

Most na Kalemegdanu Bridge Collaboration

Since July 2008, Serbian Sculptor Mrdjan Bajic and British sculptor Richard Deacon have been working together on the design of a footbridge at Belgrade Fortress, an idea that originated in 2006. The bridge will connect the historic site over the busy road, Bulevar vojvode Bojovica, to the promenade by the river Sava.

Prefaces are accustomed to bridging gaps; temporal, physical and conceptual. In this case it seems that the gaps are productive rather than problematic. Two artists meet while teaching in Paris and Belgrade. The British sculptor is later invited to make a project at Belgrade Fortress and sees it as a opportunity to work again with the sculptor from Belgrade. This context, and the suggested site, produce the idea of the bridge. If it is built the bridge will be genuinely transformative, altering the routes which people trace through the city everyday. In this interview Mrdjan Bajic speaks of his pleasure in finding that he and Richard Deacon both identify the same 'good structures'. He dares to suggest that there is an objective visual language which can overcome national barriers. This language uses the 'good shapes' of which the bridge is one.

Penelope Curtis, Henry Moore Institute

Fedja Klikovac: I feel very privileged to have been able to follow your work since July 2008 on this very unique project and I'm hoping that we are going to be able to show, in our exhibition in April, not only the final proposals for the bridge, but the whole process of making. Your artistic languages are very different, but I never felt at any time that it was in the way of you working together in the last eight months. Mrdjan, I know that you always admired Richard Deacon's work, and we all looked at this generation of British sculptors around Lisson Gallery. Could you tell me what does it mean to you working with Richard on a complex project like this?

Mrdjan Bajic: In this entire complex project – no matter how far we shall get with its realization – there are, for me, several extraordinarily exciting aspects. Certainly, first of all, the strange situation which gave me the opportunity to work on a joint project with Richard Deacon, who has been existing in my professional universe ever since the mid eighties. Someone whose work I esteem infinitely for the coherence being constantly renewed with a research zeal, for his production and visible work energy and for his implicit struggle for each new piece to be particular. The fact that Richard is one of the most consistent contemporary sculptors and artists in no way depends on me mentioning it here.

Now that I have met Richard I esteem him ever so immensely for his human coherence, concentration and simplicity. By all means, this cooperation is a great honor and an invaluable experience for me: for, to whatever end this project comes, there is a very important aspect of a

deep human, professional exchange, based on mutual identification of shaping necessity we were looking for, while we moved through the complex layers of historical, sociological and plastic shaping that Kalemegdan Bridge Collaboration demanded. Joint identification of good structures and development of thoughts by means of displacing, adding, disassembling, silence, throwing ideas, i.e. by simple studio work, moving, measuring. This indulging 'the hunger' for good shapes and the joy of identification when these good shapes emerge, apparently, from 'nowhere', makes me more confident than ever that our profession has its modern version of primordially constructed language which is not only a matter of personal creative insight, but has the weight of an intensive, real, even objective, communication.

FK: Richard, I know that you like collaborating with other artists but working on a design of the bridge in Belgrade it must be a different experience?

Richard Deacon: I didn't set out to design a bridge! The idea grew out of working with Mrdjan whilst he was teaching in Paris and whilst I was teaching in Belgrade. We were colleagues and I really enjoyed the contact we had and really respected Mrdjan's work and the warmth that he showed in his approach to students. Whilst I was in Belgrade in 2006 I was asked some questions about the restoration of the sculpture by Mestrovic in Kalemegdan Fortress. Then it became more a question of whether I thought it was possible to produce something for the Park. To me it was obvious that I needed a partner who was rooted in Belgrade. And since I had become very interested in the work of Mrdjan Bajic it was a chance to prolong a dialogue. The process where we came up with the idea of a bridge developed from us beginning to think about working together and trying to agree on a location. The bridge grew out of exploring the park and beginning to think about how you get into it. Of course when you say it like that then the Park becomes a metaphor for the shared zone, the area where artists put their boundaries to one side and promenade in a different space and building a bridge is thus a methodology for getting in.

MB: When we were walking around Kalemegdan for the first time, looking for the possible joint project, the novelty of the situation was in the fact that we had neither a defined task nor a given location, but we did an utopian search for a place of a possible plastic remake of an exciting and already shaped locality such as Kalemegdan, which is of essential importance to Belgrade in every sense. Although at the time, our proposition was just a suggestion and far from the idea of a possible realization, I think that we both wanted to act with great responsibility with regards to the Kalemegdan landscape. The Kalemegdan Fortress is a field of already formed micro-wholes. Therefore, the most interesting operation field seemed to be the line – the thoroughfare that, as a frustrating border cuts off the park from the river. That border is inscribed in the landscape's memory – a round about thoroughfare and a neglected, but still active railroad – are the memory metonymy of this landscape, which dates back as far as ancient Rome. It continues as a centuries long war border between the West and East at the time of Turkish and Austrian empires. The memory of the border which, at that very point, ominously approaches Belgrade with each great war in the 20th century. Today – also a dividing line between two totally different architectural tissues of the same city, the line filled with the traffic roar, between still not merged Old and New, East and West.

Perhaps, this is why it seemed that the historic and topographic link was at that point. An opening gesture. The link that can easily connect this dividing line. May be this is a passage through which this passerella can bring Kalemegdan Fortress to its once open quays, to the river

which will bring friends. May be it is there, on a banal metaphoric level, where the crossing over the border which separates the very urban core of the big city from big rivers coming from far away, is located. A symbolic place across reservation, reticence, and caution. Or, just a simple tourist attraction. Everybody we have talked to at the beginning and explained the project, was happy at the thought of an uninterrupted passage that will take you from the city center, from Knez Mihajlova Street to the river in ten minutes. This joy of recognizing it as other people had, convinced us that we have found something. It was now the trickier question that remained. How?

FK: Whenever we went to the site there were people there trying to cross that busy road (Bulevar vojvode Bojovica) cutting access to the river. The trajectory that you've chosen for the bridge coincides with an already unofficial demarcated route to the river. Central Belgrade, although being on the confluence of these two big rivers, is somehow still detached from them. This bridge would create a major improvement to this section of the city. But just to go back to Richard's remark of 'building the bridge' as 'methodology of getting in...' Processes here are becoming a creative force and they will become autonomous works of art. For the two of you, the site has become the shared zone and what you also share as sculptors, is an interest in a variety of materials, but you are treating them in your very own way. Are there going to be lots of different materials involved in this project and how would they relate to the Fortress and what Mrdjan said: '...totally different architectural tissues of the same city'

RD: Here we are on the verge of working together and never having done it before, but respecting each other and circling the Park like it's the Promised Land trying to find a way in – and all the entrances are blocked! Except for one, but you've still got to cross a busy street to get there. Deciding to build a bridge is not so illogical.

In the proposal there are many different materials, when you build anything there are always lots of materials involved, and, yes, epochs have material vocabularies so that the fortress is clearly a wood and stone sort of place in parts and a brick place in others and the Park is sometimes grassy, sometimes tarmac and, interestingly, sometimes marble. The zoo is concrete and steel and the railway tunnel structure is concrete, the waterside is stone and has an the interesting edge. The bridge can incorporate some of these vocabularies and also use them – when the bridge enters the fortress it crosses a boundary, where it touches by the river is an entrance portal.

MB: The use of materials comes also through the gradual inner shape construction. In this particular project, the situation is complex because, coming down from the fortress towards the river, this shape undergoes a constant transformation of the dominant inner requests. In the first part, inside the fortress and immediately next to it, it must be a discreet construction which restores a non existing road, and which is, as far as its shape is concerned, completely subordinated to the inventory of the fortress itself. From the moment when the shape charges towards the river bank it is, first of all, an efficient platform used to walk on, over the street, the railroad, through tree branches, over roofs, to enable the person walking over this patched landscape, to reach the river. On the very river bank, this shape must be a lift and a descend; a landmark and a sculpture, and all this at the same time. These are the dominant inner requests the materials will come from. But the first thing to do was to define those dominant requests.

RD: Of course I don't know that I think the materials should be fit for

purpose or ready to do the job or have any truth in them. The bridge is constrained by the requirement of structure and that has been hard to stick with since all the time the things that we have been working on are doing the job as well as looking the part. Maybe the columns don't all have to be the same? Be great if one was marble! And another was a tree trunk.

FK: Yes, that would look great, each column being in a different material: curved brick, marble, tree trunk etc as I think that the bridge shouldn't be a 'monolithic' structure due to the nature of the site. Could you tell me more about the end of the bridge by the river which is looking like the most complex part of it...the purpose of the tower etc...?

RD: There are limits as to how steep you can make the slope of a walkway and since the bridge is connecting two parts with a vertical separation of 9.5m we need a longer walkway than the distance between the two points, so the walkway has to spiral around – or else cross to the other side of the Sava River! Not everyone wants to make the walk, so a lift is incorporated from the riverside up to the higher level of the walkway. Both of these constraints – the lift and the spiral around – provide expressive opportunities for the construction. First in the shape, profile and supports of the curving walkway surrounding the lift shaft and, secondly in the lift shaft itself, a column supporting a free sculptural element that echoes Mestrovic's iconic 'Victor' on the promontory of Kalemegdan.

These two elements, both functional and expressive touch at the upper exit from the lift, though there is no structural need for them to physically be connected. Here you might say that, between the base and the superstructure there is a caesura, chiasma, suture, fissure, displacement, sidestep or swerve. The base, with its erratic columns, supports the (functional) walkway and the (functioning) lift shaft supports a monument perched on top. However where 'Victor' stands atop his column, you would say that here the lift shaft pushes the monument up, posted like something on stick, the projections reaching down towards the leaning columns of the spiral ramp. At night this object may light (powered perhaps by its own internal photo-voltaic cells) and signifying the place itself and its own autonomy.

MB: There is really nothing I can add to Richard's precise description. Though there are some things that have not been resumed in words, we have been communicating through forms, and that is, probably, where, the impression of total agreement with this description, comes from. The only thing I would like to add is, that, during the process of looking for the solution as a whole, we have began with technically complex parts of the structure, which, due to their utilitarian purpose, have many constrains, and, as for the perching monument we have several solutions, but they will be the subject of work and definition at our final pre-exhibition séance.

FK: I was surprised at how few remarks the structural engineers had when they visited the studio in November to look at your work. You have both made sculptures on a large scale but the bridge is rather different...or not? After all this is a structure which will have utilitarian purpose.

MB: Of course, there is always a lot of engineering work on a sculpture, when you think out the construction from the inside. In this sense, this work was not very much different from some of the previous ones, except, of course, in its complexity, size and a great responsibility. What were very different were the importance and the influence of other people during the very conception, and the first notions of the work.

Those small weavings of exchanges while forming an idea. Usually, you are alone with your idea and are trying to follow its development. This time, this is not only a cooperation between two artists, which has been complexly functioning with great intensity – but there are also other people, colleagues, heritage people, engineers, passers-by and collaborators, who were helping from the beginning, in most various ways, in the realization, and, in fact, participated, with their attitudes and remarks, in the development of operation method and of the idea itself. The discussions with you, Fedja, who were with us all the time, with Dragan Djordjevic who was simultaneously working on 3D images, with Vlada Jovanovic who made a fantastic situation model for us, and particularly with Marina Andric who was determined to bring this project to this possible stage, makes the foundation of this project.

RD: The question implies that function creates structure and that utilitarian purpose equals utilitarian structure. But think about the opposite, that non-utilitarian purpose equals non-utilitarian structure. Does that mean a structure that doesn't work? In which case it just falls down, or are you wanting to highlight the tougher rules that structures like bridges have to pass? These we have always known about and wanted to keep abreast of so that as the design progressed we were confident that it would work, rather than us having worked in isolation and then finding that whatever we proposed needed drastic modification. I should also say that, from my experience, structural engineers are, in general, amongst the most open and least conservative group of professionals that you are likely to come across – they love challenges!

FK: It was interesting seeing how you started, I imagined that you would start with a dialogue by drawing on the same pieces of paper, but it didn't happen like that, you were doing your drawings separately, you Richard would do very precise architectural elevations and turn them into cardboard models and Mrdjan with his expressive freehand... and then you would meet at the topographical model of the site and discuss it...but there was more model making than drawing, what's your relation to it in general, is this the way you usually work on your sculptures too?

MB: I had no idea how this process would go on. And the work procedure was formed independently and logically. There was no need to discuss who was going to do what – we simply started working in the way each of us seems to be working usually. Perceiving field – situation model – gave visible answers that we have, I think, rather unanimously recognized. The advantage of this process was in the fact that we did not have an explicit time limit and that, after the séances of intensive work for a week, there were long breaks which were helpful for shaping identification.

RD: We were not starting from zero – Mrdjan and I had done a fair bit of walking around Kalemegdan and made some hesitant steps – including looking at standard proposals for such a bridge and, more fruitfully, spending a lunchtime sketching possibilities on a napkin in a Parisian cafeteria. But answering your question, Mrdjan seems good at drawing what he is thinking about in ways that I am not – although I do a lot of drawing. I don't like what happens when I try to draw what I imagine, it's mostly pretty dull. I'm much happier with model making and manipulating a three dimensional form. For most commissions I tend to work directly on a topographical model and for a lot of sculpture I just start.

FK: We mentioned collaboration before and from the beginning this was

the title for this project. Whatever life your ideas will have after April's show, the collaboration and process of working together will remain as a wonderful experience.

MB: Besides trust and equality, it was so generously given and besides the professional, deep communication necessary to overcome a multilayer enterprise – and I have already mentioned both of them – with time and progress this cooperation got yet another kind of weight. (Now when we are making a film with Dusan Ercegovic Djole and Neca we can see a lot of material, decisions, versions and abandoned routes we have considered so far). Yes, really, who knows what will happen with this project eventually. Everything is possible. It is possible that all this remains as a trace of a utopian enterprise. But the unrepeatable thing is that working on this, we believed that this bridge is going to overpass what is separated, we believed that plastic shaping can change social and historic tissue, and that simple and logic gestures have their weight logic world we are the part of. The two of us, so different, with totally different experiences, personal histories and cultural forming, could, fully convinced, share this idea. Here we are now, trying to make this conviction catching.

RD: Marina Andric and all of the people we have met at Kalemegdan have really supported this from the beginning – they have been fantastic. I do think the project will get built – I am not envisaging any other outcome and I am ready to work for it, though I know it is not going to be easy. It will be a great thing to do and a really good reason, amongst several others, for me to keep coming back to Belgrade!

The exhibition will be open at City of Belgrade Assembly and ULUS
Gallery, Knez Mihajlova 37

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