

## Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980

Exhibition at MoMA

New York, US, 10 July 2018 – 13 January 2019

*Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980* opened on July 10 at MoMA to the sound of old Yugoslavian songs, revolutionary and popular, spreading surreally from the museum's courtyard. For the next six months MoMA's third floor galleries will be inhabited by over 400 items, exhibited neatly, salon-style, on walls and pedestals, and organized in four major themes that traverse the period of architectural production covered in the exhibition: Modernization, Global Networks, Everyday Life, and Identities. Though this survey exhibition, curated by the Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design, Martino Stierli, and the visiting curator Vladimir Kulić, Associate Professor at the Florida Atlantic University, with curatorial assistant Anna Kats, offers different and perhaps contradictory things to different audiences, in the history of MoMA's institutional stewardship and codification of Modernism, it delivers a form of revision, and a significant geo-political expansion of the narratives the institution has undersigned so far. The exhibition's artifacts range from precious archival sketches, historical photographs, photographic reproductions of drawings, original models, and exquisite model reproductions (the labor of architecture students at The Cooper Union and the Florida Atlantic University), to commissioned video presentations by Mila Turajlić and photographs by Valentin Jeck. All of these represent and invoke the making of some of the most important architectural and design objects, almost evenly spread, over the territory of the former Yugoslavia. In its selection of work, the exhibition, perhaps self-consciously so, re-enacts in curatorial terms the balancing of national representation constitutive of Yugoslavia's political and social project, which was in some measure indeed materialized by its architecture.

Yugoslavia's specific federalist form emerged from WWII with six, mostly rural republics, major damage to its key urban centers, vast human casualties, war-exacerbated ethnic conflicts, and a war-time revolution. This was followed by a definitive break with the Soviet Union in 1948 which

was decisive both for the country and for its modern architecture. Yugoslavia's architects did not have to contend with socialist realism for very long, nor with the anxieties of interpretation that in most other Eastern European countries followed Khrushchev's official 1954 pronouncements against the socialist realist dictum. The break with Stalin prompted the party leadership to look for its own political path — which led to its experiment in self-management, and later to combinations of a state and market economy. It also prefigured Yugoslavia's eventual leadership in the Non-Aligned movement (with its alternative global market for architecture). Modernism in this context, as the curators and the researchers they assembled suggest, was the architectural language that supported the country's federalist, non-aligned, and self-managed socialism.

*Toward a Concrete Utopia's* survey of a 32 year period of architectural and urban thought of Yugoslavian architects avoids comprehensiveness and chronology, for a set of architectural objects and examples of more sustained urban efforts and practices, which refract the four categories announced in the opening text, into a number of (only slightly) smaller themes: Urbanization, Technological Modernization, The Architecture of the "Social Standard", Tourist Infrastructures, Design, Housing, Exporting Architecture, Regional Idioms, and Monuments. There are three large urban developments that get special recognition in terms of the gallery square-footage: local and international efforts towards the reconstruction of Skopje in the wake of its devastating 1963 earthquake, development of Split 3 Housing, and the postwar reconstruction of the coastal city of Zadar. The show is also punctuated by four immersive spaces dedicated to architects Vjenceslav Richter, Edvard Ravnikar, Juraj Neidhart and Bogdan Bogdanović. While the work of a number of other architects is presented as well, these figures serve to drill deeper into their own production, and through their biographies and bodies of work, into the historical moments and institutional and discursive networks they inhabited. As Kulić suggests, their function is in part also to transmit the message about the

possibility and value of individual creativity in the context of Yugoslavia's postwar architecture.

For the once Yugoslav architects (and in some measure for their colleagues across the equally former WWII) *Toward a Concrete Utopia* is a triumph. It is an important validation of these architects' efforts, of architecture once produced for the collective good — "generous" architecture, as Rem Koolhaas has often characterized examples of socialist architecture, because it was explicitly not aimed at the bottom line, and often quite literally dimensioned for a collective subject<sup>1</sup>. This architectural heritage has been under great pressure in the region for a while already. Even as the show opened at MoMA, some of the buildings presented in its galleries lay in disrepair, ironically mired in property issues and for others, like the never finished Dom Revolucije in Nikšić, Montenegro, developers just had or are having their final word, "transitioning" them into the flow of global capital. The imperative of the price per square meter is literally paving over the architecture once dedicated to public good and aimed at contributing to the quality of collective life, and thus transforming the figure of the architect in this context into a tool for private profit<sup>2</sup>. Disrepair, and disrespect for the architecture produced under socialism, is common across the Second World<sup>3</sup>. But perhaps this MoMA show can serve to turn the tide or, at the very least, turn the fates of some of this architectural heritage in the region.

One of this exhibition's greatest accomplishments thus registers in the realm of preservation. Though it exposed a pervasive lack of archival care across the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the whole effort resulted in salvaging and organizing material by a group of dedicated researchers<sup>4</sup>. Since many of the major architectural enterprises that built Yugoslavia have been privatized, have gone bankrupt, or otherwise crumbled, what would have been important archival material suffered similar fates. *Toward a Concrete Utopia* prompted the research team to locate and digitize at least some of the items constituting Yugoslavia's socialist architecture heritage. There were also important individual acts of preservation that made parts of the exhibition possible. To highlight just a couple of these, in a conversation following the opening at MoMA held at the Center for Architecture in New York, Juraj Neidhart's daughter, Tatjana, described the dramatic events during the long (1992–1996) and devastating siege of Sarajevo by the army of Republika Srpska, and her rescuing of her father's papers related to the book he co-authored with Dušan Grabrijan



**01** At the entry of the exhibition one encounters a three-channel video installation by Mila Turajlić, *Mi gradimo zemlju – zemlja gradi nas* [We built the country – the country builds us] –, and produced out of newsreel footage of the construction of New Belgrade. Installation view of *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 15, 2018–January 13, 2019. © 2018 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Martin Seck.



**02** Reconstruction of Skopje is dedicated a vast space in which Yugoslavian architects and their work come together with the urban plans produced by, and the images of, Kenzō Tange's team. This space includes another of Mila Turajlić's commissioned videos, large photographs by Valentin Jeck. Installation view of *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 15, 2018–January 13, 2019. © 2018 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Martin Seck.

*Architecture of Bosnia and the Way to Modernity* (1957)<sup>5</sup>. In Belgrade, the main protagonist in the Exporting Architecture narrative, Energoprojekt, whose architecture section was led by Milica Šterić, had an unusually well-organized archive held in a prefab house near its famous office building in New Belgrade. The archive was first damaged when the nearby Chinese Embassy was bombed by NATO in 1999. More recently, in preparation for the show members of MoMA's exhibition team rushed to rescue archival material from its possible destruction in a "hostile takeover" of the company by the new private majority shares holder. Though not readily available for the general MoMA visitor consumption, but circulating as legends among the curatorial team, these stories of preservation are an important register of the historical events, complexities and contradictions otherwise not palpable in the exhibition<sup>6</sup>. Concretely in these two above cases: a devastating ethnic conflict, the NATO solution to it, and the advances of the wildest kind of neo-liberal capitalism. Though I absolutely recommend the exhibition's catalog as required reading for the exhibition visitors (and especially reviewers), deeper and more complicated histories than even the ones the catalog manages are necessary to deliver on the earnest curatorial promise of the wall text—for this material to become actually useful for our own (dark) times<sup>7</sup>. Despite the fact that the material in the exhibition was submitted to MoMA's institutional habits of seeing in terms of styles, objects and authors, which of course transforms it in important ways, it is thanks to MoMA and its curatorial and research teams, that *Toward a Concrete Utopia* is an important record now that may slow down the quiet entropic disappearance of the historical traces of an era. It has prepared the ground for more research on why and how we might learn

from the examples it includes. I prefer to see it, therefore, as an invitation to research the architecture of the socialist era which, though it was many things in Yugoslavia, was also optimistic about the prospects of a diverse, multi-ethnic, equitable, self-managed and self-conscious collective.

Ana Milijački

#### Notes

- 1 Most recently Rem Koolhaas made such pronouncements on socialist modern architecture generally in a public interview conducted by the Russian American journalist, Vladimir Pozner at the Garage in Moscow as part of *the Moscow Urban Forum 2018*. See <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/rem-koolhaas-vladimir-pozner>.
- 2 Because I find these ideals most clearly embedded in the architecture that supported civic and everyday life, I found the show's section on the Social Standard most exciting. It includes projects such as the Kosovo University and Public Library in Priština (designed by Andrija Mutnjaković), as well as the recently (and beautifully) renovated Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (designed by Ivanka Raspopović and Ivan Antić).
- 3 In my own research of Czech architecture, I found the destruction of the department store Ještěd in Liberec particularly sad, though not the sole, example of this. In the show at MoMA, the disrepair of some of the famous tourist structures like the Haludovo hotel (designed by Boris Magaš), or the memorial on Petrova Gora (designed by Vojin Bakić, Berislav Šerbetić, and Zoran Bakić) quite literally represents the general attitude towards this architectural heritage. The contemporary politicians operating in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia have nothing to gain from identifying themselves with the old ideals of "brotherhood and unity", or the once

regulated development of the Adriatic coast; and the memorials of the anti-fascist struggle that most of them had to visit regularly as part of their early education, might have the capacity to dangerously expose the contradictions now deeply embedded in their own, often fascist, politics.

- 4 The names of the members of this collective are impossible to find on the exhibition walls, but they are thankfully included (on page 179) in the catalog. I will relist here the curatorial advisory board, because without their research and understanding of the importance of preserving and organizing the material, we would all be poorer: Tamara Bjažić Klarin, Matevž Čelik, Vladimir Deskov, Ana Ivanovska Deskov, Sanja Horvatinčić, Jovan Ivanovski, Jelica Jovanović, Matrina Malešić, Maroje Mrduljaš, Bekim Ramku, Arber Sadiki, Dubravka Sekulić, Irena Šentevska, Luka Skansi, Lukasz Stanek, Marta Vukotić Lazar, and Mejrema Zatrić.
- 5 Juraj Neidhart's room is dedicated to this research on Bosnian architecture's premodernism.
- 6 The first small event to mark the opening of *Towards Concrete Utopia* in Belgrade, included Vlada Kulić, and two members of the curatorial advisory board: Jelica Jovanović and Dubravka Sekulić, and took place at the mobbed REX cultural center on July 26, 2018.
- 7 I use here Hannah Arendt's term "dark times", which she, in turn, borrowed from Bertolt Brecht for her collection of essays *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970), precisely because she believed that the men and women she wrote about in that collection responded to the "dark times" in a way that produced hopeful forms of "illumination". It is a term that thus contains, through its layered historical references, both a description befitting our own historical moment and possible antidotes to it.