Commodifying the contested:
Institutionalising "difficult" heritage of dictatorships in post-socialist Europe

Introduction

- Heritagization as a process of re-constructing the past from the contemporary point of view - political and social recognition of certain version of history
- Heritagization turns to be the most politically challenging when the underlying narrative of the past is uncomfortable, ambivalent or contested
- In the post-'89, the post-socialist identity (re)construction and nation building processes in Central and Eastern Europe, requiring political disqualification of history and memory of dictatorships, stood in uneasy dialogue with nostalgic resilience and commercial exploitation of totalitarian legacies
- Process of economic and tourist valorization of difficult heritage of dictatorships particularly ambiguous in the countries experiencing strong temporal discontinuity, as the collapse of communism was followed by territorial, national and identity reconfigurations

Hypothesis

- Heritagization of the legacies of World War II and communism in Europe negotiated through the complex interaction of the state intervention in transforming national identity and memory, and economic interests underlying the commercial exploitation of that same legacy.
- Commodification of heritage sites and objects a way to satisfy tourist demand for the stories of totalitarian regimes, without jeopardizing new identity landmarks and engaging into controversial debates: displacing historical reality of 'controversial' heritage sites (by stripping them out of their original context, and by giving objects entertaining rather than educational character)
- In the process, the uneasy and uncomfortable emotional potential related to the heritage of dictatorships negotiated through commercial mobilization and underlying memory narratives reshaped

Methods

- Historical analysis: heritage tourism and memory management in Europe since '89 (tracing changing attitudes towards commodification of history)
- Critical discourse analysis: analyzing context, cultural and political references, rhetorical mechanisms and implications - tracing how the heritage narrative is socially constructed
- Policy analysis: official publications (Government, Ministries of culture/tourism, expert reports, contracts, Urban Development Strategies, policy papers)
- Semi-structured interviews with representatives of government , investors and cultural workers (institutional level) – tracing decision-making processes and their underlying interests
- Case study survey – ethnographic observation of selected heritage sites/objects and the commemorative vs. commercial practices

Contribution

- Understanding the changing nature of memorial sites and commemorative practices in Europe and their urban dynamics
- Highlighting the varying fates of "difficult" heritage and helping to identify patterns or motivating factors that lead to these outcomes
- Understanding how the „uneasy" past was acknowledged and embedded into the official memory and heritage institutions and tourism practices
- Exploring the different commercial heritage strategies and different degrees of commodification and institutionalisation in « difficult » heritage sites
- Deploying heritage strategies at national and international level - memory and heritage management as a strategy of nation and urban (re)branding

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:
- *What different strategies have been employed in "rebranding" uncomfortable heritage in Europe, ensuring its preservation, but re-contextualising the narrative of the past?*
- *Which different social purposes the commodification processes are required to fulfill (to remember? to forget? to ensure financial sustainability? to change the meaning of the public space? to provide a sense making dialogue with the past?)?*
- *Could commercialisation, misinterpretation and disneyfication of contested heritage be interpreted as a strategy of avoiding or postponing the 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung' (coming to terms with past)?*
- *How these heritage processes transformed both mnemonic and urban landscape of European post-socialist cities?*
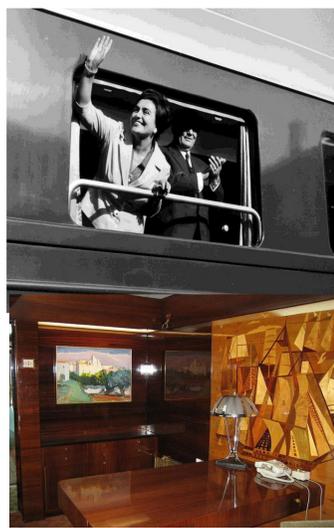
Tito's Blue Train: Symbol of socialist-Yugoslavia (where Tito used to host his most notable guests such as Queen Elizabeth, Indira Ghandi, Leonid Brezhnev) nowadays rented for marriage and birthday celebrations, promotional events (Windows 7 launching by Microsoft, Playboy birthday parties)

OBJECTIVE:
Analyse the resilience of urban structures in relation to the politics of the past in selected European cities, using "difficult" heritage as a lens through which the disruption of relationship between place and memory can be seized.
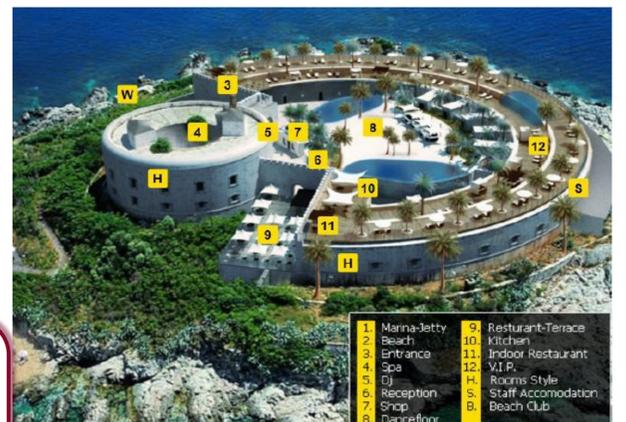
Fortress Mamula: Former concentration camp island (WWII) on Montenegrin coast turning into the luxurious seaside resort featuring exclusive rooftop nightclub, spa and former cells turned hotel rooms (Government pledging to "preserve historical character of the building" by forcing the investor to integrate a room of remembrance in their hotel

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