

## Tracing the past: "The Spa" by Bojan Mrđenović

Homelike, calming and simply beautiful. The photographs from **Bojan Mrđenović's** series „The Spa“ show the spa complex located in Daruvar, Croatia, somewhere between “now” and “then”. By using a visual language, the Croatian photographer turns the spa, which was built in the 1980s, to a political place and asks crucial questions. What is the relation between public architecture and its environment? And what is the role of resorts in a particular value system? **osTraum** talked with Bojan about his photo series “The Spa”, “Adriatic Postcards”, “Welcome” and coming projects.

### **The spa as a metaphor and the place for coming back**

“I started the series in 2011. In a way it is still in progress but in recent years I visited this place only couple times a year. I am really fond of long-term photographic observations, so I keep revisiting my subjects and places again and again over the years.

The spa complex is located in my hometown, but the project started after I left and started coming back as a visitor – the one who is seeing familiar things with different eyes. Until then I was just taking it for granted; afterwards I started to observe in a more analytical way. At first, I was attracted to the idea of hot water and its use for social purposes. I also liked how the complex looked – it is situated in the park and I was thinking about the interaction of natural and built space. I was also thinking about the institution itself and its function: I had a feeling that in a way this tiny institution can work as a metaphor of a particular world and the system of values that I wanted to explore”.

### **The functional architecture in Yugoslavia – the remains of the past?**

“The spa complex that you can see in the pictures was built in 1980. There are as well some remains from the Roman period and also 18th century spa buildings but my focus was on the buildings from the 1980s. I really appreciate architecture of Yugoslav public buildings – both for its forms and purposes. I had a feeling that this is an example of modest and functional architecture which really takes its environment into account and establishes a dialogue with it.

At the moment, when I started to move around and take pictures, I have realized that selective restorations are taking place: Some rooms were renewed, some parts of the façade were changed, some new parts of the interior restored or removed. At that point my “archeological” impulse was triggered, and I realized I wanted to keep it in pictures until it changes. I had a feeling that the interior is getting old as well as the people that are coming to spa to be taken care of. So, both people and the space are in need of care to keep going on.

My interests are related to common spaces – the spaces that people share and

shape. Our built environment always reflects social dynamics and contains different levels of political implications. But I also like to think about the opposite influence, how certain types of social spaces can influence people who are using them”.

## **The idea of well-being as a political question**

“The spa complexes of this kind have double functions: they are used for medical purposes and for touristic and recreational purposes. The costs of medical treatments for all the patients are covered by public healthcare system, whereas tourists have to pay to use the facilities.

It reflects the heritage of socialist management since treatments are available free of charge for all the people that are in need. I find this component very important for the identity of this space but I am wondering, if it is going to stay like that. There are some initiatives to push more and more social services on the market, which means that they become limited to the ones that can afford them.

Many spa complexes in Croatia, and for example its neighbor Slovenia, are privatized and are more profit-oriented. A similar thing is happening with hospitals: Almost all new hospitals, that were built in Croatia in the last 30 years, are private hospitals. In the current pandemic crisis, it is clear that the wellbeing of people has to be supported by an institutional infrastructure. Similar to individuals also institutions should be taken care of. I was trying to use a visual language to articulate an idea of wellbeing as a political question”.

## **Croatian resorts in a time lapse**

“Photographic projects “The Spa” and “Adriatic Postcards” represent the spaces that are created for the sake of people’s wellbeing. Through the development of these institutions you can trace significant political changes within the last 30 years: In a socialist state the institutions were developed from the public for the public, whereas in a capitalist state they are developed from the elites for the elites.

I’ve been developing some other works related to the ideas of wellbeing and tourism: In my short film “The Party” I tried to make a sketch of a party night at one of popular Croatian islands. In another photographic work, “Adriatic Highway”, I was using my bicycle on the highway that follows the Adriatic coast to trace the intense development of tourist infrastructure”.

## **The “local” vs. “tourist” or the feeling of belonging**

“Since I’ve been living in Croatia for my whole life, it is the territory that I got to know pretty well, with all of its diversity and all of its subtleties. I like to deal with small scale topics that reflects some wider dynamics and I feel that subjects and topics are coming to me naturally from my everyday life and my “domestic” environment. I feel like a citizen of the world and I don’t relate myself strongly to the national identity. Still, there is a certain kind of belonging which is related to geography – there is a certain area where you feel like home – the area that you

can relate to more than to some other places. For me, it is important to keep my interest in the area to which I can personally relate myself. I don't think that these relationships and the feelings of belonging are predestinated, I think they develop over time and they make the difference which can be illustrated through the distinction between "the "tourist" and "the local". I would like to work in other countries as well, but I don't feel it as a necessity. I feel that I have so much things to do at home".

## **New projects and contemporary Croatian photography**

The architecture in public spaces is definitely a long-term topic for Bojan. The photographer is currently working on new projects in this area and also on another project related to industrialization and environmental issues. The sources from different photographic archives are coming into play in his work and that makes a process really interesting.

You can continue to learn more about contemporary Croatian photography on the curated website called [Contemporary Croatian Photography](#), which Bojan shared with us: "... [it] presents the work of many authors that I admire, such as [Hrvoje Slovinc](#), [Marko Ercegović](#) and [Boris Cvjetanović](#)... If I had to choose one person, it would be [Ana Opalić](#). From the young generations of photographers, I would recommend [Glorija Lizde](#)".