

Hidden Places of the City

Mara Bratoš took these photographs in 1995, in the immediate aftermath of the Homeland War, when Dubrovnik still bore visible traces of destruction and the dull silence that echoed off its city walls. Once places of encounter, rest and entertainment, these outdoor spaces stood empty, neglected or forgotten. It was these very spaces that attracted the artist Mara Bratoš, then a student at the Film Academy in Zagreb. She was interested not in postcard views of Dubrovnik, but in its hidden faces – places that the people of Dubrovnik recognise and carry in their collective memory, though other visitors to the City would struggle to locate them on a local map. These are spaces between the public and the forgotten, places that have lost their original function but not their power to stir the imagination.

In the black-and-white photographs from 1995, these settings appear almost cinematic. Empty, silent and faintly menacing, they resemble film sets in which we sense that something has just happened or is about to happen. The tension they evoke stems not from anything happening in front of the lens, but from the unsettling presence of the space itself. It is no surprise that these photographs also evoke the mood of cinema at the time – a Lynchian sense of uncertainty, mystery and unease, in which ordinary spaces become stages for untold stories.

Places such as Villa Šeherezada, Hotel Argentina, Lapad Bay with Villa Elita and Villa Wolff, the water polo court at Porporela and the table tennis tables in front of Hotel Neptun were the protagonists of Mara's photographs at the time. Former hubs of tourist life became backdrops to a time of transition, stripped of their original purpose; only later would they acquire new meanings.

Thirty years later, Mara Bratoš returns to the same locations. Yet it is no longer possible to return in the same way. Some of these places can no longer be accessed. She was denied entry to Hotel Argentina. Nor could she enter Šeherezada, so she photographs only its entrance. The reasons remain beside the point – whether this is due to renovations, changed rules of use or simply a new identity for these places. What matters is the fact that spaces that once belonged to collective experience are now closed to view.

It is precisely this impossibility that becomes an important layer of the exhibition. The photographs from 2025 are not replicas of those from 1995, but bear witness to change. They show

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that over the course of three decades, not only the appearance of individual locations but also their social status has changed. Some places have been renovated; some have lost their amenities – such as the table tennis tables near Hotel Neptun or the chessboard on which no one plays chess any more – while others now lie behind doors no longer open to everyone.

A dialogue about time, memory and space unfolds between the two series of photographs. What was a photograph of an abandoned city in 1995 is now a photograph of a city whose parts are hidden in a different way. Once they were marked by emptiness; today, by inaccessibility. Mara Bratoš's photographs record not only changes in architecture or the landscape, but also changes in our relationship to public space and to our own memory.

This exhibition is therefore not only an encounter between two photographic series created thirty years apart; it is also an encounter with two Dubrovniks – one recovering, the other continually reshaping itself – and with a single artistic gaze that, in both periods, finds the same, almost cinematic, fissures in everyday life. Mara neither offers a nostalgic vision of a lost Dubrovnik nor attempts to compare what was better and what was worse. She observes how the City changes its face and how, with those changes, our experience of space changes too. Photography thus becomes a medium of memory and a witness to something difficult to record in any other way – the moment when spaces we remember as shared gradually enter a regime of controlled access, when the boundary between public and private is not always visible at first glance but is nevertheless keenly felt.

The dialogue between the black-and-white photographs from 1995 and the colour photographs taken thirty years later reveals that façades, vegetation and amenities are not the only things to have changed. So too has the way in which the City belongs to its inhabitants. This is precisely why these photographs are not merely documentary records of changes in Dubrovnik's urban fabric, but records of the relationship between space, time and the gaze – of what remains visible and what slowly recedes from view over time and becomes entirely hidden.

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