

## Genex

6 November 2010. Entering Belgrade from the west along a highway linking the capital of Serbia with the airport, Budapest, and the whole of Europe, we come across the so-called West Gate or, more precisely, two huge concrete towers topped with a revolving connector. This is Genex – the highest pinnacle of the Banat Plain. I, however, entered Belgrade in another way: by leaving the highway I took a bus crawling and weaving its way amidst the rural houses of the suburbs, which unnoticeably – and in a totally natural manner – blended with the housing estates of New Belgrade. Between the houses and the blocks flickered the gloomy towers – terrifying and fascinating at the same time. This is Genex, I thought. I already knew that I would do anything to get inside, climb to the top, reach the abandoned, closed café on the 31<sup>st</sup> storey of the rotating roof... \*

This could be a fragment from a blog or a book by a globetrotter searching for extreme impressions, traversing former communist countries while seeking unusual adventures, the sort that come from contact with architecture – the often breath-taking ruins of truly futuristic and, literally, unique buildings from the 1960s-1980s, to be encountered from Vladivostok to Trieste. Brutalist constructions made a strong imprint upon the surrounding, and today their former purpose has become unclear. Often uncompleted due to a lack of funds, unfavourable political decisions or, finally, the fall of the Eastern bloc, in the last two decades they turned into ruins and, at times, succumbed to total degradation.

Why am I writing about this? The reason lies in the growing although still niche interest in the topic and in the emergence of a new, specific form of travelling, whose target is “collecting” images of strange architecture, just as landscapes were collected in the past. Actually, the heart of the matter involves experiencing architecture as a form of repression and the uncanny (*Unheimlichkeit*). This situation is sufficiently interesting to draw the attention of an anthropologist. Naturally, specific “love for ruins” is not new; it is rather a successive embodiment of a phenomenon known at least from the French Revolution, when abandoned architecture became an allegory of the irreversible processes of History and in time a symbolic reverse of progress and modernity. This time, however, the accents have been arranged differently. Another interesting phenomenon is the permeation of the theme into the world of contemporary art. Although recently published albums: by the Slovenian photographer Roman Bezjak: *Socialist Modernism – Archeology of an Era* and the photographer Frederick Charbin: *Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed* (the latter presents almost a hundred curious ultra-modernist although actually totally postmodernist buildings in the former USSR), causing the reader to smile and even

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## Phantom Houses and Voyages to Nowhere

more often to experience goose bumps of horror, can be considered more as treats for lovers of architecture it is difficult to ignore the fact that the topic in question was considered by Cyprien Gaillard, winner of last year's prestigious Marcel Duchamp Prize. In his neo-Romantic videos and photograph series strange communist-era buildings appear rather as allegories of the decline of the very idea of modernism, images of living ruins, and, finally, a perverse praise of vandalism, treated like archaeological remnants of some sort of ancient civilisation.

In the Polish context, this theme – perhaps not brutalism as such but socialist modernist architecture in general as well as its fall – has been broached by the photographer Nicolas Groszpiere and in a slightly different manner by the reporter Filip Springer. There exists a whole tangle of issues on which light should be cast in order to explain the reasons for this interest. Put aside curiosity about the widely comprehended heritage of Le Corbusier, the architectural legacy of the communist era and the failure of the modernisation project. Relegate to the margin the otherwise important connections between architecture and utopia. Instead, concentrate on a concrete example: it is time to take a look at Genex.

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The skyscraper, built in 1977-1980 by the architect Mihajlo Mitrović next to a highway leading towards an airport and the border with Hungary, is located in a district known as Novi Beograd (New Belgrade), i.e. a sprawling housing estate for 250 000 residents on former farmland surrounding the city on the opposite bank of the Sava. It is worth mentioning that New Belgrade is closely connected with Josip Broz Tito: construction work began in 1947 (i.e. immediately after the marshal seized power) and was envisaged as a symbol of new socialist architecture and an equally new and better socialist future. Today, it is an unusual site and, at the same time, typical for the peripheries of cities across Eastern Europe and the Balkans



Fragment video by Cyprian Gaillard *Desnianski Raion* (2007). In the frame Genex.

– modern and often interesting architecture borders with uncontrolled refuse dumps and temporary buildings. It is also worth recalling that the skyscraper was completed in 1980 – the year of Tito's death. Its erection for the Genex export consortium was, therefore, a symbolic caesura, a symptom of all the fundamental contradictions – political, ethnic, and economic – that comprised the specificity of Yugoslavia.

The skyscraper was built in the style of brutalist architecture out of raw concrete, i.e. material identified strongly with trauma and symbolic violence but also with commemoration and memory (during the twentieth century concrete was used for monuments, including those of the Holocaust<sup>1</sup>). The architecture of Genex consists of two tall concrete towers – one residential and the other used for offices, combined at the very top with a revolving restaurant, which was never actually opened. The office tower has been closed and totally empty for a long time, while the second tower was used only partly (which makes a specially chilling impression, since abandoned flats adjoin inhabited ones). Recently, the authorities of Belgrade made initial decisions about pulling the building down, and it is probably only a question of time when it will vanish. This phantom-like trait is paradoxical considering that the building in question is simultaneously associ-

ated with a number of more or less realistic visions of its revitalisation and transformation (e.g. of creating at its top the most exclusive nightclub in Belgrade or redesigning the whole edifice for an international conference centre).

From the very onset Genex stirred extreme emotions: some perceived it as a symbol of modernity while others condemned it as brutal intervention into the landscape and urban tissue. It also produced horror due to its claustrophobic concrete interior: narrow stairways and tiny apartments. Up to this day Genex divides the opinions not only of the Serbs but also tourists and experts on architecture from all over the world. This approach is illustrated well by several opinions expressed on discussion fora about architecture: *One of the most terrifying buildings in the world; ideal for committing suicide; unique and exotic; the ugliest building in the world; a monolithic architectural masterpiece; the most disgusting skyscraper in the world; just looking at it hurts; this building is a joke; undoubtedly the most interesting communist building in the world; the ugliest thing in the Balkans; ugly but fascinating; so hopeless that it is fun; this building is genuine and uniquely Serbian...*

A characteristic feature of opinions about Genex is their extraordinary polarisation and mixture of images. Together, they are part of the domain of the meanings

of the symbol, known from phenomenological studies on religion and creating tension between horror and fascination, *tremendum et fascinans*. At the same time, we can consider the inimical and alien architecture of the partly empty building in, e.g. the context of the celebrated book by Anthony Vidler: *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*,<sup>2</sup> dealing with haunted, uninhabitable houses, or within a psychoanalytical context where oppressive architecture of the interior imposes the Freudian experience of the *Unheimlichkeit*. It can bring to mind in an unclear and disturbing manner that, which is familiar and, at the same time, totally repressed, and which contrary to our wishes returns in the manner of a phantom in another context: the World War II experience, so strong in this part of Europe, or the after images of the ethnic massacres of the 1990s. The horror of the latter consisted of the fact, as Ivan olović stressed,<sup>3</sup> that the killings were committed by neighbours often living next to each other in claustrophobically small ethnic ghettos... Another interpretation, this time political, could be based on the observation that the spectacular and brutal skyscraper, combining the traumatic with the utopian - a vision of a wonderful new world with an image of a concentration camp - in a certain sense personified the complicated attitude of the inhabitants of this part of Europe towards the communist era.

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Genex comes alive in yet another, totally different context: contemporary art. It appears in a panoramic take opening the "video-opera" *Diesnansky Raion* (2007) by the above-mentioned French artist Cyprien Gaillard.<sup>4</sup> Intuition led Gaillard to consider modern architecture, in particular the one originating from the "periphery of modernism", i.e. countries of the former Soviet bloc, the Middle East, South America or the degraded suburbs of large West European metropolises, within the context of the inevitable disintegration inscribed into its nature. This process is the reason why they become ruins at the moment of completion. Genex is a model-like example: the building started to age and succumb to degradation only several years after it was finished, and the revolving, modern cafe at the top of the skyscraper never actually operated. Its function, similarly to that of the abandoned ("inhospitable") flats, was gradually obliterated and forgotten. This phenomenon could be described by using a term created at the turn of the 1960s by the American artist Robert Smithson, namely, "de-architecturisation", i.e. the loss of the building's originally assumed functions.<sup>5</sup> No longer used, it becomes in a certain sense excluded from the present and is perceived as a relic of the past or, on the contrary, turns into a materialisation of a vision of the future. This paradox absorbs Gaillard's attention: a building losing its function and

becoming "its own ghost" can be discussed outside the context of architecture, for example, as a remnant of some no longer existing civilisation or a futuristic object, a natural elevation of space or a land-art sculpture, finally, as a ready natural art installation. In this context it is possible to comprehend why one of the strategies applied by contemporary artists is extreme tourism as a form of art. An interpretation of a building subjected to disintegration remains in the hands of the artist, but also in those of the recipients - it is the latter who imagine its function. Without becoming aware of this semantic shift it is difficult to understand the series of actions proposed by curator Joanna Warsza in the abandoned 10th-Anniversary Stadium, soon to be torn down.<sup>6</sup>

Cyprien Gaillard added something more to this intriguing artistic diagnosis: a paradoxical linking of the entopic with the spectacular. One of his works shows the remarkable end of a housing block in the peripheries of a Scottish town: the very moment when it is being demolished. A miserable block, a typical machine for living, terminates its life with a striking firework - is this not a paradox? The moment when it had already ceased to exist and its particles became scattered all over the vicinity gains for the artist the dimension of an allegory: it is a posthumous monument, or rather,



Genex. Photo: Tomasz Szerszeń

evoking a neologism created by yet another American artist, Gordon Matta-Clark, a "non-ument" of the building, existing only in a work of art as a spectacle of disintegration.

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Time to return to Genex. Is this skyscraper-phantom a "non-ument"? Or perhaps it is rather a monument that does not commemorate anything apart from the process of its disintegration?

It is thanks to art that such sites as Genex begin to exist anew even if this is a highly paradoxical existence. Apparently, on this case artists are interested much more in the aspect of non-existence: the negative factor inscribed into the essence of these places, their phantom quality. This process was noticed by the anthropologist Roch Sulima, who analysing the demise of the 10th-Anniversary Stadium /Marketplace Europa, drew attention: *Artistic undertakings rendering aesthetic the space and time of the agony of the Stadium-bazaar define something that I shall describe as "in-between" aesthetics. They build meanings out of absence and non-continuum (the aesthetics of the void). Just as absent is Warsaw, a city of rubble, the finish lines of the Peace Race bicycle race, communist regime harvest festivities together with the pathos of their collectivism and apotheosis of social engineering. The vivid outlines of the site of meetings with the Pope during his second pilgrimage are becoming hazy, the spatial structure and emotional contents of Marketplace Europa are turning into a part of nonentity. These multiplied absences and emptiness mutually define and reinforce each other and add significance to meanings.*<sup>7</sup>

Can it be said that the concepts of emptiness, absence, and phantom qualities, in this part of the world closely connected with a comprehension of architecture and space, in some astonishing way bring these reflections close to the historiosophic diagnoses proposed by Jan Sowa in his recently published book: *Fantomowe ciało króla: peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*<sup>8</sup> (in this context the subtitle: "peripheral strife with modern form" is particularly significant)? This is a question for further reflection.

## II. Hotel Palenque

Thinking about Genex, the socialist modernist heritage and, more extensively, architecture in our part of Europe, including the already non-existent 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Stadium, in Warsaw, I cannot resist a certain especially evocative phantom. I have in mind a vision of Hotel Palenque in the Yucatan, a place that became famous (only virtually: has anyone ever actually seen Hotel Palenque?) thanks to Robert Smithson.

This American artist, the creator of *land-art* – whose premature tragic death in 1973 rendered him truly immortal – studied connections between archi-

itecture and entropy. The topic appeared in his work for the first time several years before his death, in a photo-essay: *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*,<sup>9</sup> a pseudo-tourist guide to his hometown, i.e. crumbling industrial Passaic, full of collapsing, once very modern industrial buildings (a landscape much too familiar in our part of the world...). Smithson assumed the pose of a tourist seeing the ruins of Rome and interpreting decrepit industrial buildings as aesthetic objects as well as, and this is particularly interesting, the remnants of some old, long gone culture. *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic* contains an outline of an approach typical for Smithson: the examination of architecture in the perspective of time as a relic of the past or a materialised vision of the future, and not from the viewpoint of the present.

The same motifs were developed two years later in *Hotel Palenque*. Smithson came to Palenque in the Yucatan, a locality up to then celebrated for its famous Maya temple, and ... he discovered Hotel Palenque: a curious uncompleted building/non-building, a ruin that, however, still functioned as a hotel. In this manner, the expedition to Yucatan appears to have been a late modernistic caricature of an exotic voyage, which, as Witkacy and Michel Leiris demonstrated so vividly, always ends in disappointment and emptiness. Another aspect of this caricature is an ironic probable reference to Georges Bataille's *Extinct America* (1928), depicting the world of the Mayas and the Aztecs, non-existent for centuries, as an incessant bloody festival. Here, instead of such a festivity we are dealing with entropic reality on the peripheries of an increasingly global world. Smithson also stressed the motif of a linguistic misunderstanding: when in 1517 the Spanish conquistadores landed in Yucatan they misheard the words: *mac'ubah than* ("we do not understand") spoken by the encountered Mayas and took it for the name of the peninsula. In the eyes of the artist, Yucatan built on a misunderstanding is, due to a basic premise, a non-place.

Smithson considered Hotel Palenque from the viewpoint of inevitable entropy: an unstoppable process of deformation that is the reason why thinking about construction as something durable that which will last for ages becomes archaic. For Smithson the only constant is decline. The context of decomposition and disintegration produces a vision of architecture that can be comprehended only as the absence of any sort of human order.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in this context he referred to a certain pessimistic motif delineated by Claude Lévi-Strauss on the margin of *Tristes Tropiques*: a vision of the anthropologist as an entropologist, i.e. a researcher dealing with disintegration and cultural corrosion. In one of his interviews Smithson drew attention to its affiliation to his conceits of "entropy" and "de-architecture": *Lévi-Strauss had a*

good insight, he suggested we change the study of anthropology into "entropology". It would be a study that devotes itself to the process of disintegration in highly developed structures. After all, wreckage is often more interesting than structure.<sup>11</sup>

Hotel Palenque is actually the opposite of a Romantic ruin – the building is not collapsing into a ruin but "grows to become a ruin" and was a ruin before it was even raised. As in dialectic visions by Walter Benjamin, the processes of construction and disintegration mutually permeate each other, creating a state of an endless exchange between the new and the old, construction and ruin, the past and the future. In an auto-commentary (which assumed the form of an ironic, para-scientific lecture given to a full lecture hall at the University of Utah) Smithson drew attention that the hotel was built in the same spirit in which the Mayas erected their temples. Many constantly changed the facades, with successive facades added on top of each other and overlapping. *The structure has all the convolution and terror, in a sense that you would find in a typical Mayan temple...*<sup>12</sup> This witty observation can be, however, interpreted quite seriously: in that case, the structure of Hotel Palenque would be a relic of earlier forms, their "life after life".<sup>13</sup> Smithson discussed in detail the successive elements of this extremely strange hybrid, such as uncompleted stairs leading to nowhere: a motif as if straight out of Piranesi's *Le Carceri d'Invenzione* series. He also accentuated the fact that the building is losing its purpose – since the function becomes blurred Smithson invented it: we are dealing with an example of late Mayan architecture, an actuation of Piranesi's vision in the Mexican jungle, or else with "absolute functionalistic" architecture... The American artist found particularly tempting the possibility of considering the Hotel in an anti-anthropocentric perspective, i.e. as a special sort of escalation – natural sculpture – caused by the impact of the forces of Nature. This moment in reflections about architecture led him subsequently to such realisations as *Spiral Jetty* (1970).

In reference to a photograph showing the Hotel door Smithson ended his commentary as follows: *There's not really much you can say about it, I mean it's just a green door. We've all seen green doors at one time in our lives. It gives out a sense of universality that way, a sense of kind of global cohesion. The door probably opens up to nowhere and closes on nowhere so that we leave the Hotel Palenque with this closed door and return to the University of Utah.*<sup>14</sup> Could it be that Hotel Palenque – this genuine model-like Non-site – was a passageway of sorts leading from nowhere to nowhere, a global mirror in which it is possible to see everything with the exception of the longed for "monument"? This means that Yucatan, that

outcome of a linguistic misunderstanding, lies elsewhere!

### III. Hotel Playte

12 September 2009. Crete. A road leading from the mountains to the sea: from the ancient ruins of Polyrimia to the resort of Castello. On the side, concealed by trees, olive groves, and Mediterranean shrubs, stands Hotel Playif (the absence of one of the letters of the neon, long out of order, creates an opportunity for speculation: perhaps the name was Playie or Playte...?). Merged with the landscape, partly overgrown by wild plants, and with cracked windowpanes, it resembles more a relic of some long lost civilisation than a site until recently inhabited by crowds of tourists. Actually, the latter is uncertain – I do not know whether the hotel went bankrupt or was never completed. That is irrelevant. At any rate, I cannot cease thinking about it as a sui generis land-art sculpture, sprouting out of the mountain slope in the manner of a strangely shaped rock ...

#### Endnotes

- 1 Cf. e.g. Adrien Forty, *Beton i pamięć*, transl. Katarzyna Bojarska, "Konteksty" 2009, no.1-2.
- 2 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, Mass. 1992.
- 3 Cf. Ivan Čolović, *Balkany – terror kultury*, transl. Magdalena Petryńska, Wołowiec 2007.
- 4 I wrote more extensively about Gaillard in: *Gaillard: romantyczny wandal*, "dwutygodnik.com" 2011, no. 67. I also wrote twice on connections between architecture and entropy: *Cóż nam po ruinach modernizmu? Z Woli do Hotelu Palenque – i z powrotem*, "Konteksty" 2011, no. 2-3, and: *Miejsca, których nie było*, "Kultura miasta" 2011, no. 2.
- 5 Kai Vöckler, *The Disappearance of Architecture as an Artistic Theme*, exhibition catalogue: *Die Moderne als Ruine. Eine Archäologie der Gegenwart*, Vienna 2009, pp. 151-152.
- 6 Cf. Joanna Warsza, *Stadion X. Miejsce, którego nie było. O projektach performatywnych w przestrzeni Stadionu Dziesięciolecia*, "Konteksty" 2009, no. 1-2.
- 7 Roch Sulima, *Stadion-bazar*, "Konteksty" 2009, no. 1-2, p. 145.
- 8 Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla: peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Kraków 2012.
- 9 Robert Smithson, *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, "Artforum", no. 4/1967, pp. 48-51.
- 10 Kai Vöckler, *The Disappearance of Architecture as an Artistic Theme*, exhibition catalogue: *Die Moderne als Ruine. Eine Archäologie der Gegenwart*, Vienna 2009, pp. 151-152.
- 11 Robert Smithson, *...The Earth, subject to cataclysms, is a cruel master. Interview with Gregoire Müller*, in: *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, University of California Press, pp. 256-257.
- 12 Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque*, exhibition catalogue: *Die Moderne als Ruine. Eine Archäologie der Gegenwart*, Vienna 2009, p. 165.
- 13 In the meaning ascribed to this concept [*Nachleben*] by the German historian of art Aby Warburg.
- 14 Smithson, *Hotel Palenque...*, p. 165.