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The Interaction Between the Isar and the Urban Landscape of Shtip

Petar Namichev, Ekaterina Namiceva Todorovska and Vladica Nikolovska

Abstract

This study examines the interaction between the Memorial Complex to the Fallen Fighters of the Revolution in Shtip, designed by Bogdan Bogdanovic, and the topography of the Isar hill. While previous research has explored Bogdanovic's distinctive approach to memorial architecture, there has been limited focus on how his monuments engage with their immediate landscapes. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the spatial, material, and experiential aspects of the Shtip monument, emphasizing its integration with the natural contours of the terrain. Using a qualitative research methodology, the study combines site analysis, archival research, and theoretical interpretation. Field observations document visitor movement, lighting variations, and the relationship between the monument's form and the surrounding landscape. Archival sources, including architectural plans and Bogdanovic's writings, provide historical context, while phenomenological and landscape theories offer a framework for understanding the spatial experience of the site. The findings highlight how the monument's design fosters a ritualized engagement with the terrain, guiding visitors through a contemplative journey that enhances its commemorative function. By situating the Shtip memorial within broader discussions on landscape-based commemoration and site-specific design, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Bogdanovic's architectural philosophy. It demonstrates how the strategic placement of the monument, the use of natural materials, and the integration with the sloped terrain create a dynamic and immersive experience, reinforcing the monument's symbolic and emotional impact.

Keywords: urban landscape, topography, environmental Integration, cultural heritage, spatial interaction

Introduction

In the western part of Shtip, the rocky Isar hill rises prominently, reaching a height of 150 meters and surrounded by steep slopes and the natural boundaries of the Bregalnica and Otinja rivers. Its strategic position and elevation provide an ideal vantage point for overseeing and controlling access to the city. At its summit lies an elongated plateau with remnants of fortress walls ranging from 12 to 19 meters in height, testifying to the powerful medieval stronghold that once stood there. Historical records indicate that the fortress was built to protect the settlement at its base, undergoing continuous changes in rulers and architectural influences over the centuries. Known for its defensive towers and walls, the fortress gradually lost its significance with the advent of gunpowder weaponry and, like many other Macedonian fortifications, was eventually abandoned. The slopes of Isar are also home to three significant churches: St. Archangel Michael, St. John the Baptist, and the ruins of St. Vlasij. This study explores the cultural and historical significance of Isar as an invaluable part of Shtip's heritage and the broader regional history (Mikulčic, 1996).

Figure 1

A view of Isar Hill in Shtip shortly before World War II in the late 1930s.

Source: https://marh.mk

The Isar represents a unique fusion of natural landscape and cultural-historical heritage, where the hill's terrain and the monument's architecture intertwine to create deep meaning and symbolism. Situated on this hill, Bogdan Bogdanovic's monument highlights the connection between humanity and space, offering an interactive experience that goes beyond visual appreciation. This study aims to analyze the monument in relation to the terrain of the Isar, exploring its impact on visitors' experiences as well as its significance within the local and historical context. By examining the hill's rugged topography, the research will demonstrate how this natural foundation enhances the monument's symbolic presence. The study will explore aspects of movement and interaction that shape the experience of the monument, where the inclination of the terrain, the texture of the pathway, and the interplay of light and shadow create a ceremonial quality. This space offers a new way of perceiving and engaging with history, inviting visitors to participate both physically and emotionally, transforming the monument into a medium for reflection and historical connection. The Isar represents a unique fusion of natural landscape and cultural-historical heritage, yet its current state lacks inclusivity, limiting access and engagement for a diverse audience. The rugged terrain, steep pathways, and lack of infrastructure make the site difficult to navigate, particularly for individuals with mobility impairments, older visitors, and those with sensory sensitivities. Situated on this hill, Bogdan Bogdanovic's monument highlights the connection between humanity and space, yet its full impact is not equally accessible to all. This study aims to analyze the monument in relation to the terrain of the Isar, identifying the barriers to inclusivity and proposing strategies to enhance accessibility while preserving its historical and symbolic significance.

By critically examining the steep and rocky topography, the research will explore how the natural foundation of the Isar enhances the monument's presence but simultaneously creates challenges for access. The study will assess how the inclination of the terrain, the texture of the pathways, and the absence of assistive infrastructure, such as handrails, ramps, and clear signage, affect the visitor experience. The analysis will also explore how the interplay of light and shadow, along with the monument's layout, may present difficulties for those with visual impairments. To address these challenges, the research will propose solutions such as the introduction of accessible pathways, the use of tactile guides, improved lighting, and digital or augmented reality tools that allow remote or alternative engagement with the site. By considering inclusive design principles, the study will advocate for modifications that enable all individuals, regardless of physical ability, to fully experience the monument, fostering a deeper and more equitable connection with

history and collective memory. Through this analysis, the paper aims to present the Isar not only as a place of memory and contemplation but also as a space that can be transformed into an inclusive and accessible cultural landmark. By acknowledging and addressing the existing barriers, the study will outline a vision for a more welcoming and universally accessible Isar, ensuring that its historical and symbolic significance is available to all.

Literature Review

The interaction between sculpture and its surrounding landscape has been a topic of extensive discussion within art history, architecture, and cultural studies. Numerous scholars have examined the works of Bogdan Bogdanovic, particularly his approach to memorial architecture, which integrates symbolic, abstract elements with natural landscapes to create immersive experiences. Bogdanovic's memorials are widely recognized for their fusion of modernist aesthetics with historical and cultural motifs. Several studies (Dimitrijevic, 2009; Boric, 2014) have explored how his sculptures serve as spaces of reflection, designed to engage visitors both physically and emotionally. Furthermore, research by Roter-Blagojevic (2017) emphasizes Bogdanovic's distinctive use of local topography, arguing that his works achieve a symbiotic relationship with their surroundings. Regarding Isar Hill in Shtip, existing literature discusses its historical significance but lacks a detailed analysis of how the terrain influences the visitor's interaction with the monument. Studies on landscape-integrated memorials (Herscher, 2010) indicate that spatial design significantly impacts memory culture. However, there remains a gap in research specifically analyzing how the spatial layout and physical movement affect the reception of Bogdanovic's Shtip memorial. Additionally, while there is substantial research on the sculptural language of Bogdanovic, further investigation is needed into the phenomenological aspects of his works—how sensory experiences, such as movement through space and changing light conditions, contribute to their meaning. This study aims to bridge these gaps by providing an in-depth examination of the Isar memorial's interaction with its environment, focusing on visitor engagement and spatial perception.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology combining site analysis, phenomenological observation, and historical review. The research approach is structured as follows:

1. **Site Analysis:** A detailed spatial study of the monument's placement, orientation, and material composition. Observations focus on the monument's interaction with the landscape, including its visibility from different vantage points and how visitors navigate the site.
2. **Phenomenological Observation:** This method involves firsthand experience of the memorial space, assessing how movement through the site influences perception. Key elements such as the incline, changing perspectives, and the play of light and shadow are documented.
3. **Historical and Archival Research:** The study examines historical records, architectural plans, and previous studies on Bogdanovic's memorials. Archival materials, including early photographs and design sketches, help contextualize the monument within Bogdanovic's broader body of work.
4. **Comparative Analysis:** The Shtip memorial is compared to other Bogdanovic monuments to identify recurring design motifs and spatial strategies. This comparison aims to position the Isar Hill monument within the broader discourse on memorial landscapes.
5. **Interviews and Visitor Feedback:** Where possible, informal interviews with visitors and local historians provide insights into how the memorial is experienced and perceived today. This qualitative data helps assess whether the intended spatial and symbolic interactions align with contemporary interpretations.

By integrating these methods, the study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the Isar memorial's role as both a sculptural entity and an experiential space. The findings will contribute to discussions on how topography influences public memorials and how future restoration or conservation efforts might enhance their interactive qualities.

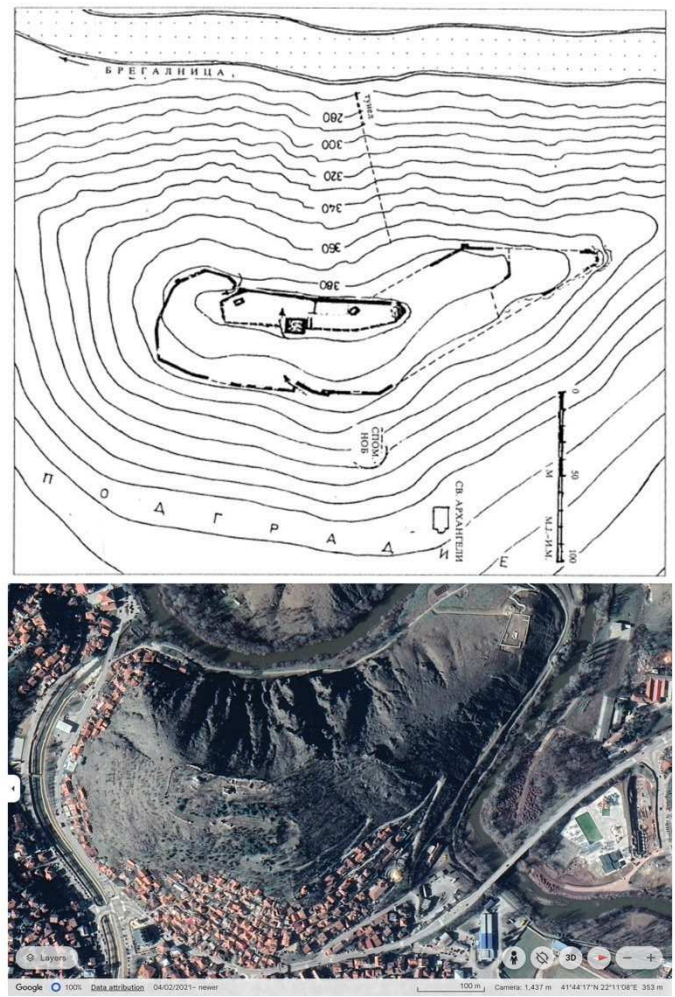
Chronology of Historical Events on Isar Hill, Shtip

Isar Hill is a significant archaeological and cultural landmark, reflecting the region's long and dynamic history. Overlooking the Bregalnica and Otinja rivers, its strategic position made it a key site for defence and control throughout different historical periods. From antiquity to the late Middle Ages, various civilizations shaped their architecture and infrastructure. This chronology highlights key archaeological and architectural remains, illustrating the site's evolution from Roman times to its medieval fortress role.

- **2nd–6th century:** Romans recognized the strategic importance of Isar (ancient Astibos). A large tunnel was carved through granite rock from the hilltop to the western base near the Bregalnica River, indicating advanced infrastructure.
- **6th century:** Remains of an early Christian Basilica with capitals were found on the eastern side, along with remnants of a Roman aqueduct near the Otinja River.
- **11th century:** The fortress of Samuel's state, known as *frurion Shtip*, is mentioned, though no remains survive today.
- **14th century:** The visible medieval fortress was constructed with thick stone walls reinforced by wooden beams. It consisted of:
  - **The Castle (Palace):** Located at the hilltop, 106m long and 20m wide, featuring a northern cistern and an organized layout.
  - **The Economic Zone (Zwinger):** Spread across the northern, eastern, and southern slopes, covering over 1 hectare, it housed workshops, stables, storage facilities, and guard quarters.
- **14th century (Settlement):** At the hill's eastern base, the Church of St. Archangel Michael was built, forming the historical core of modern Shtip.

Figure 2

The location of the Isar highlighting the position of the 14th-century castle (top) versus an aerial photograph taken on Google Earth 2024 (bottom).



Source: I. Mikulčic (top), Google Earth (2024) (bottom).

The aerial photograph focuses on the Isar Hill in Shtip, an area of significant historical and cultural importance. A general description of the key features and monuments that can be observed on or around the Isar includes:

1. **Isar Fortress (or Hisar):** The main historical structure on Isar Hill. The fortress walls are partially preserved, especially along the eastern side of the hill, and the remains of several towers or defensive structures may be visible.
2. **Churches in the Vicinity:**
    - **Church of St. Archangel Michael:** Located on the eastern slope of Isar Hill, this church is one of the most significant religious monuments near the hill. Dating back to the 14th century, it is a well-preserved example of medieval church architecture in Macedonia, characterized by its stone structure and distinct Byzantine design.
    - **Church of St. John the Baptist:** Situated south of Isar Hill, this church, although smaller and simpler than St. Archangel Michael, holds historical significance as part of the medieval heritage of the Shtip area.
    - **Church of St. Blaise:** Located on the northern slope, where only the foundations may be visible. This is another medieval church ruin that attests to the religious and cultural history of the site.
3. **Tunnel System and Defensive Structures:** Archaeological research suggests that a tunnel was built through the granite rock of the Isar, connecting the hilltop to its western foothills near the Bregalnica River. Although not directly visible in aerial photographs, this tunnel was part of the fortress's historical defense system.
4. **Bregalnica River:** Flowing along the western edge of Isar Hill, the river provided a natural defensive barrier, offering a strategic advantage to the fortress. This geographic feature also shaped the layout of nearby settlements.
5. **Ancient Settlements and Urban Layout:** Clusters of buildings surrounding the hill, particularly to the south and east, represent the old town area of Shtip. Some of these structures are likely residential, while others may be commercial buildings that historically supported the fortress. The proximity to the hill suggests that these areas may have once been inhabited by fortress residents or functioned as a medieval urban center.
6. **Cultural and Archaeological Layers:** Isar Hill is an archaeological site containing layers of historical settlement from the Roman period through the Byzantine and medieval eras. Fragments of ancient walls, pottery, and other artifacts have been discovered here, indicating continuous use as a settlement or defensive location.

Figure 3

Plan of the Isar Palace

Source: I. Mikulčic (top), Google Earth (2024) (bottom).

The photograph, taken from Google Earth, presents Isar Hill as a central landmark in Shtip, surrounded by historical features that provide insight into the area's significance across different historical periods. The palace (castle), located at the highest point of the hill, measures 106 meters in length and up to 20 meters in width. The western wall, positioned on the steep slope, is straight. The southern half, 1.5 meters wide, served as a support for auxiliary structures, while the northern half, 2.65 meters wide, supported the palace, which had a basement and at least one, possibly two, additional floors. The northern section ends with a ruined triangular tower. Within the enclosed space, two cisterns for collecting rainwater are carved into the rocky ground, one in the northern section and one in the southern. The northern cistern, measuring 4 x 5 meters, is placed diagonally and is likely older, dating back to the Late Antiquity period. On the eastern wall stands the main tower (donjon), measuring 9.8 x 8 meters and rising up to 12 meters in height. The

southern side featured a gate providing entry to the castle, while the northern side housed the guardhouse for the inner gate. The castle's layout is compact, indicating a significant construction project (Mikulčic, 1996).

Vegetation Around Isar Hill

The vegetation on and around Isar Hill is relatively sparse and characteristic of a dry, rocky landscape commonly found in Southeastern Europe. An analysis of the vegetation in this area, based on observations, includes the following key aspects:

- **Vegetation at the Top of the Hill:** The summit of Isar Hill appears mostly bare, with minimal tree coverage. It is dominated by low shrubs, hardy grasses, and scattered small plants that can survive in rocky, nutrient-poor terrain exposed to direct sunlight. Moss and lichen may be present in some areas on exposed rocks, as these are often the only vegetation that can thrive on such high and barren surfaces.
- **Vegetation on the Hillsides:** As the elevation decreases, the density of vegetation slightly increases. Small pockets of low shrubs and hardy plants can be found, particularly in sheltered crevices and depressions where soil can accumulate. These shrubs are typical of Mediterranean or semi-arid environments and may include species like juniper, wild thyme, or other drought-resistant plants. Occasionally, clusters of small trees or larger shrubs are present, especially in areas with slightly more soil or moisture, contributing to the uneven appearance of the slopes.
- **Vegetation at the Base of the Hill:** The area at the foot of Isar Hill, particularly near the Bregalnica River, features denser vegetation due to the proximity to water. Larger shrubs and a few deciduous trees, such as willows or poplars, thrive near water sources. Along the riverbanks, the vegetation is typically lusher and greener, contrasting with the drier, sparser vegetation on the hill itself. This area also supports reeds, grasses, and other plants, benefiting from moisture and nutrients from the river.
- **Vegetation in the Urban Area at the Foot of the Hill:** Around the urban areas on the southern and eastern sides of Isar's base, human activity has shaped the vegetation. Gardens, ornamental trees, and cultivated plants form a green belt around the lower parts of the hill, particularly in residential areas. This urban greenery is maintained and may include non-native species, creating a stark contrast between the hill's natural, sparse vegetation and the cultivated greenery of the city.

In summary, Isar Hill is predominantly covered with drought-resistant shrubs, grasses, and scattered small trees on its lower slopes. The vegetation becomes denser near the river and in the urban areas at its base, while the summit remains largely rocky and barren, emphasizing the exposed and rugged landscape surrounding the fortress.

Vegetation at the Summit of Isar Hill

The vegetation at the top of Isar Hill is highly specialized and adapted to the harsh environmental conditions present in such locations. Some additional details include:

1. **Climatic Conditions:**
    - The summit is exposed to direct sunlight, resulting in high UV radiation levels, which influence the types of plants that can survive, favoring species resistant to drought and high temperatures.
    - Windy conditions further limit plant growth by drying out the soil and creating physical stress on vegetation.
2. **Terrain and Soil Composition:**
    - The soil is rocky and nutrient-poor, meaning only plants adapted to such conditions can survive, limiting vegetation diversity.
    - These conditions create a habitat for plants with short root systems, which can adapt to unpredictable moisture levels.

Types of Vegetation

1. **Low Shrubs:**
    - Aromatic and nectar-producing shrubs are common, not only for their resilience but also for attracting pollinators.
    - These plants can grow in exposed locations, providing minimal shelter for small wildlife.
2. **Hardy Grasses:**
    - Various grass species adapted to low water and nutrient availability create a dense ground cover in some areas.
3. **Lichens and Mosses:**
    - Lichens and mosses can be observed on rocky surfaces. These organisms play a crucial role in the ecosystem by:

- Thriving under intense sunlight and harsh climate conditions.
- Improving soil quality by breaking down minerals and organic material, eventually facilitating the growth of other plants.

The vegetation at the summit of Isar Hill is a prime example of evolutionary adaptation to extreme conditions. These plants not only survive but also support a complex, albeit limited, ecosystem that sustains various forms of life.

Table 1

Vegetation on Isar Hill: Characteristics and Types of Plants

Area	Characteristics	Types of plants
Top of the hill	The vegetation on Isar Hill varies according to the terrain and environmental conditions. At the hilltop, the vegetation is sparse due to rocky terrain, nutrient-poor soil, high exposure to sunlight, and strong winds. The predominant plant types include low shrubs such as drought-resistant and aromatic species, hardy grasses, mosses, and lichens that grow on exposed rocks.	Low shrubs (e.g., aromatic and drought-resistant), durable grasses, moss, and lichens on the exposed rocks
Slopes on the Ridge	A slightly increased density of vegetation in the protected hollows and cracks. Predominantly Mediterranean or semi-dry plants, especially in areas with more soil or moisture.	Low shrubs (e.g., juniper, wild thyme), clusters of small trees and larger shrubs in areas with more soil and moisture.
Foot of the Ridge (near the river)	Denser vegetation due to the proximity of the river Bregalnica, which provides moisture.	Larger shrubs, several deciduous trees (e.g., willows, poplars), reeds, and grasses adapted to wet conditions

Urban Foot of the Ridge	Vegetation influenced by human activity, with cultivated plants and ornamental trees, forms a green belt around the lower, urbanized parts of the ridge.	Gardens, ornamental trees, and various cultivated plants, in contrast to the natural sparse vegetation of the ridge.
Living Conditions at the Peak	Intense exposure to sunlight and UV radiation, windy and dry conditions that limit plant diversity. Rocky, poor soil supports only drought-resistant plants with shallow root systems.	Low shrubs, durable grasses, moss, and lichens that survive in intense sunlight and poor soil conditions gradually improve the soil quality over time.

Figure 4

Analysis of the Monument in the Context of Isar's Terrain and Landscape

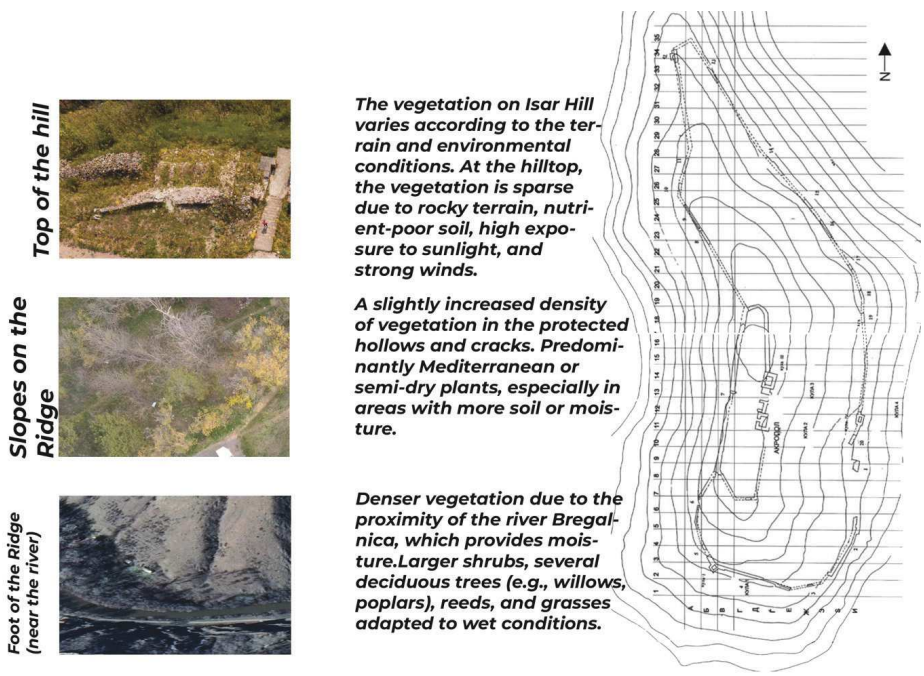


Figure 5

Location: Memorial Complex to the Fallen Fighters of the Revolution, ShtipAuthors: Bogdan Bogdanovic, Years: 1969-1974

Source: Photo by Boris Jurmovski, 2021

Interaction of the Sculpture with the Terrain of Isar

Image 6 depicts a monument designed by Bogdan Bogdanovic, the renowned Serbian architect and sculptor known for his memorial works across former Yugoslavia. This particular monument in Shtip, North Macedonia, is situated on Isar Hill, a historically significant location that enhances the symbolic value of the structure.

Analysis of the Monument in the Context of Isar's Terrain and Landscape

1. Structure and Design - The monument consists of a series of sculptural stone blocks adorned with intricate symbolic carvings. Each block has a unique pattern, often circular, with relief designs that may reference ancient or cosmic symbols, reflecting Bogdanovic's abstract and universal themes of memory and eternity. These

carvings align with Bogdanovic's signature style, which merges modernist forms with hints of ancient symbolism, possibly reflecting the long history of Isar Hill as a site of fortifications and settlements. This design approach creates a timeless effect, linking the monument to the historical layers of the hill.

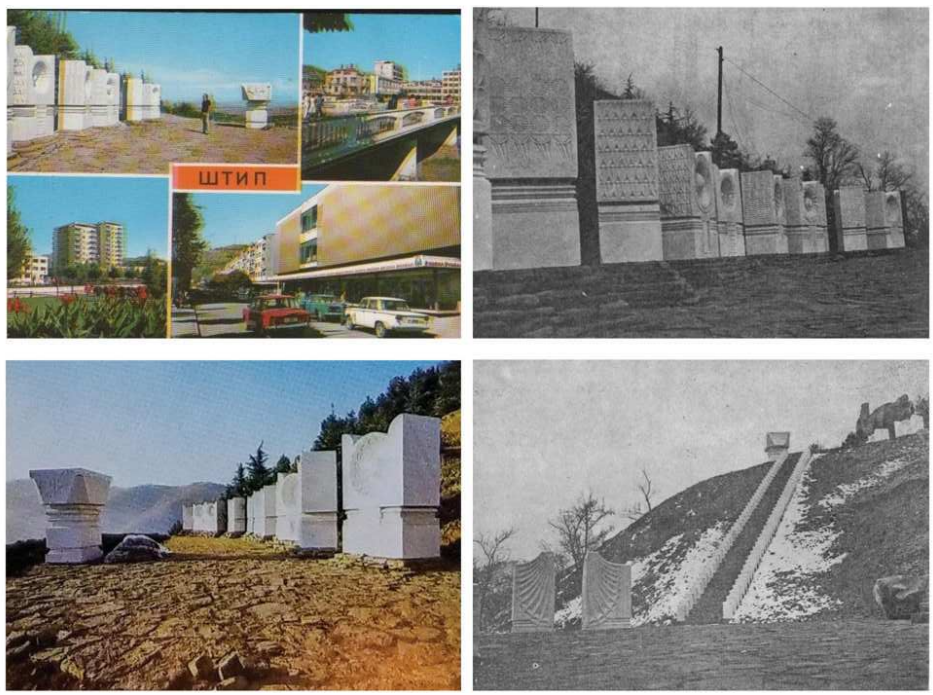
2. Interaction with the Terrain - The hilly and rocky landscape of Isar serves as a natural pedestal for the monument, giving it a sense of elevation and prominence. Positioned along a cobbled path leading up the hill, the monument overlooks the surrounding landscape, creating a panoramic setting that invites reflection and meditation. The monument's placement on a slope influences the visitor's experience, as walking along the line of stone blocks requires navigating the incline, adding a physical, almost ritualistic dimension to engaging with the artwork.

3. Vegetation and Surroundings - The surrounding vegetation, primarily evergreen trees, contrasts with the white stone of the monument, creating a sense of enclosure that isolates the memorial from the rest of the hill. This natural framing likely enhances the solemnity of the monument while also providing shade that may help protect the stone carvings from erosion. The sparser vegetation of Isar Hill is complemented by the more intentionally landscaped environment of the monument, blending natural and built surroundings. This balance reflects Bogdanovic's approach to integrating his work with nature rather than imposing it upon the landscape.

4. Symbolic and Historical Resonance- Given that Isar Hill has Byzantine, Serbian, and Ottoman historical layers, the universal symbolism of the monument can be seen as a tribute to Shtip's diverse past. The abstract forms allow viewers to interpret the monument personally, creating connections to different historical periods and influences. The repetitive design of the blocks—each similar in structure but unique in design—may symbolize the continuity of history and the layers of civilization that have occupied the hill. This repetition reflects the historical structure of Isar itself.

5. Choice of Material and Durability- Built from light-colored stone, the monument contrasts with the darker tones of Isar's natural surroundings, making it visually prominent. The stone was likely chosen for its durability, given the exposure to weather conditions at the hilltop and the need for the monument to endure as a testament to memory.

Figure 6
Historical photographs of the sculpture by Bogdan Bogdanovic.



Source: https://marh.mk

Interaction of the Monument with the Terrain

The hilly and rocky topography of Isar serves as a powerful foundation for the monument, utilizing the natural contours and irregularities of the hill to create a sense of elevation and authority. The monument itself, placed along a winding stone path that follows the natural incline, appears as an organic part of the landscape. The stone tiles along the path, likely chosen intentionally, add an element of timelessness, reminiscent of ancient cities or pilgrimage trails. This combination of natural and artificial stone emphasizes the symbolic and historical weight of the monument as an integrated part of the environment. The hilltop offers panoramic views of Shtip and the valley below, drawing visitors' gaze toward the landscape as they approach the monument. This panoramic perspective encourages contemplation, embedding the monument within its natural and cultural surroundings. By positioning the monument along the slope, Bogdanovic creates a space that

demands both physical and mental engagement from visitors—they must climb, descend, or navigate the incline, experiencing the weight of each step. This journey-like quality transforms the act of viewing into a ritualistic process, inviting visitors to slow down and become more aware of their movements and surroundings.

Visual and Symbolic Impact of the Terrain

The interaction between the monument and the terrain also affects the way the work is perceived in terms of scale. Each marble block, decorated with reliefs and carvings, stands out against the rocky and earthen backdrop of the slope. The contrast between the white stone of the monument and the darker shades of the surrounding rocks and soil highlights the presence of each block, making them visible both individually and as a collective sequence along the hill. The decision to create separate blocks along a continuous line also reflects fragmentation and multiplicity, common in memory and historical narratives—each block potentially represents different historical moments, ideas, or symbols. As visitors move along the line of blocks, the incline naturally influences their rhythm and posture. This physical effort in navigating the slope adds a ceremonial quality, reminiscent of ancient traditions where pilgrims ascended hills or mountains as part of rituals or spiritual journeys. Bogdanovic's use of the terrain subtly encourages visitors to connect with this idea, turning the walk through the monument into a symbolic journey of reflection and remembrance. The sloping terrain also affects how light interacts with the monument, especially during the early morning or late afternoon hours. The shifting shadows cast by the hill and the sun's angle highlight the carvings in different ways, adding a dynamic quality to the monument that evolves throughout the day. This interplay of light and shadow enhances the emotional and contemplative atmosphere of the site, drawing attention to specific features of the artwork at different times.

Conclusion

The interaction between the monument and the hilly terrain of Isar transforms the act of viewing into an immersive and dynamic journey. The steep, stone-paved path requires deliberate movement, ensuring that visitors physically engage with the site rather than passively observe it. This physicality adds a ceremonial aspect to the experience, reminiscent of ancient pilgrimage routes, where ascent and descent held symbolic significance. Additionally, the panoramic setting and shifting natural

light contribute to an ever-evolving atmosphere, emphasizing different details of the monument throughout the day. The contrast between the monument's white stone blocks and the darker tones of the surrounding landscape makes each sculptural element stand out, reinforcing its presence both individually and collectively. As visitors navigate the incline, the placement of the blocks subtly directs their gaze, prompting moments of reflection and connection with history. By situating the monument within the natural contours of Isar Hill, Bogdan Bogdanovic creates an inseparable dialogue between art, nature, and memory. The monument does not merely occupy space—it actively interacts with its surroundings, responding to the terrain and engaging visitors in a contemplative, almost ritualistic experience. This integration ensures that the monument is not just a static historical marker but a living space for remembrance, where the journey itself becomes part of the act of memory. Through this interaction, the monument transcends its material form, embodying the layered history and cultural continuity of the site while inviting future generations to engage with its symbolic and historical depth.

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