

Nika Grabar: Landscape Windows Wallpaper

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interior (adj.) – late 15c., from Middle French *intérieur* and directly from Latin *interior* “inner, interior, middle,” comparative adjective of *inter* “within” (see *inter-*). Meaning “of the interior parts of a country” is from 1777; meaning “internal affairs of a country or state” (as in U.S. *Department of the Interior*) is from 1838. *Interior decoration* first attested 1807. *Interior design* from 1927.

interior (n.) – “part of a country distant from the coast,” 1796, from *interior* (adj.); meaning “inside of a building or room” is from 1829.¹

“The Other”

In 1885, when Ernst, Prince of Windisch-Graetz, had a two-storey villa built on his estate on Lake Bled, could he have imagined that in 2012 a video would be made at this location for the Venice Biennale? Perhaps the leap through time from Prince Ernst to Jasmina Cibic is too great. But I expect the prince would find it difficult even to imagine that, in 1934, the villa’s new owner, King Alexander I of Yugoslavia would be assassinated in Marseilles. Or that, after the villa’s redesign in 1946 in a totally new shape, it would become an elite destination for the socialist government, a place Tito enjoyed visiting. Even if it were possible to meet the prince in some neutral time chamber, it would be difficult to discuss the full complexity of the situation with him – speculating about property values would (most likely) be pointless. His era had neither the concepts nor the related words needed to make him understand what had happened over the past one hundred and twenty-eight years on this piece of land.

In all probability, the prince would find the political upheavals difficult to grasp. But what if we shortened the time gap? What would happen if, as in some Borges story, the architect Vinko Glanz, in his mature years, found himself sitting on a bench in the Villa Bled park next to his younger self?² Would the older man be able to explain to the younger the story of his life in a few

¹ Douglas Harper, Online Etymology Dictionary, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=interior&allowed_in_frame=0 (accessed 1 April 2013).

² Vinko Glanz (b. Kotor, Montenegro, 1902, d. Ljubljana, 1977) was the architect responsible for the renovation of Villa Bled.

sentences? It would be harder if the meeting was between Glanz at the age of ten and Glanz at the age of seventy. Within this time frame, the location would have been part of five different countries – at least in name. (About this, too, much could be debated.) If, however, it was the twenty-five-year-old Glanz meeting his fifty-year-old self, things would be a little easier. In that case, the younger man would already be familiar with the notion of a state system collapsing.

In one of Borges's stories there is a critical moment when an older Borges, after presenting a string of persuasive facts from his own life, tries to convince a younger Borges of the truth of his story. The younger man counters with the idea that their encounter is just a dream, that he is dreaming his older self. The older man responds: "Our obvious duty, meanwhile, is to accept the dream just as we accept the world and being born and seeing and breathing," and the conversation carries on.³

The younger Glanz dreamed of building ships, but he did not finish the shipbuilding programme in Zagreb. After completing the architecture programme under Plečnik at the University of Ljubljana, he dreamed of designing houses. He dreamed less about his military service in Sarajevo in 1929. In 1930, he joined the Technical Department of the Drava Banovina in Ljubljana, and after the Second World War he assumed the role of architect in the Slovenia Project; later he was reassigned to the Executive Council of the Slovenian government. The spaces he designed and that we walk through today were at one point in his life nothing more than an idea, a vision.

Jasmina,

You ask me about Villa Bled. When you were setting up the frames of the video, you were framing a space Glanz designed in 1946. When he was drawing up plans for the renovation, he was forty-four years old. You have put his character in the story. He and Linda are exploring big topics – architecture, ideology, the question of representation, ornamentation, historicization, reinterpretation. But it is fascinating to try to unravel such questions in architecture when we come across some exquisite detail or surprising view. The reason behind a discussion on architecture, then, is hidden in our spatial experience – when we take hold of a handle and open a window, when we push open a heavy door, when we follow paving stones and, turning a corner, discover a façade. An architectural idea affects us because it works even after the ideological paradigms have shifted several times.

For many years Villa Bled was an inaccessible location, closed to the eyes of the public. We cannot say this of all of Glanz's projects. After all, he designed the Slovenian parliament building. But when I look

³ Jorge L. Borges, "The Other," *The Book of Sand*, tr. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Penguin Books, London, 1979, p. 5.

at the main façade of the parliament, I see an ambiguity. The entrance alludes to socialism, but I cannot associate it with socialist realism. If I take a step back, how should I describe the building? As a four-storey building with a stone façade and a portal of bronze sculptures? Or should I talk about its style, ornament, volume; about the relationship between façade and portal? Is the essence of the façade expressed in the frame, the latticework, or the sculptures? What should I base my decision on? Don't misunderstand me, we can debate all these things a long time. But I think that at this point, we share a doubt: we wonder about the context, about the preconditions that made its existence possible; we question the histories we are supposed to accept as self-evident.

We were both fascinated by the transcripts of the debates about how the artworks would be put on display; we noticed the different variations for the entrance portal. The syntax, the words of the transcripts come from the past. The façade and frescoes illustrate this same space in a different time. I remember how the phrases resonated in me. I found myself thinking about that distant place and time. Today we have only a vague memory of the language spoken in communist Yugoslavia. The Berlin Wall has fallen. We can barely recognize the words anymore and, even more importantly, what we do NOT remember is when this syntax became inscribed with a new ideology. How, then, should we talk about the parliament?

“Politics functions in the medium of language,” says Boris Groys. “It operates with words – with arguments, programs and petitions, but also with commands, prohibitions, resolutions and decrees.” How you speak about communism depends on what you take communism to mean. For Groys, communism is “the project of subordinating the economy to politics in order to allow politics to act freely and sovereignly. [...] The communist revolution is the transcription of society from the medium of money to the medium of language.”⁴

The economy, on the other hand (says Groys), “functions in the medium of money. It operates with numbers. [...] In capitalism, the ultimate confirmation or refutation of human action is not linguistic, but economic: it is expressed not with words but with numbers. The force of language as such is thereby annulled.” And what does this have to do with us? “So long as humans live under the conditions of the capitalist economy,” Groys stresses, “they remain fundamentally mute because their fate does not speak to them. If a human is not addressed by his or her fate, then he or she is also incapable of answering it.”⁵

What do these words mean for us today? Can we see visual art as something that transcends both verbal and numerical constructs? How? Why should this be important? Why should it be important that, a hundred years ago, the site of today's parliament was in the Austro-Hungarian Empire? Why should it be important that we have known life under three different political orders, have used four different currencies and experienced two different political systems without ever having moved? Is this something extraor-

⁴ Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, Verso, London and New York, 2009, pp. xv–xvi.

⁵ *Ibid.*

dinary? Is it something we need to talk about when we interpret art and architecture? Why should yellowed transcripts and other documents be important to you?

The Archive

Meanwhile, cities continue to connect us in stories. If we do not know each other, if a generation does not know the generation that came before it, then our history will become the history of someone else, of some “other”. The stories we live with are, simply, important – they are ours; they count. We reach them through words, not money. And if something is important, then we have to research it; we have to ground our sensibilities somewhere, in a particular space and time; we have to talk about it. And this is where archives come in. Charles Merewether describes the archive as “a repository or ordered system of documents and records, both verbal and visual, the foundation from which history is written”. One of the defining characteristics of the modern era is, he says, “the increasing significance given to the archive as the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered”.⁶ Today, as citizens of the Republic of Slovenia, we research things in a very different way than we once did. Should we go to the archives in Belgrade, in Vienna, in Ljubljana?

Any research on Glanz might easily concern all three cities as well as the political transformations I have mentioned. In the 1990s, the process was seeped in the traumatic experience of the wars of that decade. Today’s Europe is thus the Europe of those who (on the face of it) continue to live in the same system as always and those who have had to deal with a transition from one system to another. Nevertheless, in both cases, the economy of the free market has in concrete ways shaken the foundations of the (social) state. The architecture built during the period of socialism in Slovenia expressed strong ideas about how to construct a neighbourhood, how to create the image of the social state. At the same time, it created hidden corners – like Villa Bled – which we should not forget.

The Dilemmas of Representation

When we first spoke via Skype, Jasmina’s interest was centred on the Ljubljana Fair project – Glanz had won the competition in 1939, but, for unknown reasons, the project was not realized to his designs. During

⁶ Charles Merewether, “Introduction – Art and the Archive,” in *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether, Whitechapel, London, and MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2006, p. 10.

the war, the fairgrounds – a space for international commerce – were appropriated by the Fascist administrative apparatus for the purposes of military storage and the exhibition pavilions were ultimately destroyed. Just a few years after the war ended, Glanz began working on today's parliament building, as well as many other projects of a public nature. If we try to categorize Glanz's work in terms of the established canons, some of his projects get us into trouble precisely because of an architectural expression that to some extent finds its reference in history or in the socialist order.

Can we understand Glanz's exploration of architectural language as a modern phenomenon? In Glanz's day, the process of industrialization ran parallel to the process of creating a modern state within the socialist community. The environments Yugoslav architects designed, which we see in old photographs or on the covers of old magazines, remind us of similar images beyond the country's western borders. Despite the "capitalist/socialist" division of the world, modern architectural expression was not out of reach in Yugoslavia, but it was based on a different reality.

One consideration relating to Glanz's legacy that is worth pointing out stems from projects that were hidden, removed from the public space, and in the end often forgotten by architectural history and theory. The spaces of the former bourgeoisie that fell into the party's hands are the other side of the coin – a contradictory truth for the context of socialism and for the question of representation. How, indeed, does one present exclusive locations as representative for the socialist elite of Yugoslavia? This was the dilemma Glanz faced when he redesigned Villa Bled. Elements that bore the memory of the bourgeois past were removed – whether this was decoration or some meaningless association. But how to create a monumental expression, a monumental frame? This question remained.

Landscape

A house can be magnified or reduced by its surroundings. Glanz knew how to take advantage of the setting to create a monumental effect in architecture. By employing classical principles, he articulated the architectural extensions and created a coherent spatial story that defined a frame. Within this frame, art could didactically illustrate the social order in the name of which the space had been (re-)created. Heroic scenes of resistance, the fruits of the homeland, scenes from history – these make up the frieze that wraps around the central interiors designed for the political rituals of the new era.

In her video, Jasmina shows Glanz with his dilemmas about ornamentation and monumentality, about affinity and opening the architecture to the landscape. The dilemmas that opened up in his work were justified by the political transformation. This is an architecture that speaks of what people were doing at the time, what they admired, what they looked at and identified with,

what they prided themselves on, and also what they destroyed. In an interior not far from Santo Stefano in Venice, at Calle Malipiero 30124, where the Slovenian Pavilion is situated, two monumental images in motion are on display. Both reveal in words and pictures the context of Glanz's architecture, which formed the setting for decisions about the kind of environment the community would make for itself in the new state.

Today, the view of Bled Island is virtually the same as it was a century ago. But everything around it, the context, has changed. Indeed, this is what now allows us to see the spaces of Villa Bled captured in Jasmina's frames. We can hear the discussion about which artworks to choose for the parliament because it is possible to research archives that were once inaccessible. Our experience thus extends to a now-distant space and time, before the latest new beginning, and (re-)connects with processes that have been forgotten, overlooked, not spoken of. The landscape, as we understand it after viewing the videos, is anything but a picturesque topography or an attractive postcard. It is saturated with the language and politics of space.

Windows

For a community based in part on the gesture of resisting Fascism, it is difficult even today to accept the fact that in 1933 there were Hitler sympathizers living on its territory. *Anophthalmus hitleri* is an endemic insect, which Jasmina has researched and included in a few of her projects. It still causes embarrassment for Slovenian entomologists. It seems that changing the name of an animal is much harder than changing the name of a person, or even, as it seems in our case, a country. During the time when the endemic beetle with the objectionable name has continued to live underground in Slovenian caves, the surface has been renamed several times. What, then, does it mean that, in one and the same location, we can hear words and decisions about the construction of the Slovenian parliament, while the wallpaper is covered in drawings of the *Anophthalmus hitleri* beetle? Who is representing whom? And what happens when the Villa Bled frieze becomes part of a video, and this video, part of a Venetian interior?

The videos represent windows to a different space and time. But whether imagined or real, windows, with the shadow of their bars, make us think of the landscape the view might have opened onto. It's not in Venice; it's somewhere else. Thus, in the interior, Jasmina's own spatial story is installed, and this story creates new cause-and-effect connections between the interior of the pavilion, words, and images. If Glanz used his architecture to define a frame for the artworks of the national community, then Jasmina has put architecture in the frame of a video, has put a landscape in the interior of a pavilion, and put the politics of the past in a medium of the present.

Here an inescapable problem arises. The space of the pavilion, after all, is not a neutral site. In the context of Venice, it has clearly defined coordinates, and these influence the experience of the artwork – the question of its representation and perception. The spatial context is not necessarily something one doubts about. In her work, Jasmina doubts precisely about the space which, through her interventions, become a work of art. The current address of the Slovenian Pavilion in Venice is outside the Giardini – a consequence of the collapse of Yugoslavia that placed Slovenian artists in a new field of reference. The interior of a private house, which in 1998 was redesigned as a gallery interior, shares the space in front of it – the street – with residents and passers-by. As visitors approach the gallery, paintings from the parliament’s art collection greet them – still lifes in many variations. In front of them, words; in the background, a wallpaper. Jasmina has established a direct contact with the interior: she has marked it with a wallpaper that is hardly neutral.

Wallpaper

Years ago I was sitting in a bar with a friend; our debate had gone on for a long time. After a while, he looked around the room and said: “Are you aware that there’s oil in every one of these things? There’s even oil in the water we’re drinking.” That’s where the conversation ended. When I look at the *Anophthalmus hitleri* wallpaper, I think the same thing. There’s ideology in every atom of the space. But to determine where this space begins and ends is more difficult. Jasmina’s intervention draws on the space and gives back to it. It’s impossible to mark out the boundary line of its “parcel of land”, so Jasmina defines it with wallpaper. Where the architect’s idea begins, so does hers – with paper. She pastes over the entire space. The wall becomes a battlefield; she pastes on it, draws on it, looks out and in from it, at the landscape, the house, through windows with bars or without them. This thin layer of paper, which she wraps everywhere throughout the space, covers even the furniture.

The landscapes demarcated by our living rooms each have their own pathological cramps. They originate in part from the pathologies of the past and the absence of ideologies of the present. The story is quite similar wherever you go in the world: clusters of residential/office towers or other buildings, paying off thirty-year mortgages, interiors that need to be filled with objects. It used to be you had to conquer new territories, new landscapes; today, to ensure economic growth, you have to conquer interiors. In such a state of affairs, then, what is the meaning of “the fruits of our land” or “for our economy and culture,” as Jasmina presents these notions?

The Venice pavilions are not empty spaces, nor are they white cubes. They place us in a schizophrenic position – they create a context we cannot identify with even though this is ultimately what we want. This context, the frame of the gallery space, defines the lens of cultural production. And Jasmina looks through this frame back at the place her assignment came from, at the address Šubičeva 4, where the parliament building stands. Through the “wallpapered” interior we look at the past with the video, and at the landscape that defines the context we live in. And as we do so, we may ask ourselves: what would we say to ourselves if, as in Borges’s story, we met our twenty year older self on a bench with a view of Bled Island? Would we be able to understand the future we are creating at this very moment?

Nika Grabar