

URBAN AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF TOTAL ENGAGEMENT. CASE STUDY KRAK

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Center for contemporary culture KRAK, in northwestern Bosnian city Bihać, was established in 2020 as a result of endeavors in the field of critical theory, art/design practice, and civic engagement generated in the last several years around the Department of Textile Design at the University of Bihać and City Gallery. It is an independent and autonomous space that emerged due to continued scientific observations and practical implementations. Its conceptual context is framed by post-socialist and post-industrial characteristics — unsuccessful and painful transformation from Yugoslav socialism into post-Yugoslav neoliberal capitalism. The prominent marks of that period are conflicted relations, depopulation, poverty, and trauma.

KRAK focuses on contemporary culture, including visual arts, design, and social theory, as a frame for proactive practice. It is imagined as a participative project with different protagonists who use the tools of social engagement and urban transformation to foster the process of learning, informal education, and cultural exchange. KRAK is about to launch its first program for 2021, where questions of migrations, identity, public space, and visual culture intend to be bespoke and articulated.

After years of neglect and after several prompt discursive actions organized in the Kombiteks Workers' Club in recent years, the Council of the City of Bihać as an owner, handed this space to the Revizor Foundation to open in its premises the center for contemporary culture called KRAK.¹ The crucial event that served as a booster to conceptualize the former Workers' Club toward KRAK center was the exhibition *Artefacts of a Future Past* in 2017. It was realized in the framework of the two-day symposium *Industrial Heritage in Bihać between Reality and Vision* that aimed at tackling a series of "complex issues of urban planning, architectural, aesthetic, ecological and social context of abandoned industrial facilities" with a potential projection of the picture of "creation or recreation of spatial contents that open the possibility for discussion about social engagement, social practices and cultural activism in our community."² This symposium

was organized as a part of the Design and Crisis course conducted at the Textile Department of the University in Bihać within the summer semester of 2017.³

The exhibition was documented within the same-named publication published by Foundation Revizor in May 2020. The publication was produced three years after realizing the eponymous exhibition, and when the space where the exhibition was held, the Kombiteks Workers' Club, experienced an entirely different destiny. Catalog and documentation dimensions have granted the publication the character of the manifesto for the future center KRAK. It is the best way to interpret the works that were exhibited there in March 2017. What was on the horizon of expectation in the process of conceptualizing the organization and set-up of the exhibition has become, two years later, an integral part of immediate experience.

With the transformation of the space mentioned above, preconditions for a new beginning based on heritage have been met. At the same time, the publication served, in addition to being a catalog and documentation, for repositioning — from the newly created situation — the field of interpretation for the reading of individual works, the exhibition as the whole, and the social context in which it was realized. From this perspective, the exhibition can be understood as an articulation of guidelines in the long-term consideration of the programmatic development of the space after its revitalization and as its cultural upgrade, art, social responsibility, and creation of the community.

The exhibition *Artefacts of a Future Past* is a collection of objects with a documentary, artistic and engaged character that initiates discussion of a layered interpretative spectrum related to the complex process of an unsuccessful transition from the self-management socialism into a market-oriented liberal and multi-party system. The exhibition comprises a wide range of artifacts — from artworks to conceptual designs and finished designs to industrial artifacts dating back to the second half of the 20th century. Brought together in one place in the form of an exhibition, and re-contextualized through the prism of the two-day symposium *Industrial Heritage in Bihać between Reality and Vision*, these artifacts represent an attempt to map the phenomena of the industrial and the post-industrial era, juxtaposing them in a new critical perspective with an emphasis on the local and regional visual art and visual culture, and in today's social context.

The exhibition *Artefacts of a Future Past* attempts to reconstruct the consciousness and memory that encompass the period of late socialism, on the one hand, and the time of the multi-party system of the capitalist Bosnia Herzegovina since the 1990s until the present time, on the other. The exhibition is also an attempt to initiate a new understanding and reading of the industrial heritage of Bihać, which is expected to yield, in the long run, and from a critically focused perspective, new guidelines and new results in this field. A transformation of what was once the Kombiteks Workers' Club with the exhibition *Artefacts of a Future Past*, as well as the recent establishment of the KRAK Center for Contemporary Culture, guarantees the success of previously undertaken activities and of the long series of discursive contents that have marked the industrial heritage as the treasury of great material and the intellectual potential. Culture, art, and contemporary curating practices play an essential role in mediation and education. Their discursive character and activist tone are of great relevance for a wide variety of socially engaged processes.⁴

On the other hand, Design and Crisis — which served as a platform of total engagement — is a teaching course at the Department of Textile Design of the

University of Bihać, that in 2016 won Patterns Lectures Award and in summer semester 2017 had its official premiere. With more than twenty guest lectures, several roundtables, symposiums, public presentations, exhibitions, design open calls, and diverse public actions, Design and Crisis was able to transform the academic and cultural landscape in the city of Bihać, involving public institutions, artists, designers, educators, activists, and others. From the recent point of view, Design and Crisis exceeded the expectations by the number of involved actors and articulated impact in the academia and society. Several publications and videos published pledge for booming and comprehensive approach Design and Crisis could have at the local and regional level.

Besides the video reportage "Design and Crisis," which has been released in January 2019 covering the project in-depth, and aforementioned publication *Artefacts of a Future Past*, additional books were published: *Culture Battlefield Bihać #DefendGallery* (Udruženje Abc, Bihać 2017) documenting civic defense forces against the initiative of the city's mayor to evict the City Gallery from its premises and *Design and Crisis* (Buybook, Sarajevo 2020) containing research papers of ten authors from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia. It is to claim that the most crucial impact Patterns Lectures course Design and Crisis made out of the classroom is transforming the fore-mentioned Club into Centre for contemporary culture KRAK.

Trigger for designing the sillaby for Design and Crisis emerged out of necessity to critically reflect upon dynamic industrial past and practical reason when back in the 1970's Department of Textile Design was founded for the sake of local textile industrial production. The fact that the Department of Textile Design still exists while the textile industry several decades ago vanished is an intriguing moment for discursive reflection upon the subject.



Kuma International summer school from Sarajevo visits KRAK, 2020

The KRAK Centre for Contemporary Culture is still an idea *in statu nascendi*. It relates to the administrative takeover of what once used to be the Kombiteks Workers' Club, its architectural renovation, and its long-term opening for the public. The name KRAK has emerged as an acronym for "Kombiteks Workers' Club" (Klub radnika Kombiteksa). It points out the importance of cultivating local industrial heritage and workers' culture of Yugoslav self-management socialism. KRAK was conceptualized within the Revizor Foundation for Science and Arts based in Bihać and completed in cooperation with the Administration of the City of Bihać, as the owner of the premises, and the key sponsors — Open Society Foundation and its branch office in Sarajevo, Open Society Fund of Bosnia and Herzegovina and European Endowment for Democracy in Brussels.

Although Bihać has several cultural premises that are all organized as public institutions, the launch of an alternative and independent space in the field of culture represents a necessity of the city of Bihać and its urban life. KRAK is oriented and focused on contemporary cultural practices such as visual arts, architecture, design, performance, dance, music, science, alternative education and ecology, with interaction with the most diverse types of citizens and groups of different profiles.

The idea and motive for launching such a center stem from the country's specific political, social, and cultural conditions in the past two or three decades. The main features of this ambiance are its neglected industrial past, the conflict-related and post-traumatic experience, as well as depopulation. Of course, it is a perfect ambiance for the conceptualization of dynamic practices of total engagement by establishing an independent and critically oriented incubator within which creative ideas would be generated, where new generations of socially responsible individuals would get together. The KRAK Centre is a direct response to the ongoing crisis and social ambiance. It is a direct reference to the prevailing and aggravating circumstances facing Bosnian and Herzegovinian society today. Therefore, it can be understood as an experiment because there is a belief that culture, science, and arts can and need to be the driving force for social changes.

In the long run, KRAK wants to position itself as the platform for alternative learning, collaboration, and coexistence, focusing on contemporary artistic strategies and inventive cultural protocols. Participation of a broad spectrum of professionals and amateurs — artists, architects, designers, educators, lawyers, activists, gardeners, environmentalist, bee-keepers, as well as legal entities motivated to be profiled and engaged in socially responsible practices — is the key aspect and the fundamental premise of potential activity aimed at shaping a new social reality. KRAK wants to be tested as an incubator of a new social life.

KRAK's challenges are related to the urgent questions of the audience and its eventual importance in devastating social ambiance. *What is the role of culture and arts in post-genocide and traumatized society? To which extent can culture generate specific changes, and how to stimulate them?* — are some of the leading questions that serve as a motive for KRAK's mission.

1 — The decision of the Council of the City of Bihać, No. GV-23-4-218 of 24/12/2018.

2 — Irfan Hošić, *Industrijsko naslijeđe na prostoru Bihaća između realnosti i vizije*, in: *Dizajn i kriza*, 2017. https://dizajnikriza.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/industrijsko-naslijedje_mart-20171.pdf (Retrieved on 1/5/2019.)

3 — The course Design and Crisis won the Patterns Lectures award given by the Erste Foundation and WUS Austria.

4 — Irfan Hošić, *Retrografija dizajna*. Faculty of Technical Sciences of the University in Bihać, 2017.