

Explore

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

Words Elena Rossoni

Working on places of conflict can be extremely challenging. As soon as a polarised discussion is addressed with a proposal, it is bound to cause some sort of backlash by at least one of the affected parties. There is no clear way out of it. Or is there? Architecture practice Hybrid Space Lab takes a rather unique approach for the re-signification of the controversial site of Valle de los Caídos in Madrid, the burial ground of Spain's dictator Francisco Franco and 33,000 victims of the country's brutal civil war.

01 Valle de los Caídos is a vast monumental memorial conceived by Francisco Franco and built between 1940 and 1959 partly by forced labour of Spain's political prisoners. It includes a 152-meter tall cross, a basilica, a long crypt and a vault, carved out of the mountain it is situated on. During recent years, the debate about the site's transformation has gradually intensified, creating a highly charged and controversial matter for the country.

Even though the Spanish government took the decision to exhume Franco's remains (which has also seen major reactions from Franco-nostalgics, right wing or Catholic church supporters), the area risks becoming a cenotaph, with no clear narrative for its future. The high prominence of the site's location is undoubtable, and its future transformation is thought by many to be an incredible opportunity, in terms of reconciliation but also re-use. However, no one can deny the divisive historical wounds and controversies attached to it.

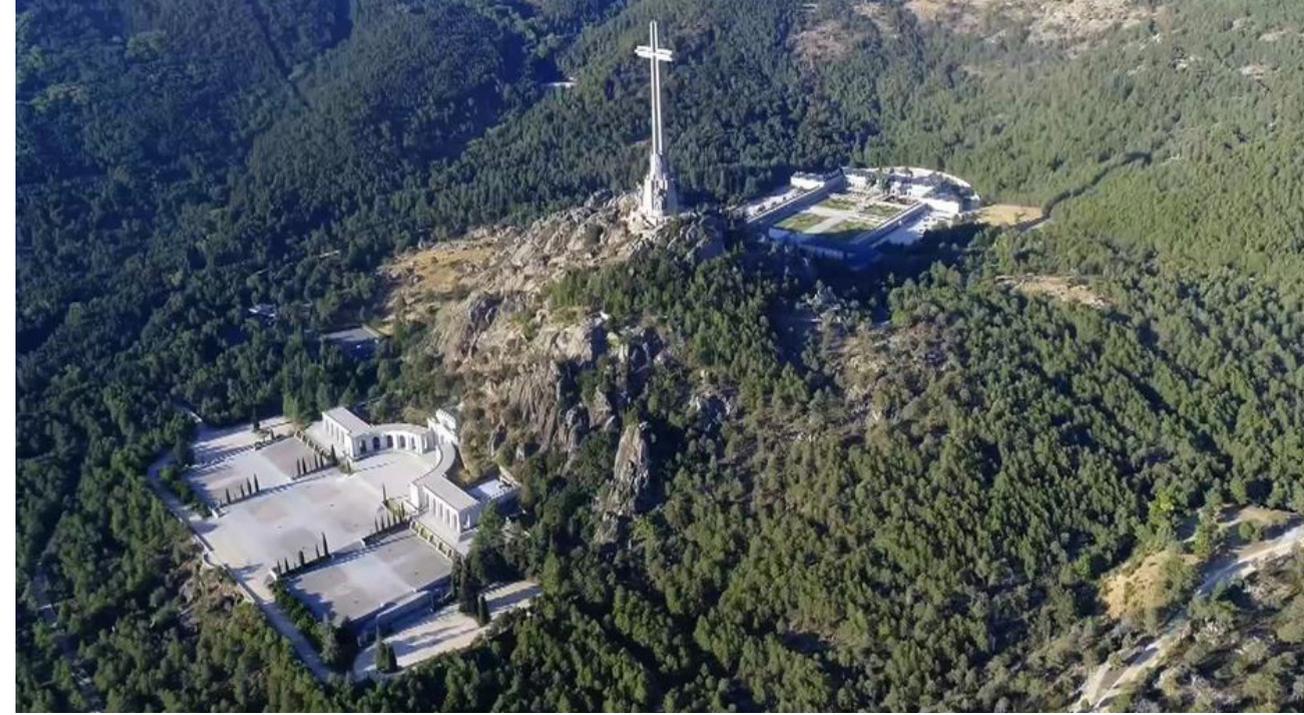
So how does one proceed from here? How can this subject, currently treated like a hot potato hurriedly passed from hand to hand, be finally addressed? Sure, inactivity can lead to nowhere with time gradually doing its job and destroying everything, but then rushed and inconsiderate decisions can also prove lethal.

How can the perception or 'label' of a place of conflict be modified, better yet repurposed?

Here is where Hybrid Space Lab enters the discourse. Its founders, professors Elisabeth Sikiaridis and Frans Vogelaar, amongst working for multiple interdisciplinary projects all over the world, have extensively dealt with memory politics and controversial heritage while using creative processes and digitalisation.

In the case of Valle de los Caídos, instead of coming up with 'solutions', Hybrid Space Lab acts as a platform of discussion by organising a workshop and inviting highly skilled individuals from around the world. The twenty two participants coming from various academic and professions such as psychoanalysts, historians, political scientists and architects, all provided their invaluable input from their own perspectives. Additionally, an important aspect of the workshop was the incorporation of both insiders' and outsiders' voices within the debate, to ensure a broad range of viewpoints and opinions for the subject.

The international 'Deep Space: Re-signifying Valle de los Caídos' workshop, which took place this past October in Madrid, included an extensive guided tour of the site followed by two days of lectures on issues



concerning similar, politically tense situations such as the highly charged relationship between North and South Korea, and Holocaust survivors' interviews. Simultaneously, the two-day workshop involved intense discussions and proposals on the monument's future visions through digital and technological tools.

Sikiaridis, the event co-organiser, argues how 'the digital layer can incorporate everything, enabling the integration of sidelined voices within the vision of a polyphonic monument and paving the way from recognition to reconciliation.' Digital methods allow for a more holistic view in terms of history without physical intervention, approaching the discourse in a meticulous and inclusive manner. For example, the visualisation of the barracks used to house the convicted along the path leading to the Valle, provides a different perspective, resurfacing the multiple voices that no longer have a physical presence.

The workshop proved how artistic interventions can fruitfully develop by incorporating multiple 'sides' and experts within a structured debate, rather than implementing top-down, anonymous and third party decision-making. This research method can prove incredibly beneficial for the tools of analysis on any sort

of controversial grounds. It can therefore assist in resolving such issues as democratically as possible in a kind of trial-and-error manner, having a clear idea on how the place would be perceived prior to its actual transformation.

We live in a world where the veracity of democratic governments depends on the latter's ability to deal and respect controversial matters. Without a thoroughly thought solution, the nation's (or culture's) representatives are automatically put into question. Prosperous societies advocating for democracy can only go forward with solid – meaning respecting and controversy-addressing – foundations.

What do you think about Hybrid Space Lab's approach? Find out more at: hybridspacelab.net/deep-space-re-signifying-valle-de-los-caidos/

Above: Aerial picture of the imposing monument in Madrid's outskirts (source: Cuatro).