

# (Non-)existent Places. The Landscape of Socialist Sofia as a Space of Bulgarian Artistic Practices after 1989

## Abstract

The aim of the book is to show the artistic ways of problematizing the (non-)existence of material representations of the communist past in the space of contemporary Sofia. These objects co-create the Bulgarian capital city's landscape, which – inspired by, among other influences, concepts from the field of environmental aesthetics – I consider as a culturally transformed, palimpsest-like construct, actively experienced by actors operating within it, being the result of their creative activity and a reflection of historical processes.

After 1989, many of the elements introduced into the Sofia iconosphere in the second half of the 20th century lost both the ideological and practical sense as well as the acceptance of some of the Sofia's inhabitants, who began to undermine not only the cultural value of individual places, buildings or monuments, but also their right to exist in the new reality. At the same time, the Bulgarian public debate resonates time and again with calls for a process of resemantization, preceded by a critical reflection on the status of the communist landscape layer. Thus, contemporary attitudes towards the heritage of communism are characterized by ambiguity.

Visual artists whose projects are the subject of analysis recognize art as a medium for articulating opinions about the spaces which in the years 1944–1989 were remodeled by the authorities in accordance with urban concepts serving to legitimize the political system. They use the streets as places of demonstrating rebellion against top-down visibility, raise the issue of the emptiness left after the demolition of the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov, take up the question of outdated meanings generated by the Monument to the Soviet Army and the impact that the structure exerts on the atmosphere of its surroundings. By protesting against the demolition of the Monument to 1,300 Years of Bulgaria, they undermine the effectiveness of iconoclastic gestures and reinterpret the aesthetic and social potential of residential complexes. Using various genres, the artists update the meaning of the communist layer of Sofia's landscape and call for reflection on the process of semiosis that it triggers, in order to enable a skilful playing on this problematic presence in the dynamically transforming, heterogeneous tissue of the contemporary city. The artists do not limit themselves to the articulation of individual opinions, popularization of knowledge, or pure artistic expression, but often adopt an activist attitude. They involve the audience, inviting them to an as well as

exciting game in which the field, object and stake is the urban landscape. Thus, their works go beyond aesthetic needs, activating discussions on the current condition of culture, art, collective memory of the communist past, and its importance in the process of constructing contemporary identities.

**Keywords:** Bulgaria, Sofia, communism, landscape, artistic practices, visual culture, Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov, Monument to the Soviet Army, Monument to 1,300 Years of Bulgaria, residential complex, block housing estate