

Bruce Lee monument in Mostar

Nino Raspudić

In a politically divided Mostar, building a monument to Bruce Lee represents an attempt for the public spaces to regain their meaning, at the same time questioning the significance of monuments and symbols, both old and new. While politics and ideology have occupied and poisoned all segments of everyday life, in Mostar and in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we would like to remind ourselves by building up the monument that a significant part of our lives, memories of our childhood and the first real values of life have nothing to do with politics or the 'great narrations'. Furthermore, in a city where everything is divided, we would like to be reminded that, outside of this vicious circle of national conflict, there still exist numerous things that are common to all citizens of Mostar. The monument is not being built for Bruce Lee the actor or the characters he played, but rather it is being built for the very idea of justice, represented in a plastic and universally acceptable way, that might also have the power to awaken some positive vibrations through the figure of the famous kung-fu hero we loved so much during our childhood.

On 26 November 2005, the Bruce Lee Monument in Veliki Park, Mostar was inaugurated following an initiative by the NGO Urban Movement in Mostar (Veselin Gatalo and Nino Raspudić). The creator of the Bruce Lee monument is Ivan Fiolić from Zagreb. The monument has been erected in collaboration with the Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art within the **"De/construction of Monument"** project, carried out in the framework of 'relations' - project initiated by the German Federal Cultural Foundation.

Major interest in the initiative has been shown throughout ex-Yugoslavia; initiators and the Urban Movement members have been interviewed by all the relevant newspapers, radio stations and TV channels, and there have been numerous reportages on the project. Mostar's Bruce Lee has opened a discussion on monuments in general and on space semiosis. In particular, it has opened discussion on the collective memory and on similar issues bearing great significance in this region due to its recent past, massive war casualties and damages during the 1990s, and for its current traumatic political and economical transition, a major cause for the breakdown of traditional social, political and cultural identities.

If the monument to Bruce Lee were erected in any other city in the world, the whole idea could be described as an homage to one particular person and actor (for example, in Hong Kong where he was born or in Los Angeles where he shot most of the films that made him famous). It also might be observed as some bizarre manifestation of local kung-fu fans. But the story about Bruce Lee, in a politically divided Mostar, is much more complex and full of significance. That is why we are glad that most of the mass media have recognized the news, not as something bizarre, but rather as something more serious and profound.

Mostar is the city which suffered, perhaps, in the most tragic way during the wars in the territories of the former Yugoslavia. This city with a rich historical heritage, inhabited by all three Bosnian and Herzegovinian entities, has survived two wars. In both, the fighting happened in the central city area.

By the end of the most recent war, the city ended up divided in two parts, split between the two major communities (Croatian and Bosniak). Although currently the city is formally unified in a single municipality, the very painful process of reconstruction and reunification is still in progress. In this situation, urbanism exists as a 'prolonging of war using different means': each one of two constituent parts of the city is trying to endow 'their own' space with 'their own' characteristics, to 'posses' it even more by constructing their own religious and cultural objects and symbols. Unfortunately, this competition to 'mark space' is going on an extremely low level profession wise. If we add the general absence of law, which is reflected in our surroundings through the total devastation of public space, illegal construction works (mainly directed by the 'newly enriched' population by war profiteering and transition without a functional legal framework), it is clear why Mostar and its citizens feel more and more alienated in their own environment and why their attitude towards public space is more and more negligent.

Theoretically speaking, we are dealing with a typical postmodernist method of blending together different levels and scales. By mixing 'high' stylistic elements (monuments, grandeur, bronze) with 'low' ones (mass culture, kung-fu, heroes of our childhood), a short circuit of reception is produced. The 'high' stylistic registry is deconstructed and the overwhelming 'myth-o-many' has itself become the subject of irony (Who are our heroes? To whom do we build monuments and why?). At the same time the 'low' registry is acknowledged and lauded again for its power to evoke little, ordinary things from everyday life that do not have anything to do with politics and ideologies but rather bring people and nations together instead of separating them.

Furthermore, in Mostar, where the consequences of war have left it divided still, the citizens are overburdened by politics and ideology to such an extent that even local elections use the discourse about the fight for the survival of people. In the abandoned and pillaged city the authorities have consciously shifted all problems to a political and ideological level, sustaining a balance of fear in the population. For example, the only local television channel once asked people from the local population about the subject of maintenance of city streets. When one citizen was asked what he thought about the holes on the roads, he said: "Please do not ask me anything about politics... I do not want to talk about politics". I would not like to ignore the existence of real political problems, such as the unsolved national issue, but they have become so ubiquitous that they impregnate all spheres of life and often times serve as a barrier to solving actual, 'small' everyday problems. Therefore, the purpose of this monument is to remind ourselves that a significant part of our lives, memories of our childhood and the first real values of life have nothing to do with politics or the 'great narrations'. It aims to defend the non-political sphere of life in order to provide it with a sense of dignity.

Our intention is not to be apolitical or to find some kind of refuge in childhood, but rather it is to outline some spheres of life in order to remind ourselves of things that are also part of our identity and that were never used as a pretext or excuse for killing somebody. Furthermore, in a city where everything is divided, we would like to remind ourselves that, outside of national conflict, there still exist numerous things common to all citizens of Mostar. For example, people from all background are fond of Bruce Lee: Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, of both left and right political opinion. The value of Bruce Lee's figure rests in its universal character and in its concreteness, capable of provoking concrete emotions, and first of all a sense of necessity to fight for justice. The monument is not being built for Bruce Lee the actor or the characters he played, but rather it is being built for the very idea of justice, represented in a plastic and universally acceptable way, that might also have the power to awaken some positive vibrations through the figure of the famous kung-fu hero we loved so much during our childhood.

Bruce Lee, a man from a completely different race to our own and from another continent, was dear to us all, no matter our political or ideological convictions. For generations raised on his movies of the 1970s, he was the embodiment of honesty, justice, protection for the weak and loyalty to his friends

and master. At a time when all moral values are underestimated, when kids in Bosnia and Herzegovina carry guns to school and seek criminals as role models, the monument to Bruce Lee in the center of Mostar will be a reminder to us of our own childhood dreams and about more righteous world where the raw brute force would not count but where the deepest strength and highest importance would lie in skill, quick wit and the power of will of the person fighting for a just cause.

Bruce Lee was, above all, a symbolic bridge between the East and the West. He was a son of a Chinese father and an English mother who left Hong Kong as a young man in order to seek his fortune in America. He contributed greatly to the popularization of Asian martial arts and Asian culture in general. Therefore, it is not strange that we chose him to stand between the eastern and the western part of Mostar. In this hyper-politicized space, considering that we are erecting a monument in the divided city where once lay the frontline between two enemies, we even had to consider in which direction should the statue of Bruce Lee, in a fighting position, be oriented? If we turned it towards the east someone might maliciously interpret our act as anti-Bosniak. If we turned it toward the west someone might say that the monument is defending eastern Mostar from the Croats on the west side. Therefore, we decided to make it north-facing: towards Sarajevo, Zagreb, Beograd, Bruxelles, Washington or Halle....

We are sure that, concerning the above-analyzed elements of deconstruction and construction, the monument will definitely become a sort of tourist attraction. Thanks to the Bruce Lee monument initiative, for the first time in fifteen years Mostar is being mentioned in a positive context. This is the first time that the global media has related Mostar to something constructive and creative, having nothing to do with either politics or war. Pretentiously enough, we hope that this monument help to connect all of the citizens of our town, as a kind of common denominator, to create a new identity of Mostar. We hope that in the near future, when somebody hears the name of Mostar, they would, instead of associating it with war, say: Mostar? Isn't that the city with the Bruce Lee monument?

We are not able to choose where to be born. Being born in Mostar during the twentieth century was not the most fortunate thing that could have happened to us. It is very important to me that you understand that the idea behind erecting the monument to Bruce Lee, and all the fun that goes with it, was born from profound pain and misery of an unhappy town. We are the people who have outlived our own town and our own world. Or perhaps that world never belonged to us? Perhaps it is better to phrase it the other way around – our world: we still have to create and build it ourselves...

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The present text is based on the presentation made by Nino Raspudić in the context of a workshop held by 'relations' in Volkspark in Halle/Saale on 5 November 2004.

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*For details on the project "**De/construction of Monument**", visit its website: www.scca.ba/deconstruction or its dedicated page on the relations project page: www.projekt-relations.de.*