

The Buzludzha Conservation Project: The Choice to Take Action

Submitted by sharragrow on 23 Feb 2024

Image



The [Buzludzha Monument](#) was opened in 1981 to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Buzludzha Congress, which later led to the establishment of the Bulgarian Communist Party. It is a project of the distinguished Bulgarian architect Georgi Stoilov (1929-2022) and stands at the top of the historically significant Hadzhi Dimitar (Buzludzha) peak in the central Balkan Mountains, with an altitude of 1,432 meters.

The building was used for special political ceremonies and guided group visits, part of the regime's propaganda. The interior decoration, made by some of the most eminent Bulgarian

artists at the time, included bronze and crystal sculptures and 913 square meters of stone and glass mosaics located on two ring walls located on the second level of the monument and in the dome.

Following the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the Buzludzha Monument was gradually abandoned and became subject to vandalism and looting which caused severe damage to the entire structure. Most significantly, its preservation state was harmed by the dismantling of the copper roof covering and the windows, exposing the interior to the direct impact of the harsh mountain climate.

In 2013 Dora Ivanova, a Bulgarian student of architecture at the Technical University of Berlin, encountered the Buzludzha Monument. Instead of a controversial ruin from a difficult past, she saw an outstanding architectural masterpiece with tremendous potential. In 2015 she founded the Buzludzha Project Foundation (BPF) with the aim of preserving the monument and turning it into a functioning heritage site.

The focus of the foundation in the [first years](#) was on provoking discussion and raising awareness of the monument among the segregated Bulgarian society. The organized conferences, exhibitions, and meetings with the governing authorities were crucial for the viability of the project as it steadily gained public support and began to benefit from professional expertise. Following its nomination by the BPF, in 2018 the Buzludzha Monument was listed among the seven most endangered heritage sites in Europe, as ranked by Europa Nostra and the European Investment Bank Institute.

In 2019, within the Keeping it Modern (KIM) program, the Getty Foundation awarded funding for “Re-search, Conservation Planning, and Adaptive Reuse Study of Buzlud-zha Monument“. The project was coordinated by the BPF and ICOMOS Germany in partnership with the Technical University of Munich (TUM) and the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering, and Geodesy in Sofia (UACEG). Along the way more than 100 international experts from various fields and multiple volunteers joined the project.

Preparation of the [conservation management plan](#) included the digitization and study of the monument’s official archive; laser scanning and creation of a precise 3D model of the building; a detailed catalog of the site materials and surfaces; and architectural, art historical, landscape and utilities studies. Crucial for the continuation of the project was the structural investigation conducted by the UACEG which concluded that the main structural elements of the building have no major damages and can be reused.

As part of the research, an oral history initiative, “Buzludzha’s Unwritten Stories” was also launched. So far 35 people who either worked at the monument or who were somehow connected to it have been interviewed.

THE WALL MOSAICS

In the fall of 2019, during the architectural survey of the monument, the team realized the only preserved elements of the interior decoration—the mosaics—were in critical condition, and if no

urgent measures were taken, large sections of the artwork would be lost. Therefore, the BPF and ICOMOS Germany applied again to the KIM program, and a second grant for emergency stabilization of the mosaics was awarded in the summer of 2020 by the Getty Foundation.

The main objective of the conservation team—including the National Academy of Art in Sofia (NAA), the TUM, the Bern University of the Arts (HKB), and the Diadrasis NGO from Athens—was to secure the most critical areas of the mosaics in order to prevent significant new losses of original material. The work on site also created opportunities for training in conservation of modern mosaics for a group of conservation students from the NAA and HKB.

The first step of the [emergency actions](#) was to document, collect and systematically store the already fallen mosaic fragments and tesserae. The space around the walls was then cleared of construction debris to allow safe access.

The multiple smaller detachments along the edges of the existing lacunae of the bedding layer and the arriccio were stabilized by edging repair. Where needed, the mosaics were further secured with a temporary wooden support system made of vertical pillars and cushioned horizontal props. The numerous loose tesserae found throughout both mosaic rings were also re-adhered.

A temporary [protective shelter](#) was constructed in two phases over the two mosaic rings. Its purpose is to significantly reduce water infiltration into the mosaics, to protect them from falling objects and strong winds, and to help establish a more stable microclimate around them. It is constructed of wooden beams and covered with corrugated sheet metal. The sidewalls of the shelter are closed with durable hydrophobic—but air permeable—textile which stops rain and snow from reaching the mosaics while still allowing normal air circulation.

The results from the research, conservation planning, adaptive reuse study, and the emergency stabilization of the wall mosaics were presented at the international conference, [In Restauro: Post-War Heritage of Art and Architecture in Central and Eastern Europe – Integrated Approaches to Dissonant Monuments and Sites](#), held in July 2021 at the Iskra History Museum, Kazanlak.

THE DOME MOSAIC

In September 2021 the Buzludzha Monument was listed as a heritage site of national significance by the Bulgarian National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage. This very important step allowed the BPF, together with the Regional Administration Stara Zagora as a legal manager of the site, to apply for state funding for the first time. The approved funding was for the stabilization of the dome mosaic; clearing of the roof from the dangerous, disintegrating remains of the original covering; and providing secure visitor access. The project was successfully implemented in 2022.

The [dome mosaic](#) is made of smalti and gilded household glass tesserae on pre-cast cement panels, mounted to a custom-designed metal structure and suspended from the roof's steel frame. The prolonged exposure to the harsh mountain climate has caused significant damage

such as loss of nearly all the leaf gilding, partial detachment or loss of multiple tesserae, and detachment of the bedding layer from the panels in some areas. Extensive salts efflorescence and biological growth are also observed throughout the mosaic. Some key elements of the mounting structure are severely corroded, threatening the stability of the panels.

The main objectives of the emergency action were, as with the wall mosaics, to stabilize the compromised areas of the mosaic in order to prevent further losses and to ensure safe access for visitors to the building. The [emergency interventions](#) undertaken by the same conservation team, along with eight conservation students from the NAA, started with the re-adhesion of the loose tesserae and the securing of the detachments in the bedding layer in order to avoid the risk of new losses [when the roof was cleared](#). All loose tesserae were carefully detached, their backs and setting beds were cleaned from the algae and the salts, and the tiles were re-adhered. The re-adhesion of the tesserae was done in two stages. First, a thin layer of epoxy resin was applied on the back of the detached tesserae and on their setting beds in dots or strokes. The resin was allowed to cure and lightly abraded to reduce the observed darkening effect on the bedding layer and to provide a larger and rougher surface for the re-adhesion of the smooth glass tesserae. The tesserae were then re-adhered with a solution of Paraloid B-72 in acetone. The partially detached and deformed fragment of the bedding layer was taken down, stabilized, and re-attached in place with a polymer-modified cement-based adhesive similar to the originally used bedding mortar. After all the debris from the roof and the rear of the mosaic was removed, the mounting structure was stabilized by welding new steel elements where needed.

The dome mosaic was also covered with a temporary shelter in order to prevent direct water infiltration into its structure. The shelter is fixed to the steel elements of the roof and extends three meters beyond the rim of the mosaic to provide better side protection. It is made of wooden beams and cladding covered with a waterproof PVC membrane. As the shelter was constructed in a similar manner to the original roof covering, it doesn't change the silhouette of the monument.

After the building was secured, [temporary wooden pathways](#) were installed in the foyer, the main staircase, the main hall, and the panoramic corridor to provide a safe route for visitors.

THE FESTIVAL

Public involvement has been an essential part of the BPF's activities since the beginning. Besides the use of traditional and social media, the foundation organizes different local events for open and direct dialogue with the public. An annual event, beloved by the team and the public, is the [Open Buzludzha Festival](#). The festival [raises funding](#) for the conservation of the monument, but it is much more than this. It brings an even wider public to the site and lets everyone experience it in a new and a different way. The event takes place at the monument and in the surrounding foothills. The program includes live music and DJ sets on different stages in the evenings and lectures, discussions, workshops, exhibitions, cultural tours, and sports during the day.

The culmination of the Open Buzludzha 2023 was a [3D mapping](#) projection on the monument, created exclusively for the festival by one of the leading studios in the field. The [next Open Buzludzha Festival](#) is planned for August 8-11, 2024. We would love to meet you there!

FUTURE CHALLENGES

The main priority of the BPF for the near future is the funding, planning, and construction of a new roof covering and windows, which are essential for the building's preservation and the continuation of conservation work in the interior. The foundation is also working to enable the opening of the monument for visitors, which is still not possible due to legal and management issues.

In parallel, the BPF is starting the research and development of an inclusive narrative for the Buzludzha Monument, which will tell its multi-perspective story, online and on-site, provoking critical thinking of the past and better understanding of the present.

THE FORUM

As the challenges for Buzludzha's preservation are generally similar to those for other immovable cultural heritage in Bulgaria and Europe, broad discussions on heritage preservation are highly valuable to exchange experience and to discuss urgent topics. Therefore at the end of 2023, the BPF organized an international [Heritage Forum](#) which is expected to become an annual event. The first edition of the forum discussed the topics of management and storytelling and included experts from various fields and institutions from Bulgaria, France, Germany, and the UK. The next Heritage Forum is planned for December 3-4, 2024. Follow the BPF's social media pages to learn how you can take part.

You can learn more and follow the project here:

<https://buzludzha-project.com/en/>

<https://www.instagram.com/buzludzhaproject>

<https://www.youtube.com/@Buzludzhaproject>

https://www.facebook.com/buzludzhaproject?locale=bg_BG

You can support the project here:

<https://buzludzha-project.com/en/support>

AUTHOR BIO

Nikifor Haralampiev holds an MA degree in conservation from the NAA, Sofia and a PhD in technical art history from the Sofia University. He interned at the Ivan Duichev Centre for Slavo-Byzantine Studies and at the Getty Conservation Institute. Since 2014 Nikifor has been teaching in the Conservation Department of the NAA. In 2020 he joined the BPF as a coordinator of the conservation work at the Buzludzha Monument.

(Read the full article and see all the amazing photos in the February-March 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 100, p. 12-20)