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THE AVANT-GARDE OF BRUTALIST ARCHITECTURE IN THE COUNTRIES OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

AWANGARDA ARCHITEKTURY BRUTALISTYCZNEJ W KRAJACH DAWNEJ JUGOSŁAWII

Abstract

The following article discusses the post-war architecture of Yugoslavia, constructed between 1948 and 1980. It investigates the influence of local and social conditions on the development of regional brutalism by analyzing selected examples of public buildings and *spomeniks* – commemorative objects typical for the Balkan architectural landscape. The author draws particular attention to the avant-garde and innovative approach of the architects to the design of expressionist forms. The result of the analysis is the identification of Yugoslavian brutalism as the most avant-garde and distinct compared to other countries of the Eastern Bloc.

Keywords: brutalism, architecture of Yugoslavia, spomenik

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przybliżyć architekturę Jugosławii w okresie między 1948 a 1980 rokiem. Zbadano wpływ uwarunkowań lokalnych i społecznych na rozwój regionalnego brutalizmu poprzez analizę wybranych przykładów obiektów użyteczności publicznej, a także charakterystycznych dla krajobrazu Bałkanów obiektów kommemoratywnych – *spomeników*. W szczególności zwrócono uwagę na awangardowe podejście i innowacyjność, mocnych ekspresjonistycznie form. Rezultatem analiz jest identyfikacja jugosłowiańskiego brutalizmu, jako najbardziej wyrazistego, w stosunku do pozostałych krajów bloku wschodniego.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura brutalistyczna, architektura Jugosławii, spomenik

1. INTRODUCTION

After separating from the Eastern Bloc in 1948, Yugoslavia adopted an unprecedented socialist political model with the features of a capitalist standard¹. The decision of the president, Josip Broz Tito, to liberate himself from the influence of the Soviet Union led to an economic and political crisis, which forced Yugoslavia to approach the West and Third World countries in order to form new economic alliances. This sudden political shift significantly affected Yugoslav architecture and urban planning. Foremost, socialist realism was rejected as the national language of architecture and replaced with an abstract form of

¹ D. Kuzović, J. Kuzović, *Language of architecture brutalism in Serbia as a matter of cultural exchange*, SED, Užice 2013.

modernism. Its meaning was multifaceted. Modernism, as an anti-historic, international style, responded to the post-war difficulties of socialist Yugoslavia. United of six minor republics country, struggled with difficulties arising from a complicated, common past and the lack of a unified national identity that resulted in internal conflicts. As a part of the unification, a neutral architectural style that was introduced did not culturally favor any of the republics. Thus, trying to define a new, socialist Yugoslav society. Furthermore, modernism and brutalism were intended to distinguish the architecture of the newly created Yugoslavia from the socialist realism of the Soviet Union while stylistically getting closer to the new Western allies².

Yugoslavia stood out from other socialist countries with its significant degree of creative freedom. The authorities encouraged artists to adopt an avant-garde culture in pursuance of creating an illusory image of a liberal, modern society³.

The split on the Tito-Stalin line contributed to Yugoslavia's divergence from the previous Soviet controlling methods, which directly influenced the development of architecture and art. As a result, the profession of an architect was liberated. Formerly constrained by the regime, artists alongside designers began to travel to Western countries to expand their knowledge of modernism⁴. Beloved by Yugoslav architects, the Unité d'Habitation building has become a prototype to follow. In the late 1950s, nearly every major city had a residential unit inspired by Le Corbusier's structure⁵.

2. THE AVANT-GARDE OF THE FORMER YUGOSLAV ARCHITECTURE

One of the first Yugoslav buildings to bear the characteristics of brutalist architecture was Pavilion 40. It was built in just five months in Zagreb, out of Croatian architect Ivan Vitić's design. The facility, along with other thirty-nine exhibition halls, was built due to the relocation of the international fair in 1956. Only one-third of the buildings have their function unchanged to this day, and the discussed Pavilion 40 is one of them. Its architectural value is evidenced by the fact that it has been carefully restored with attention to every detail⁶. The expressive form of the building rejects horizontal and vertical directions. The distinctive roof line bends towards the center, in the middle of the building. Such an operation was possible due to the innovative, at that time, technology of the pre-stressed concrete ceiling. The shorter walls of the pavilion bow both horizontally and vertically. This impression is emphasized additionally by massive columns in the shape of the letters V that faces each other vertically. The architect decided to leave a visible texture on the concrete columns. Vitić's sculptural sensitivity is noticeable in every detail, especially in the glazing of the longitudinal façades that were inscribed in the triangle module.

² M. Babic, *Modernism and Politics in the Architecture of Socialist Yugoslavia, 1945–1965*, University of Washington, Washington 2013.

³ D.M. Stojiljković, A. Ignjatović, *Towards an authentic path: Structuralism and architecture in socialist Yugoslavia*, "The Journal of Architecture" 2019, 24:6, p. 855.

⁴ M. Babic, *op. cit.* p. 80.

⁵ V. Kulić, M. Mrduljaš, W. Thaler, *Modernism in-between. The mediatory architectures of socialist Yugoslavia*, Jovis Verlag GmbH, Berlin 2012, p. 36.

⁶ Phaidon Editors, *Atlas of Brutalist Architecture*, Phaidon Press Limited, New York 2018, p. 397.



Ill. 1. Pavilion 4 in Zagreb, Ivan Vitić, source: <http://www.architekturreisen.ch/reisen-und-touren/zagreb/zagreb-messepavillon-ivan.html> (access: 27.06.2022).

In the western part of New Belgrade, between 1971 and 1979, a city gate was constructed as a symbol of the modern ideas of Yugoslavia's capital city. Designed by Mihajlo Mitrović, the Western City Gate embodied the brutalism spirit, integrating structuralism and constructivism elements. Due to its bold formal solutions and straightforward spatial concept, it is considered the most crucial object of brutalist architecture in Serbia. Mitrović's visit to Chandigarh had a significant impact on his ideas, thus on the appearance of the building. Le Corbusier's concept of using raw concrete *as found* encouraged the architect to translate it into his creations.

The building consists of two towers of different heights that function independently. A futuristic restaurant with a panoramic view crowns the building, connecting its top floors. The dominant tower was intended as a residential program; meanwhile, the lower one became the engineering company's headquarters, responsible for the structural design of the building⁷. A rectangular grid of windows was projected on the façade of the building, although the rigid rhythm was locally interrupted by carefully conceived details of window lintels and balustrades. The cylindrical shafts extending vertically over the building refer to the brutalist idea of spatial readability of function⁸.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 402.

⁸ D. Alfirević, S. Simonović Alfirević, *Brutalism in Serbian architecture: style or necessity?*, Architecture and Civil Engineering, Facta Universitatis, Niš 2017, p. 328.



Ill. 2. Western City Gate in Belgrade, Mihajlo Mitrović, source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/aa/Jugotours_Beograd_Dec_2003.jpg/1200px-Jugotours_Beograd_Dec_2003.jpg (access: 27.06.2022).

Svetlana Kana Radević was not only the “first lady” of brutalist Yugoslavia but also an internationally recognized architect. She became famous for her design of the Podgorica Hotel, located on the bank of the Morača River in what is now Montenegro. She graduated

from the University of Belgrade and the University of Pennsylvania, where she obtained a master's degree under the guidance of Louis Kahn himself. Afterward, she took her first design steps in the studio of Kisho Kurokawa in Japan, where she learned about the assumptions of metabolism – a movement incorporating the theses of megastructures with organic design. Thereby, this encounter with world-class brutalists shaped her later approach to architecture⁹.



III. 3. Hotel Podgorica, Svetlana Radević, source: <https://socialistmodernism.tumblr.com/post/646009997974749184/hotel-podgorica-on-svetlane-kane-radevi%C4%87-street> (access: 27.06.2022).

Podgorica hotel, constructed in 1967, organically fits into the site's morphology, echoing the Morača riverbed's shape. The silhouette of the building reveals its internal structure – dynamic towers accentuate the communal area, while horizontal, placid forms accommodate the hotel rooms. Subsequent terraced floors are arranged in a cascade, receding, and granting each room the best access to light and viewing exposure. Following the guidelines of New Brutalists on using the material available regionally *in situ* and without additional mechanical processing *as found*, the external and internal walls of the building were clad with stones quarried from a nearby river. It is also a tribute to tradition, as this material was commonly used in building old Montenegrin huts. The facility operates in an almost unchanged form to this day. Although, during the renovation in 2000, the interior of the hotel rooms deteriorated, as the smooth pebbles were replaced with marble slabs¹⁰.

⁹ T. Issaias, A. Kats, *Balkan Brut*, "Metropolis: Architecture Design" 2018, No 6, p. 120.

¹⁰ Phaidon Editors, *op. cit.*, p. 409.



III. 4. Hotel Zlatibor in Užice, Svetlana Radević, source: <https://scavengedluxury.tumblr.com/post/643535781901877248> (access: 27.06.2022).

Hotel Zlatibor, in the center of the ski town of Užice, was constructed during the period of the peak shape of Yugoslav brutalism and was nicknamed “Rocket” thanks to its bold shape¹¹. The dynamic form of the building shoots from the ground with sharp shafts tapering at the

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 406.

top. The hotel's structure was based on a plan of a cross over the first three floors to take the form of a twelve-story tower finally. The architect uses reinforced concrete in a sculptural way. The base of the podium, housing the reception, restaurants, and other communal areas, has been heavily deconstructed with expressive lines of cantilevered bay windows. Their dynamics are emphasized by the texture of grooved concrete used in the lower parts of the hotel, cutting off the smooth tower above. The central part of the hotel has been designed based on contrast. Moreover, the dominant direction is vertical, which optically lengthens the building. The windows are set between deep pilasters that give the impression of modernist buttresses. Louis Kahn's influence on Radević is revealed by systematically repeating geometric forms on the façades¹².



III. 5. 25th of May Sports Center in Belgrade, Ivan Antić, source: <https://www.archdaily.com/795958/soviet-modernism-on-your-smartphone-this-research-group-is-raising-funds-for-a-crowdsourcing-mobile-app> (access: 27.06.2022).

An iconic place on the map of Belgrade is the Milan Gale Muškatirović 25th May Sports Center on the bank of the Danube River. It was built between 1973 and 1975 by the Belgrade-based architect Ivan Antić. Although the architect never declared his affiliation with the brutalist movement, the use of unfinished red bricks and raw concrete as the main construction materials brought him closer to this style. Antić wanted to amaze the recipients of his architecture by using the longest possible spans and beams, creating impressive overhangs and wide-span halls. The 25th of May Sports Center is a multifunctional sports complex with a scattered, horizontal form with an irregular roof structure. Thanks to the use of pre-stressed reinforced concrete, it was possible to cover the diamond-shaped part of the pool with diagonals of one hundred seven and sixty meters. The roof, which performs as the fifth

¹² D. Alfirević, S. Simonović Alfirević, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

façade, was designed as a hyperbolic paraboloid. The concrete shell constituting it is only seven centimeters thick. The character of the place is affirmed by the triangular silhouette levitating on the riverbank with a restaurant area. Its structure is supported by a centrally located pillar, from which 19-meter-high brackets extend. The restaurant is covered with a hyperbolic ceiling; meanwhile, an extended pillar outlines above the roof¹³.

Branislav Jovin, an architect born in Serbia, designed the Urban Planning Institute in Belgrade building, which was built between 1967 and 1970. Surprisingly, although he is described as one of the pioneers of Yugoslav brutalism, in a 2016 interview, he confessed:

To be honest, I only heard about the word brutalism after 2000 (...). First, I do not like the word 'brutalism' because it means something cruel, unprocessed, and rude. However, it is more appropriate for me to interpret the term when it refers to the use of the original material or when the building appears to have not yet been finished (...).¹⁴

The main design guidelines were to display the structure in the façade by extending the columns beyond the outline of the building and to use materials, in this case, concrete, glass, and steel, in their original, unaffected form. Composed of geometric shapes, the building was raised on columns as a means to open up the ground floor of the building onto the square with the entrance area¹⁵.

The territory of former Yugoslavia is dotted with hundreds of futuristic-brutalist monuments, also known as *spomeniks*. The Yugoslav monuments are nothing more than abstract sculptures of an architectural scale, set to commemorate the location of the partisan battles of the Ottoman Empire and the resistance against fascists during World War II. On President Tito's orders, several dozen such structures were built scattered throughout the former Yugoslavia, designed by leading Balkan architects. Despite the differences in form, used materials, or additional, apart from commemorative, function, the monuments are characterized by a common artistic expression, minimalist abstraction¹⁶.

These abstract memorial objects were not always made of concrete. In this case, the material did not play the leading role, but the otherworldly shapes and perfectly selected location – most often a natural, undisturbed landscape, so strongly contrasting with *spomeniks*. Architects, alongside sculptors using brutalist architecture, have always had a divergent approach to the location of their works in the landscape, as the dominance of one style was the antithesis of the assumptions of the New Brutalists. Sometimes they used background architecture, for instance, architecture is hidden, buried, or being an unobtrusive complement to the landscape. Mostly, however, brutalism is associated with audacious architecture, which tends to stand out above the landscape to dominate it. Such objects evoke the most emotions and provoke conversation and thought.

Spomeniks represent the ironic contradictions of the former Yugoslavia. They are reminders of an unspeakably painful past and an uncertain future. Physically, they are bold, concrete, and heavy. Conceptually, they are even heavier. Built at locations of immense tragedy, representing

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 403

¹⁴ D. Alfirević, *Conversation on brutalism: Interview with architect Branislav Jovin*, "Arhitektura i Urbanizam" 2016, No 42, p. 67.

¹⁵ D. Alfirević, S. Simonović Alfirević, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

¹⁶ M. Jaško, M. Husar, M. Hajduk, "Spomenici" – *the forgotten icons of concrete utopia*, "Terra Spectra Stu" 2019, Vol. XI, no 2, pp. 12–13.

death, victory, unity, and peace, they are often edifices that recall deep pain and the absolute worst of humanity.¹⁷

The 1990s were a challenging time for these brutalist monuments. The break-up of Yugoslavia, caused by economic problems and the nationalist impulses of the right-wing groups, led to plenteous armed conflicts. *Spomeniks* symbolized the brotherhood and unity of nations. Nevertheless, they were also an embodiment of Serbian domination over the remaining countries of the former Yugoslavia. Hence, a growing aversion towards them was inevitable, expressed through looting and devastation. Due to the difficult history between Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Slovenia, Bosnia, and Hercegovina, the local monuments representing socialist unity suffered the most¹⁸.

One of the most recognizable of all *spomeniks* is the one on Mount Kosmaj near Belgrade, dedicated to the memory of local partisans. It was designed in 1970 by Vojin Stojić and Gradimir Medaković as a brutalist star with five monolithic, pointed arms. This concrete sculpture affects the viewer not only with its expressive form but also impressive scale – its height reaches forty meters¹⁹.



Ill. 6. Spomenik Iliden, Jordan and Iskra Grabuloski, source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ilinden-spomenikot.jpg> (access: 27.06.2022).

Iliden is a futuristic monument located in the Iliden National Memorial Park in Krušev, on the highest peak of Gumenja Hill, in what is now North Macedonia. The Memorial Park is filled with several smaller symbolic sculptures, but the heart of the complex is the Iliden

¹⁷ N. Robert, *Brutal Socialist-era Yugoslavian Monuments – the Spomenik*, <https://yomadic.com/yugoslavian-monuments-map/>, 2016 (access: 19.06.2022).

¹⁸ M. Jaško, M. Husar, M. Hajduk, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

spomenik. The work of the architects Jordan and Iskra Grabuloski was selected as part of the competition for the design of the monument. The *spomenik* was unveiled in 1974, after two years of construction. The concrete structure is characterized by the shape of a sphere with a diameter of twenty meters with a footbridge leading to it. Numerous oval bumps protruding beyond the outline of the main body are finished with sculptural glazed and stained-glass windows. Each of these windows presents a different season of the year. The shape of this object is supposed to resemble a traditional Macedonian cudgel, symbolizing resistance, and freedom²⁰.

Designed by Miodrag Živković and Ranko Radović, Tjentište is a monument that was erected between 1964 and 1971. One may think the form is in the shape of spread wings or the nearby rocky Sutlejska canyon. The soaring, deconstructed monument emerges from the ground as if it soars into the sky; the concrete rock's asymmetric and expressive form creates tension in the composition. The inner part of the wings is decorated with figuratively presented statues of fighting partisans to whom this memorial is dedicated²¹.

The Croatian region of Moslavina hides the most surreal of all the *spomenik*. It commemorates the victims of the community's rebellion and uprising against Ustaše occupying forces. Built in 1967, Podgarić is a concrete twenty-meter monument designed by a Serbian sculptor Dušan Džamonji. Characteristic asymmetrical wings converge into a central circle that is made of aluminum panels. Minimalist ideas were abandoned in this sculpture in favor of semi-figurative elements. The combination of the expressive, apocalyptic form with a rough concrete texture exudes a truly sinister character²². "Giulio Carlo Argan once noted that Dušan Džamonji's sculptures are monumental, regardless of their scale. This statement can be applied to most of the Yugoslav sculptors of the period"²³.



Ill. 7. Spomenik Podgarić, Dušan Džamonji, source: <https://www.theravestijngallery.com/artists/30-vincent-fournier/works/4683-vincent-fournier-podgaric-2020/> (access: 27.06.2022).

²⁰ Phaidon Editors, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

²² M. Jaššo, M. Husar, M. Hajduk, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–17.

²³ V. Putnik Prica, N. Lajbensperger, *On the wings of modernity: WWII memorials in Yugoslavia*, "Docomomo Journal" 2018, nr 59, p. 78.

On a mountain peak in what is now Croatia is located *spomenik* Petrova Gora, designed by Vojin Bakić. The curved, abstract sculpture clad with stainless steel panels that reflect sunlight is visible from a distance. Never entirely accomplished monumental structure measures thirty-seven meters and is dug ten meters into the ground. Its structure was based on prefabricated metal frames to which the panels were being screwed. The monument, which also serves as a cultural center, with a conference room, exhibition halls, a café, and a viewing point, was put into use in 1981, on the fortieth anniversary of the guerrilla people of Kordun and Banija in Petrova Gora. Unfortunately, like multitudinous relics of brutalism, it did not stand the test of time. Forgotten and away from civilization, it was gradually being destroyed and devastated. Only in recent years has it started to gain recognition. First voices seem to appear about the necessity to bring the monument back to its heyday²⁴.

3. CONCLUSION

Due to the political situation in Yugoslavia, architecture performed as a political instrument in the hands of the authorities. President Tito deliberately emboldened architects to implement in his country an avant-garde variation of modernism – brutalism. He wanted to distance national art and architecture from the formalistic style of the Soviet Union. However, not from the very use of architecture – a totalitarian tool used for propaganda purposes. An abstract and symbolic overtone of late-modernist and brutalist architecture was supposed to help reconcile the divided republics²⁵. The regime benefited from the architectural achievements, demonstrating abroad the country's cultural development and the boldness of its ideas²⁶. Yugoslav modernism embodied the visually proclaimed ideas of openness in socialist society. This new model of society was the vanguard in opposition to Western capitalism and Soviet socialism²⁷. The cultural openness of Yugoslavia allowed architects to draw inspiration from and radically reinterpret the formal concepts of contemporary foreign architects. The architectural magazines, locally promoted at that time, the French *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* and *JA* (Japan Architect), were the primary sources of inspiration about global brutalism. While there are multitudinous examples of this late modernism variety in former Yugoslavia, it is crucial to understand that not all designers consciously used brutalism as the language of architecture. Those who had direct contact with brutalist architecture, including Svetlana Radević, Mihajlo Mitrović, Petar Vulović, and Ljupko Ćurčić, deliberately used it in their designs. Others instinctively used raw concrete and brick. This seems, however, that the basic essential intention was to fulfill the post-war demand for rapidly erected functional buildings.

²⁴ Phaidon Editors, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

²⁵ M. Jaššo, M. Husar, M. Hajduk, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²⁶ R. Barełkowski, *The dark side of architecture. The power over space and the control of society*, "Space & form" 2019, No 40, p. 44.

²⁷ A. Zoranic, *Modernism in the Case of Sports Architecture in Yugoslavia*, IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering 960, 2020, p. 8.

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