations made between NATO and the Serbian Army Forces, the message on the banner which covers the façade of Building ‘B’ is not about autonomy or implementing a distinct vision, but manipulation and deceit of the Serbian population since up to 75% of the population is against Serbia joining NATO (Roland and Jelovac, 2015). The ‘vote against’ is largely driven by the fact that the population still remembers the effects of NATO’s targeting. The bottom line is that the initiative is undemocratic considering the majority vote. While one may argue that Serbia, in actual fact, has not joined NATO as yet; there is an undeniable fact that the provisions made in the past 10–15 years have opened the doors for an orchestration of policies and structures deemed necessary by NATO. The stiff procedures implemented around security and defence reform, security co-operation and public information will soon require the use of a magnifying glass to articulate the differences between the nationalistic regime bolstered by control and manipulation of information during the Slobodan Milosevic era, and the current democratically controlled defence government that comes with the ‘Partnership of Peace’ spearheaded by Aleksandar Vucic as the President. It seems that Virilio’s (2000) foresight is arriving sooner than envisaged; when addressing questions related to the instantaneous delivery of destructive power, he stated that ‘if we don’t watch out’ it will arrive ‘without a real war ever having started’ (p. 96).

Considering that Serbia now is more indicative of Virilio’s negative horizon. It is possible, to place ‘now’ within the larger – albeit compressed – historical frame in order to critically analyse the past and the present is limited due to the flattening of events. The flattening has not only facilitated the earlier mentioned current victimisation in Belgrade, but also the hidden agenda behind NATO’s Operation. In terms of NATO’s targeting and framing of events, the question of proportionality and territoriality is no longer only reminiscent of Foucault’s (2007) thinking about power in terms of analysing and breaking down spaces, places, individuals and operations into components ready to be modified; there was a clear identification by the (inter)national media when it comes to questions of who were the victims and who were the perpetrators during the violence in Kosovo. Neither is power only enveloped in classifying the components to meet set objectives seen in ‘the overlapping of *like* and *likely* where the whole of Serbia’s population was *like* the war criminal Slobodan Milosevic and therefore instantaneously became a *likely* ally of the regime’ (Bobic, 2015b: 409). Questions concerning power are no longer simply about optimising sequences as found in the alteration of NATO’s



proportional military targets. They are soon to include control of every aspect of the Serbian society and city culture. Similarly, the Operation Allied Force is no longer only a reflection of Foucault's (2007) thinking on governability filtered through various institutions, procedures and tactics as seen in Serbia's incorporation of NATO's military training techniques. The distinction of the governmental power and development of orders of knowledge when it comes to matters dealing with security, peace and war, or justice being governmentalised such as the Hague tribunal setting up its office in Belgrade post 1999. Instead, this is a question of first, eliminating all spaces that operate with an alternative structure (Titoist and Balkanist) to second, making provisions for this city and the region to become absorbed by the 'security' provisions in relation to 'protection' by being under the NATO umbrella, and third and more significantly – if Virilio is correct – to accelerate the control and the imminent implosion of time.

The question, though, that remains unanswered is how to think the Generalstab complex otherwise to the politics of current violence and control? In other words, how to orchestrate the movement away from the politically driven NATO and Serbian government thinking about the time of 'now' and 'then'? Maybe the answer lies in critically re-engaging with the void in a way that creates a rift between Dobrovic's designed cone, the NATO hollowing out of the structure, and the recently engineered split of the Military Headquarters (Building 'A') for purposes of 'structural instability'. The rift would re-render the understanding of time through an alternative framing of identity whereby the ruin of the Generalstab complex is not a question of decay, or rejoining the social European order 'through re-assigning meaning to the form' as advocated by Arneson (2013: 11). To assign meaning to the form, if applying Virilio's (2000) thinking about the negative horizon, would be through perceiving the event in terms of image compression, where the event itself disappears. To assign the compressed meaning to a flattened form is to de-void the potential implicated within the void of the Generalstab complex.

## **Politics of control: A frame beyond?**

Since 1999, the cone in the 'symmetrical' void has literally grown in size, and as such destabilised the understanding of architectural borders in terms of interior/exterior. In the terminology of Bergson's (2005) philosophy, the complex could currently be apprehended at a contemplative level and/or a dream state (furthest layer from the action-based state). The risk of remaining in this clouded state of perception comes with some possible dangers. In the case of the Generalstab complex, memory can turn to its own self-destruction should Serbian society return to conservatism, nationalism or the thinking that moving forward is dependent upon giving away all power to dominating force(s) such as the NATO. This idea is captured in the aspect of time. The time elapsed since NATO's targeting has affected the structural stability of both buildings, the Military Headquarters and the Ministry of Defence. The fact (Milicevic) that the still unreconstructed complex had to be further demolished in 2010 by the local engineers for 'structural reasons' in order to protect the lives of passers-by facilitates further thinking about hollowness. It not only makes one more aware of the space due to decay, but the hollow surface poses a question of how to identify borders. What a border may be is destabilised, and is open for re-negotiation and re-interpretation. The surface of the complex is neither





**Figure 4.** The Military Headquarters – building ‘A’: hollowness in 2010, and a sanitary incision in 2016.

All maps and diagrams were done by the author.

clean nor dirty, open nor closed, which is a type of resistance as it provides an inflection to ‘warchitecture’, where the understanding of ‘architecture as ruin’ becomes ‘architecture *is* a ruin’. For ‘warchitecture’, the buildings targeted and destroyed were broken into historico-cultural categories and ‘were all in varying states of war-induced ruin’ (Herscher, 2008: 37). The hollowness of the Generalstab complex suggests that history and identity need to be approached as a wound and a ruin if architecture and urbanism are to offer a means for speculation and alternative transformations.

Since 2010, further destruction and clean-up has taken place; the prevalent rhetoric remaining “structural stability and safety”. In this clean-up process, traces of 1999 violence are also being removed. The removal has significantly sped up during the past couple of years, as indicated by the entry pavilion of the Ministry of Defence (Building ‘B’) being entirely removed in 2015 and the central core of the Military Headquarters (Building ‘A’) scooped out in 2016 (Figure 4). The systematically engineered incision in 2016 has created an additional void in an already destabilised and ruinous structure; it is an attempt to sanitise history as well as to treat a building enfolded in the dynamism of Bergson’s cone as a clinical and spectacularised object. While one may agree that the engineered void is not reminiscent of creativity and thinking in time one may find in Dobrovic’s cone, thinking along this trajectory would not further – architecturally at least – the thinking on how to approach the future of the Generalstab complex so that it pre-figures forthcoming theorising thinking and framing of architecture. In other words, the question that is pertinent to this incremental incision into the building, and present remains of the NATO hollowed structure, is how to engage with the complex. Forging ahead – despite the prevalent opinion of the Serbian academic community and architects alike – would not be to restore the building to its original vision and therefore replicate the façade of the by-gone era. Even if the Military Headquarters (Building ‘A’) were further demolished, due to noted “structural reasons”, the construction of a new building would be led by the condition for the new façade to resemble the pre-targeted one considering that the exterior of the complex was placed under historical preservation in 2005.<sup>6</sup> When considered through a philosophical lens, the restoration of an ‘original’ is questionable, as even when restored, the building cannot serve the same outward function as it did prior to the bombings, given that time and geo-political shifts have created

a different Belgrade from the one Dobrovic imagined after WWII. The origin and the original – whether addressed philosophically or historically in relation to this zone – are certainly much more complex and indeterminate than thinking ‘origin(al)’ as a singular beginning or autonomous matter. This argument may suit the agenda of the Serbian Army and the Serbian Government of the Property Directorate since they are interested in removing the Generalstab’s historical preservation order; the script of their rhetoric remains unchanged in that Building ‘A’ is structurally unstable, and that rescuing parts of this building would not be economically viable (Mucibabic, 2014). However, the underlying agenda behind this move is driven by the interest to sell the land to an international buyer with the intent of turning it into a hospitality venue. Seemingly ‘the economic benefits surpass all others, and in the light of the constant struggle for financial stability in the national budget they [governmental officials] see demolition and new construction as a valid reason’ (Milošević, 2015: 51). While the increase of monetary funds may be a necessity, the removal of the preservation order does raise a couple of concerns. First, that a precedent is set whereby it becomes acceptable for enlisted cultural goods to be sold to private investors without obtaining the plan of works, and second, that the agenda of sale prefigured by the highest bid puts in danger ‘all other listed monuments which could be targeted for their location [and] natural resources’ (Milošević, 2015: 51). More so, this move is not only a signifier of the private- and consumer-based neoliberal agenda, but also affirms the role the military plays in matters to do with the law, culture and history. There is a strange morphing of values in this political order, where the military is orchestrating the supposed progression of culture and arts. In short, for Serbia to move forward architecturally, re-construction should not be contingent on privatisation, creating an architectural replica of what was there before destruction, or going to the other extreme by building a spectacular hi-tech glass structure; both approaches prevalent in post-war re-construction.

Before one addresses the thinking on how to approach the re-construction of the Generalstab, there is a need to address questions about the value of the present, with the past – if utilising Bergson’s thinking – already implicated into present (Bergson, 2005). To think about the building as an architectural ruin (i.e. ‘architecture *is* a ruin’) problematises the understanding of the ruin itself considering that historically in Western culture it has been associated with transience, value of history and place, and the tenacity of a specific culture. To think of the ruin as a signifier of history may also lead to apprehending it as a monument and to see it as a monument is to solidify history and time. From this perspective, it preserves power and a particular perception of history. Seemingly, it is a question of both position and perception about time and memory. In terms of the Generalstab, if the NATO hollowed-out complex was left to further dilapidate it would turn into rubble. The hollowness of the Generalstab does not just make one more aware of the space due to decay, but that such hollowness poses questions on how to identify architectural borders since the void eliminates Western traditional thinking on interiority and exteriority.

The meeting of the void with the edge of the hollowed building is no longer just a signifier of interaction with the surface, but also that this interaction is an encounter with and the transformation of that event. The potential is in how to perceive hollowness that has already destabilised the question of inside/outside through a process of

double-inversion; the inside is both internal and external, and the outside is both external and internal. How to perceive the void meeting the edge of hollowness? The void is not a solid matter, but flowing energy and its materialisation is simply a threshold where power has the potential to be negated by addressing processes of ordering and understanding of power. It is only when it intersects with a surface that it meets a configuration of power. Through this engagement, neither identity, history or memory are treated as eternal, but as flowing energy from which arises both decay and birth in-chronological order or from a set origin. Effectively, thinking along this trajectory disassembles the belief that an identity is fixed and orderly bounded. Considering that ‘the Otherness out of which postwar Yugoslav identity was carved was complex’ in the sense that ‘[o]nto the normative foundation of anticapitalist Marxist populism, a distinctly Yugoslav identity was grafted’ (Wilmer, 2002: 88), the potential exists for (an)other dynamic and experimental becoming that undermines Cartesian flattening. It is a double movement of decay and hollowness, but also growth and the undoing of politics, which would contribute towards transgressing the flattening of representation associated with the negative horizon found during NATO’s incursion.

What can be said in relation to the currently filleted state of the Generalstab complex is that it offers potential to architectural discourse for an alternative space making as the complex cannot be easily described or represented through the conventional understanding and identification of space. This can be used in an opportunistic way, one that would spearhead the identity of a different Belgrade/Serbia and an alternative way of thinking post-war re-construction. Hence, forging ahead is to think and build identity at the intersection of architecture, trauma and violence; the intersection being a potential to revise the current thinking in Serbia on the future of the complex. The way forward is not about removing the wounds and traumas of past historical periods, but integrating the hollowed structure into and within the proposed new one. This proposition may sound as a mere replication of Lebbeus Woods’ (1993) writings on destroyed architecture in terms of a scab, scar and tissue, and his seductively speculative re-constructions in *War and Architecture*. However, the difference is that engaging with the ruin of the Generalstab, including the intersection of the void with the surface, means that the power of the border and the identity of the structure become a deformable process; in other words, the hollowness is matter and as such, a departure from the Western normative thinking about borders. Similarly, the intersection of the void (hollowness) and the surface of a ruin is a political folding that can no longer be reduced to what has become of the canonical structure of the Generalstab complex; to do so would be a mere identification and from this perspective, a return of and a stepping into a reality of perpetual present. Instead, this political folding is a Bergsonian relation of rotation/contraction/expansion, where hollowness is a means of engaging with infinite other realities, and more importantly insertions into present to alter history.

A variation of this thinking was present in Dobrovic’s Generalstab complex. When the building was finished in 1960s, it was perceived by the West as an ‘[a]n “architectural nightmare ... in concrete and pink stone” that was a clear “sign of the Communist rule”’ (Kulic, 2009: 137). Politically, this shift in perception is significant considering that from the end of WWII to the completion of the Generalstab complex in the mid 1960s, Yugoslav architecture was built mainly in the modernist International style, and, unlike

other communist countries, was praised by the West (Kulic, 2009). From an architectural perspective, it was only when Yugoslavia started to clearly form its own identity, signified by the Generalstab complex that Yugoslav architecture started to be perceived in the West as an architectural 'nightmare'. The 'nightmare' associated with the complex was a result of Dobrovic integrating modernist architecture, philosophy and local materials, which might be claimed to prefigure the latter arrival of postmodernism in the West.<sup>7</sup> In a lecture given at the request of the Society of Architects and Technicians of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, Dobrovic was noted as saying,

What is our task in this part of the globe? Is it not about grinding that matter, which has been brought here with no custom inspection, in the domestic mill and while grinding it combine that matter with all those domestic additives and spices, domestic brains and hearts, which will turn it into our product, our national school's product? (Lazar, 2002: 218)

Thus, the process of re-construction post 1999 is to avoid creating architectural replicas of a time before, or building futuristic spectacle-induced architecture. What both of these options ignore is the event; in this case, the violence during the disintegration of Yugoslavia, NATO's 1999 targeting and all that followed thereafter. To think identity as a leap forward is to find ways of altering the course of the ongoing voiding of the Generalstab complex, indicative of the loss of Belgrade's urban identity. It is to extend the identity of the marginal Other in a way that deters siding with any centralised and dominant power; the current quasi-democratic Serbian government or the assimilation with NATO's agenda of inclusivity, security and peace veiled in the extreme grip of hegemonic control. To think experimental architecture would mean retaining the carcass of the current complex but not to fill the hollow volume with form or meaning prescribed by the European identity, rather, to extend thinking about identity altogether in terms of an indeterminant Balkanist image.

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## Notes

1. Parts of Serbia fell to the Ottoman Empire in 1389, with Belgrade falling in 1521. Serbia was recognised by the Congress of Berlin in 1878.
2. Hausmannisation (influenced by the French General Thomas Robert Bugeaud text *The War of Streets* authored who served in Algeria in the 1840s) was not only for suppression of the possible revolts and more efficient policing of the capital; suppression was one of several reasons and affects of that urban cleansing. For example, Haussmannisation was also geared towards eliminating widespread disease by establishing an underground network of sewer systems and water supply. Planning wise, the erasure of a medieval city with narrow labyrinthine streets also facilitated the establishment of green zones and implementation of building codes (height limits, technical and aesthetic specifications) to standardise housing. The new street grid with long, wide and open boulevards organised in a series of concentric circles radiating outward meant that economic productivity was heightened by increasing the capacity and efficiency to service the circulation of goods. In terms of socio-economics, the destruction of

medieval outer and inner walls coincided with the elimination of working-class areas from northeastern Paris. The move also affected the value of land and facilitated a new building typology of shopping arcades, theatres and residential apartments creating an economically homogenous zone.

3. The Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) was the military of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). The beginnings of the Army are to be found in the Yugoslav Partisan units formed during World War II (WWII). The Partisans were the most successful anti-Axis movement in Europe during WWII.
4. Other unreconstructed buildings include the following: the Chinese Embassy and Hotel Yugoslavia in New Belgrade, the RTS (Radio and Television of Serbia building) and the buildings of the State Police in Belgrade's Old City.
5. See NATO (2015).
6. The exterior of the complex was placed under a historical preservation order largely driven by the lobbying of the architect Bojan Kovacevic who wrote his masters dissertation on the Generalstab complex, published in 2001 by the Serbian Army.
7. The fact that in the 1960s, the SFRY was starting to re-establish political and military communication with the Soviets, could not have aided the perception of Yugoslav architecture in the West. Up until then, the SFRY was politically presented in positive light due to the 1948 split from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which the West interpreted as a hopeful sign that other socialist/communist satellite states would follow and, in turn, undermine USSR's power.

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