



Leonid Lenarčić, Milosav Mirić, Ivan Petrović, Mihailo Canak, Block 21 meander A7, New Belgrade, Belgrade, SFR Yugoslavia, 1959-1966. Experimental construction site of IMS Žeželj technology. © Ivan Petrović archive in Konstantin I. Petrović private collection, Ivan Petrović, c. 1962.

New Belgrade: past-present-future, and the future that never came

BY JELICA JOVANOVIĆ

It was an event that rarely happens in this part of the world: the construction of a brand-new capital city in a country which was not famous for its achievements in city building. Furthermore, it was in a country ravaged by WWII, rural and mostly agricultural, with modest industrial capacities. Today, 70 years after the beginning of its construction, New Belgrade is still one of the most contentious topics of architecture and urban planning in Serbia. It is the most beloved and the most hated, biggest success story and biggest failure, most beautiful and ugliest architecture of the city – all at the same time. It is not just a question of contested beauty: like many other post-war cities based on the *Athens Charter*, New Belgrade is a vast infrastructurally equipped urban territory, soaked in conflicted interests and interpretations of its past and its future. As we approach the saturation point of its available construction land – at least per original and many consecutive plans – the question of its future development, its reconstruction and/or restoration is looming out of every document and every conversation about New Belgrade.

When proud New Belgrade would stand here, built up with a conscious plan, and with the love, will and hands of the laborers, the youth, the People, let this plaque say and remind: April 11th 1948, three years after the end of the People's Liberation Struggle, we have finished the preparations for the start of a new working battle in the struggle for the happiness and prosperity of the people. On that day: the laborers and the youth of all the nations of Yugoslavia have burned out to build New Belgrade, to extend the beloved capital city of the state of equal peoples to this side of the Sava river².

The beginnings: the “symbol of the rise of our wishes and the imagination”³

Although located within the “greater Belgrade”, New Belgrade was conceived as a new city from the very beginning, considering the complexity of this enterprise and the power relations within the city. New Belgrade was “a federal project” that could “take away the resources” for rebuilding of the old Belgrade, or at best serve as a “reserve area while the reconstruction is taking place”⁴. From the outset a separate urban entity, it took a long time for New Belgrade to become an integral part of the city, both for the citizens and for the authorities. But planners and architects envisioned the city in this area decades before it emerged, to remediate the marshland in the city center and to physically and symbolically claim the former “no man’s land” of the historical empires.

Initial steps for Belgrade to cross the Sava River were taken before the WWII. The master plan from 1923 proposed a classical urban scheme with squares and prospects on

the left river bank; the bridge and the road were built to connect Zemun⁵ and Belgrade; the industrial zone was built from the 1920s onwards in the lower area of Zemun⁶ — most notable being the Rogožarski and Ikarus airplane factories; the new airport⁷ was built from 1927-1931 which included the two concrete shells designed by Milutin Milanković; finally the complex of the Old Fairground was built from 1936-1940 designed by municipal architects Tričković, Lukić and Tatić, which had a tragic history of being a notorious concentration camp during the war. However, these structures had been built *ad hoc* and not according to the master plan, which allowed the post-war planners to treat them the same as the rest of the territory that had yet to be ameliorated — as *tabula rasa*. Furthermore, these structures were punctual, located circumferentially to the territory that was the focus of the city’s expansion, which needed much investment since it was covered with water.

The first conceptual diagram of New Belgrade had already been made in 1944, by then director of the Department of Architecture of the Ministry of Construction, architect Nikola Dobrović. His strong personality and author’s approach to urban planning shaped (and burdened) the first post-war years of New Belgrade construction: grandiose “Haussmannic” boulevards and avenues, large-scale functionalist architecture, generous areas for various *central functions* and heavily compartmentalized zoning. He started his mission already during the war: in 1943 he managed to join partisans and immediately started working with the group of professionals, planning post-war reconstruction of

the devastated country. After liberation in 1944 he spent three years appointed as director of the key planning institutions in charge of Belgrade⁸ where he drafted the plan — actually, a series of concept sketches — that served as the basis for all the later competitions: for the buildings of the Federal Government (later Executive Council), Central Committee of the Communist Party and representative hotel (Hotel Jugoslavija). The plan changed later, but these buildings were built as planned, becoming the first fixed urban points of New Belgrade. In 1947, Dobrović was given tenure at the Faculty of Architecture, just before the Kominform Resolution took place in 1948 — these events introduced a major shift in city's planning paradigm.

The execution: several decades of the largest “organized construction site”⁹ in the country

The period 1948-1958 is considered to be “the lost decade”¹⁰ of New Belgrade development, due to the crisis in funding and the reorganization of the administration, which deeply affected the planning and construction processes. However, the “loss” is relative: although there was almost no architectural production on the New Belgrade site(s), this decade was used to regroup and build the necessary industrial capacities for construction¹¹. The amelioration and filling of the site never stopped: the sand was extracted from the bottom of the Danube and block by block the level of the area was raised. The blocks still carry the same numbers as in the amelioration layout, subtly inscribing the memory of this engineering endeavor into the city's tissue. Newly appointed planners, Stanko Mandić and Branko Petričić, started elaborating on the inherited plans, orbiting around the main concepts of the earlier iterations: the above-mentioned buildings which were already under construction, the network of main traffic corridors, and the postulates of the *Athens Charter* applicable in this case. The core concepts were already on paper: the typical size of the urban block was 400 × 400 m; the planning module revolved around the “prescribed” distances of 200–400 m; the block's architecture was planned as a set of typical modernist structures — slabs and towers dispersed in rich greenery; the entire city in rigid urban zoning.

However, already in 1950¹², the use of the *Athens Charter* in Yugoslavia was under scrutiny: it was noted that a city is too complex to be observed through CIAM's four functions — which added a new layer of creative freedom and allowed the unprecedented experimentation for which New Belgrade is famous. Already in 1960s the zoning was reassessed and more “central functions” introduced, while industry and traffic were pushed towards more peripheral locations. This was a good decision at the time, but by the 1980s clearly wrong, since industry went even further away, north-west of Zemun, near the road to Novi Sad. Planners started researching different concepts and schools of planning, Soviet *microrayons* and Perry's *neighborhood unit* were revisited. The production of space completely changed following 1958: the capacities for industrialized production of housing were in place, and the first experimental blocks 1 and 2 emerged, per the plan by Petričić.

In 1959 the competition for the urban planning and architectural design of the Central Zone of New Belgrade was launched. The “super-group” composed of members of two award-winning teams Leonid Lenarčić, Milosav Mitić, Dušan Milenković and Milutin Glavički¹³, led by the experienced Uroš Martinović, started developing the plan based on the competition designs. The results were the urban design of the zone's “modular block”, Block 21, and the Master Plan of the New Belgrade Municipality adopted in 1962, which led towards the explosion of experimental practices in the field of mass housing. The methodology of planning included public competitions for a block or a rayon, the results of which would be elaborated by the award-winning team paired with the Urban Planning Institute to develop the detailed plan, and upon the plan's adoption the construction would begin, almost exclusively in prefabricated technologies¹⁴.

Towers, slabs and meanders were still the main urban planning typologies, but architectural design became more elaborate in terms of form and materialization. Previously, crude hard-liner prefabrication technology had become more sophisticated owing to the use of local prefabricated systems, most famous being IMS Žeželj and Jugomont. The creators of these systems — in the spirit of the era — experimented with the concepts of open-system technology and offered a wide range of technical solutions, allowing architectural expression through the layouts and the envelopes. This attitude led to a vast diversity of forms, avoiding monotonous and generic urban landscapes, which was often the problem of modernist estates.

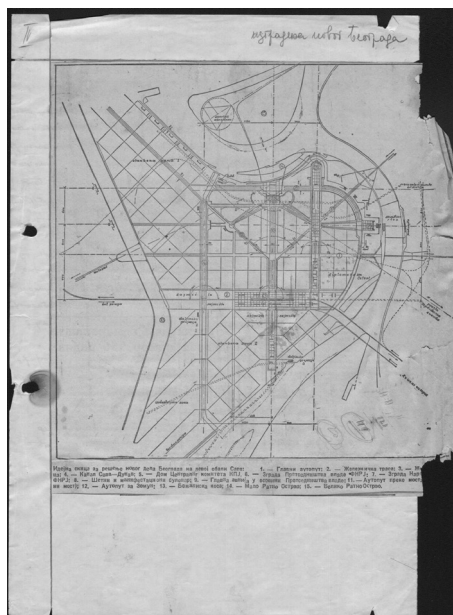
The critique: sunny skyscrapers and the tale of two competitions

During the 1960s and 1970s, New Belgrade became a veritable laboratory of integration of urban planning, mass housing design and prefabricated construction, but the lack of *central functions* and industry was still lagging behind. The *de facto* prevalence of housing structures, poor public transport, lack of stores and markets, led to indignation over the perceived status of the municipality as “Belgrade's dormitory” and “reservoir of lots for cheap housing construction”¹⁵. The problem of construction of *non-housing content* was grave: no investor¹⁶ was willing to build these premises, and there was no mechanism available to push them to build. The city came up with the plan to bypass the problem by commissioning and building many typified community centers, which was a step down — considering the progressive practices applied to other typologies, and still wasn't enough — considering the demand. Vast areas remained empty, waiting for a better, more prosperous and richer future to come.

On the other side, the empowered investors would push and negotiate to get more areas for their housing developments, changing the plans in the process. The exception soon started becoming the rule, reaching a turning point with the competition and construction of Block 24 in the Central zone of New Belgrade: the seventh housing block, that was never intended to be, replaced the planned square



01 Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, New Belgrade in construction, Belgrade, SFR Yugoslavia, c. 1962. View from Belgrade Fortress, showing Block 21 and the Central Committee tower (left), Museum of Contemporary Art (center), and Federal Executive Council (right) in construction, while the land in the background is still covered with water. © Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, Branibor Debeljković.



02 Urban Planning Institute, New Belgrade, Belgrade, FPR Yugoslavia, 1947. One of the concept sketches of New Belgrade, done by Urban Planning Institute led by Nikola Dobrović. © Collection of Miloš Jurišić, *Rad* [journal], 30.08.1947, press clipping.

with public buildings in front of the main train/bus station, effectively ruining the plan to build the central axis of the Zone. The competition happened in 1984, but the documentation¹⁷ shows that the agreement on the land use, signed between the investor, the Yugoslav People's Army and the Institute for Construction of Belgrade, existed already in 1981. It was a shock for professional circles, first of many to come, but the Association of Architects and then mayor, architect Bogdan Bogdanović, quickly regrouped. It was decided to announce an international, UIA-supported competition¹⁸ for the urban regeneration of New Belgrade, to try and respond to the critique of the city's development and prevent another "Block 24" from happening.

The competition was controversial from the beginning, namely because many aspects were not defined: there was no territorial limit and no focal point of this prospective regeneration, the deadline was extended a couple of times. Finally, the awarded designs were so heterogenous and even divergent, that many questioned the point of such a competition and its future applicability. Nevertheless, 490 tender documents were raised and 94 entries submitted from the teams worldwide. The first prize was split between teams from Czechoslovakia and Poland; second prize went to another team from Poland; third prize was split between one Yugoslav and one French team – team of Alexis Josic and his studio¹⁹; fourth prize went to one Yugoslav and two Polish teams. One must notice among those awarded the prevalence of (East European) teams with the substantial background in the field of mass housing and organized city planning. Apparently, many of them were well acquainted with the city and, coming from familiar backgrounds, understood instinctively many of its problems. They also understood its potential, and were excited to take the

challenge and rehearse their concepts in an environment that was different, yet very familiar to all of them²⁰. On the other side, Belgrade authorities received many ideas that would have been easily attainable given the avid level of the profession's infrastructure, even with the shift of the scale and style — but other processes interfered and eventually prevented this from happening.

Today: it is achievement of socialist Yugoslavia²¹?

The corrosive processes, that today are beleaguering Belgrade and many other socialist capitals, stem from this period. As a vast greenfield area, fully equipped and integrated in the city, New Belgrade was an easy target for those who were "knitting (their) 'games' [...] around this huge battlefield of interests"²². Yugoslavia was facing severe austerity measures in the 1980s: foreign markets were crumbling, so companies (re)focused on the domestic market, stirring up competition and acting in many ways as a "bull in a China shop". In the case of New Belgrade, Energoprojekt is the most illustrative and most drastic, albeit not solitary, example: offering know-how paired with significant capacity to pre-invest, they seemed like a blessing from the sky to the city authorities who needed a quick fix after they pompously announced results of the competition. Riding on their success, Bogdan and Vladimir Slavica²³, authors of Block 24, proposed the design for the new Arena. Using the toxic atmosphere of the postmodernist critique of New Belgrade as the "failed" embodiment of the "failed" regime, Energoprojekt lobbied for continuation of the construction in the Central Zone, presenting itself as the company most capable of developing what was envisioned by the competition in 1986.



03 Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, New Belgrade, Belgrade, SFR Yugoslavia. Modular working-model per plan of 1962 on display in the Institute for Construction of (New) Belgrade – scale models would be inserted after the adoption of the detailed urban plan for each urban block. Most of the depicted blocks were built as designed per these plans. © Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, c. 1970.



04 Jaroslav Kachlik, Radomil Kachlik, Juraj Koben, Jaroslav Präger, Peter Vavrica, Martin Koniar, Miloš Gašparec, New Belgrade urban renewal, New Belgrade, Belgrade, SFR Yugoslavia, 1986. Two 1st prizes were awarded to teams from Bratislava and from Warsaw. © Association of Belgrade Architects, 1986.



05 Geokarta, New Belgrade, Belgrade, SFR Yugoslavia, orthophoto. © Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, c. 1975.

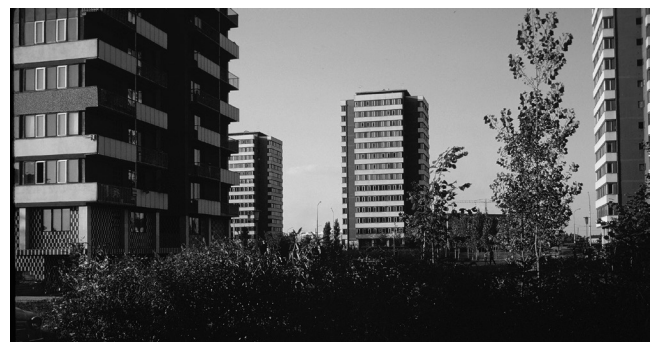
These actions, combined with financial hardship and precarious conditions in the country that was falling apart, but also the upcoming deadlines, pushed the city authorities to make a form of public-societal partnership²⁴. After a painstaking bidding process, the consortium of the Energoprojekt and Napred construction companies were awarded the job. The concession was to build the Arena – that was suddenly moved to the center of Block 25 in the middle of the Central Zone, continuing with the tendency of building on the previously planned axis, not around it as promised. The City transferred the rights to the land use of the Central Zone in Blocks 25 and 26 to this consortium, hoping they would bring more investment – which did not happen due to the Yugoslav Wars and international sanctions. However, these companies were soon privatized either fully or partially, and their new-old management decided to just sit on the empty — but extremely valuable land, waiting for the convenient moment to maximize the profit. This is just the most prominent example — many similar scenarios happened all over the country.

In the case of New Belgrade, it effectively meant transferring the responsibility for planning and shaping this part of the city onto the societal-turned-private companies, that had received the rights to land-use. Due to these processes, the newly built environment became more diverse while old structures fell into disrepair, losing their original appearance, urban environment and stylistic synergy. More housing, office and commercial space was built, sometimes even overbuilt usurping public spaces. Meanwhile, the problem of the lack of health services, daycare services, cultural centers, parking... remains. Another quite problematic consequence is the drastic loss of knowledge and experience in the field of prefabrication that these companies championed: its production, its features and the logic of its emergence, which is essential for any prospective restoration.

However, new tendencies that arose within the last decade bring some hope: with the amounting new research on the modernist architecture and urban planning in Yugoslavia, New Belgrade started to gain more international attention and exposure. The Museum of Contemporary Art and Old Fairground were protected

already in 1987, and years later the Federal Executive Council building and the remaining hangar of the old airport (in 2013), and Friendship Park (in 2014). In 2013, after many previous initiatives and attempts, the Central zone of New Belgrade was put on the tentative list of the Belgrade Institute of Heritage Protection, together with Blocks 1 and 2, the Western Gate of Belgrade (Genex Tower) and Sava Centar. Although still disputed as being “unwanted” or even “difficult” heritage, the attitude towards the blocks and the city is changing, becoming more positive among the residents, which will hopefully build up to its protection and the restoration of the original elements of its architectural and urban design.

06 Mihailo Čanak, Milosav Mitić, Block 29, New Belgrade, Belgrade, SFR Yugoslavia, 1967-1974. © Ivan Petrović archive in Konstantin I. Petrović private collection, Ivan Petrović, c. 1970.



07 Branko Petričić, New Belgrade's Blocks 1 and 2, Belgrade, SFR Yugoslavia, 1958-1962, experimental site of IMS Žeželj technology. © Ivan Petrović archive in Konstantin I. Petrović private collection, Ivan Petrović, c. 1970.

Notes

- 1 The title refers to the *The Future of New Belgrade, International Competition for the New Belgrade Urban Structure Improvement*, held in 1986.
- 2 Čedomir Minderović's text for the memorial plaque, commemorating the beginning of the construction of New Belgrade, located in Ušće, near the Museum of Contemporary Art.
- 3 Bratislav Stojanović, Uroš Martinović, *Beograd 1945-1975 – Urbanizam Arhitektura*, Beograd, NIRO Tehnička knjiga, 1978, 42.
- 4 Branko Bojović, "Beleške o Novom Beogradu", *Izgradnja 11-12/83*, Beograd, *Savez građevinskih inženjera i tehničara SR Srbije, Savez društava arhitekata Srbije, Savet za građevinarstvo Republičke privredne komore SR Srbije*, 1983, 63; Ljubo Ilić, "Sećanje na godišnjicu Novog Beograda", *Ibid*, 70.
- 5 Today Zemun is one of the municipalities of Belgrade, back then it was a separate town.
- 6 Today Blocks 8 and 9 of New Belgrade.
- 7 Area between today's Blocks 1 and 49.
- 8 Department of Architecture of the Ministry of Construction of the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia, Urban Planning Institute of Serbia and Urban Planning Institute of the People's Committee of Belgrade Municipality.
- 9 Milutin Glavički, "Novi Beograd kao predmet istraživanja", *Izgradnja 11-12/83*, Beograd, *Savez građevinskih inženjera i tehničara SR Srbije, Savez društava arhitekata Srbije, Savet za građevinarstvo Republičke privredne komore SR Srbije*, 1983, 5.
- 10 Brigitte Le Normand, *Designing Tito's Capital: Urban Planning, Modernism, and Socialism*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014, 73.
- 11 Machines, war trophies, turned out to be looted from Netherlands, so they were eventually rented and remained in Belgrade. Cement production in Beočin had to be stabilized with new production lines and capacities, a new brick factory, silos and laboratories were built, patents obtained for Franki piles, but also many new local patents invented. Ljubo Ilić, "Sećanje na godišnjicu Novog Beograda", *Izgradnja 11-12/83*, Beograd, *Savez građevinskih inženjera i tehničara SR Srbije, Savez društava arhitekata Srbije, Savet za građevinarstvo Republičke privredne komore SR Srbije*, 1983, 70-71.
- 12 During the Symposium of Architects and Urban Planners in Dubrovnik.
- 13 Milutin Glavički kept his posting in Urban Planning Institute, and soon became the prominent lead of the Group for New Belgrade, where he remained until 1982.
- 14 This "exclusivity" was a result of the urgent need for housing on-the-one-hand, and the belief that prefabrication would deliver the needed acceleration of the process on the other hand. Since the terrain of New Belgrade was flat, unlike the rest of the city, the prefabricated technology was accommodated in the competition, planning and bidding process, which led to a specific planning practice that was, often derogatory, called "gabarit" and "crane" urbanism.
- 15 Bratislav Stojanović, Uroš Martinović, *op. cit.*, 12; Živojin Karapešić, "Okvir dostojan slike", *Izgradnja 11-12/83*, Beograd, *Savez građevinskih inženjera i tehničara SR Srbije, Savez društava arhitekata Srbije, Savet za građevinarstvo Republičke privredne komore SR Srbije*, 1983, 55.
- 16 The investors were either companies and agencies which were in self-managed societal property, or small investors gathered around a housing cooperative. The situation became even more complex after the reform in 1965 and introduction of the market, which meant that business associations could take a bank loan, build and then sell the flats to different entities, that would later distribute the flats to their employees, according to their ranking on the distribution list. Basically, no one was incentivized to build schools, shops, cultural centers – it was expected that the city would negotiate these with the entities and agencies in these fields to invest and build the premises they would later use.
- 17 The contract on "Arranging and handing over the land for construction of apartments in residential block 24", dated 30.06.1981, part of the General documentation of the Main Project, Historical Archive of Belgrade, technical documentation of Block 24.
- 18 *The Future of New Belgrade, International Competition for the New Belgrade Urban Structure Improvement*, deadline 21.07.1986.
- 19 In the interview to the journalists of NIN, Bogdan Bogdanović says that Aljoša Josić (Alexis Josic), Belgrader by birth and education, was "(...) personally very excited. It seems as he was really impressed with New Belgrade as an undertaking, technique (infrastructure) as a huge investment. I personally think that he even likes New Belgrade a little bit", *Stenogramme*, 11.04.1986, 23. Bogdan Bogdanović documentation, Archive of the National Library of Austria.
- 20 In an interview with Jaroslav Kachlík in 2017, Henrieta Moravčíková noted that he was inspired by a children's book: *Sunny Skyscrapers* by Mira Alečković, which brings the story of a stray dog found in one housing neighborhood by a group of children, and the group's adventures in the effort to keep the dog, in spite of strict housing rules and skeptical parents.
- 21 Bratislav Stojanović, Uroš Martinović, *op. cit.*, 42.
- 22 Borislav Stojkovic in *Simpozijum "Budućnost Novog Beograda"*, Beograd, *Društvo arhitekata Beograda*, 1986, introduction.
- 23 Who were employees of Energoprojekt at the time.
- 24 Although these companies were still formally in societal property, they acted and had the reputation of "socialist corporations", in which self-management was more of a formality.

References

- Arhitektura urbanizam*, n. 2-32, vanredni broj "Budućnost Novog Beograda", Beograd, *Organ Saveza društava arhitekata i Saveza društava urbanista Jugoslavije*, 1960, 1965, 1987.
- Bilten Energoprojekt*, Beograd, Energoprojekt, 1980-1991.
- БЛАГОЈЕВИЋ, Љ., Нови Београд, «спорени модернизам. Београд: Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства, Архитектонски факултет Универзитета у Београду, Завод за заштиту споменика културе града Београда, 2007.
- Bogdan Bogdanović documentation, Archive of the National Library of Austria.
- Historical Archive of Belgrade, Municipality of New Belgrade, technical documentation of the Blocks: 1, 2, 11, 15, 19, 19a, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, 45, 70, 61, 62, 63, 64.
- ЈОВАНОВИЋ, Ј., Елаборат анализе претходно заштићене целине Централна зона Новог Београда Блокови 21, 22 и 23. Урбанистичко – архитектонска анализа, Документација Завода за заштиту споменика културе града Београда, 2014.
- KRSTIĆ, Branislav, *Atinska povelja i misao arhitekata i urbanista FNRJ 1950-ih*, Beograd, Branislav Krstić, 2014.
- LE CORBUSIER, *Atinska povelja*, Beograd, *Klub mladib arhitekata*, 1965.
- LE NORMAND, Brigitte, *Designing Tito's Capital: Urban Planning, Modernism, and Socialism*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014.
- ПЕТРИЧИЋ, Б., Прве урбанистичке реализације (Нови Београд), *Годишњак града Београда XXII (Београд)*, 1975, 219-234.
- RADOVIĆ, R., *Centralne funkcije i centri (skripta)*, Beograd, *Arhitektonski fakultet u Beogradu*, 1972-1976. *Simpozijum "Budućnost Novog Beograda"*, Beograd, *Društvo arhitekata Beograda*, 1986.
- STOJANOVIĆ, Bratislav, MARTINOVIĆ, Uroš, *Beograd 1945-1975 – Urbanizam Arhitektura*, Beograd, NIRO Tehnička knjiga, 1978. "Tridesetpet godina izgradnje Novog Beograda", *Izgradnja*, n. 11-12/83, Beograd, *Savez građevinskih inženjera i tehničara SR Srbije, Savez društava arhitekata Srbije, Savet za građevinarstvo Republičke privredne komore SR Srbije*, 1983.
- Urbanizam Beograda*, n. 25, 58, Beograd, *Urbanistički zavod grada Beograda*, 1974, 1980.
- Komunikacija*, n. 25, 26, 27, 28, 40, Beograd, CEP, 1984, 1986.

Jelica Jovanović

Independent researcher, PhD student of the University of Technology, Vienna. Founder and member of *Grupa Arhitekata* and *docomomo* Serbia. Coordinator of regional projects *Unfinished Modernisations* and *(In)appropriate Monuments*. Curatorial assistant of MoMA's exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948-1980*.