JURAJ NEIDHARDT'S EARLY WORK

Archiepiscopal Boys´ Seminary in Zagreb (1925-1929)

Darja Radović Mahečić

ABSTRACT: The article covers the early work of Juraj Neidhardt (Zagreb, 1901-Sarajevo, 1979) and the architectural themes he introduced. Aside from the large-scale urban projects Neidhardt worked on at the time, the Archiepiscopal Boys´ Seminary–integrated into its landscape and determined by its ambience–remains his only built design in the interwar period. And that was before his departure for Europe to work in the studios of Peter Behrens in Berlin and Le Corbusier in Paris.
In 1925, the Construction Committee defined a detailed program for the metropolitan seminary; Neidhardt made sketches on his initiative under the guidance of Jože Plečnik and, in close cooperation with the Building Committee, designed and supervised the construction until 1928. Neidhardt established himself as a significant large-scale creator very early on. As part of the seminary, he designed an ensemble that can only be experienced by gradual observation and movement. The tension of the compositional axis is achieved by the dominant tower of the observatory (the only echo of Mendelsohn in Croatian architecture) on one side and the chapel on the other. The meander composition he applied–the spatial principle of overflowing space into space–will become one of the leading principles in urban planning.
As a testimony of the ambivalence of the architecture of the 1920s–large buildings in a bold monumental stripped classical form, showing traces of expressionism–the seminary is often overlooked by urban architectural knowledge. Its survival was put to the test when the earthquake that hit Zagreb in 2020, left it with the red mark (extensive damage), making this an opportunity, through the method of cross-reading and analysis, to take another closer look to understand the dynamics of change and innovation in terms of urban development and individual architectural practice.

KEYWORDS: Juraj Neidhardt, Zagreb, Modern Architecture, Urban Planning, Expressionism

INTRODUCTION: Juraj Neidhardt (Zagreb, 1901-Sarajevo, 1979) was foremost an architect of ideas and a large-scale urban planner, professor, publicist, and propagator of the principles of modern architecture, who also created over 200 projects. Born in Zagreb, he built a successful career in Sarajevo, mostly during socialist Yugoslavia after the Second World War. He was a full professor at the Technical Faculty in Sarajevo, a corresponding member of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts (JAZU), an honorary fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), and a winner of numerous awards. In the book *Architecture of Bosnia and the Way towards Modernity*[1] published in 1957 (which attracted international attention and for which Le Corbusier wrote the foreword), Grabrijan and Neidhardt positively presented the postulates of traditional Turkish architecture in Bosnia and drew a connection with the contemporary efforts of modern architecture (Seissel, 1979).

Along with Zvonimir Kavurić and Ernest Weissmann, Neidhardt is one of three Croatian architects who worked with Le Corbusier in Paris in the interwar period. Corbusier's influence, like a permanent epithet, will be associated with Neidhardt's work; from the fact that he was a „paid collaborator" while he worked for him (unlike many young associates who worked there as volunteers) through the interpretation that he was an „ideological follower but not a slave to his ideas" in his independent work to the foreword to the book *Architecture of Bosnia and the Way towards Modernity* with which Le Corbusier himself confirmed mutual preference and recognition (Radović Mahečić, 2007a).

Eager to experience new challenges, young Neidhardt spent most of the interwar years abroad. He worked with Peter Behrens in Berlin (1930-1932) and Le Corbusier in Paris (1933-1935), where he received excellent reviews for his work in the French professional press (Pingusson, 1935; Zevros, 1935; P.V., 1937). Nevertheless, he remained tied to Zagreb through competition projects and stayed there again twice. The first time from 1925 to 1928, when he designed and built his most significant large-scale urban project, the Archiepiscopal Boys´ Seminary. The second time, after he actively participated in the creation of the „new spirit of architecture"[2] and proved his outstanding qualities as a gifted architect abroad, he showed his complete work at a solo exhibition at Technical University in Zagreb in 1937 (with excellent reviews), but his pioneering seminary remained his only built project.

ZAGREB—THE POWER OF URBAN SPACE

The history of urban Zagreb began in the middle of the 19th century when the modern city center was created: the representative framework for institutions of national culture, the so-called Green Horseshoe, modeled on Vienna's Ring (Blau & Platzer, 1999). Vibrant construction activity at the end of the 19th century, further stimulated by the reconstruction after the great earthquake of 1880, led not only to the city's transformation but also to changes in the domestic architectural scene: the establishment of professional associations, craft, and secondary schools of construction. The transition from the 19th to the 20th century was crucial for the urban and architectural development of modern Zagreb.

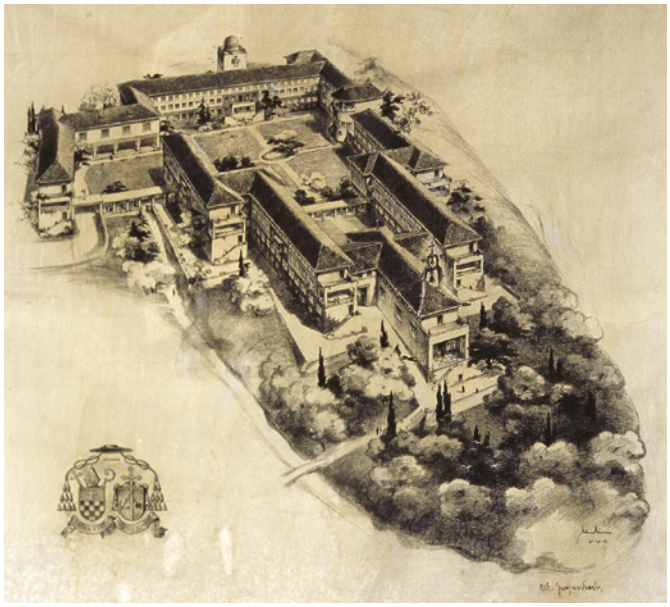
Juraj Neidhardt attended the Department of Architecture at the Royal Craft School in his native Zagreb, which ranked as an important center of decorative art and education on a middle-European scale. Thanks to the school, stylistic changes in Zagreb, from historicism and Art Nouveau via Expressionism and Art Deco to functionalism, were connected by a characteristic „...inclination toward the classical and calm, stereometrical and geometrical forms" (Čorak, 1990).

Although shortly after World War I in the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, technical universities were founded in Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Belgrade, Neidhardt followed the long-standing local tradition and studied in Vienna (1921-1924).[3] In 1924, he graduated in the class of Peter Behrens at the Academy of Fine Arts and was awarded the Austrian Engineers' Association Lindenthal Prize for his student project of a metropolitan airport (a task to which he would return during his stay with Le Corbusier in Paris in the 1930s)[4]. He started gaining work experience in the architectural studios of Ernest Lichtblau, Professor Behrens, and Polak in Vienna and in the construction company „Sikora" in Skopje.[5] Returning to Zagreb in 1925, Neidhardt continued working in the prolific architectural studios of architects Rudolf Lubynski and Lav Kalda and construction ingenieur Antun Resz. Still, his foremost goal was to achieve an objective form of expression in his own work.

SEMINARY—CONSTRUCTION HISTORY AND TIMELINE

The idea of building a metropolitan seminary first surfaced in the Zagreb Archdiocese in 1875, but it had taken years to get the finances, location, and design for the costly project right. In 1916, prominent architect Josip Vancaš designed the seminary, but at a different location. Although a detailed cost estimate was prepared, World War I prevented the construction.

After the war, archbishop Antun Bauer took up the task and, in 1922, opened the accredited Archiepiscopal Secondary School at an adapted venue, which enrolled more students every year. In November 1925, the new General Committee for building the Archiepiscopal Boys´ Seminary defined a detailed construction program. Whether the seminary was to be built as a single building or as a building cluster (or whether each bishopric contributing to its realization should obtain its own building) dominated the debates. At the suggestion of architect Vancaš, the entry project was to be entrusted to another well-known architect–Dionis Sunko. However, in December 1925, it was announced that „architect Juraj Neidhardt has already made some sketches on his own initiative," which drew the attention of the Construction Committee, and in April 1926, then twenty-five-year-old Neidhardt was commissioned to design a seminary (Barac, 1929) [FIGURE 01].



01 Juraj Neidhardt, perspective of the 1926 entry project adorns the staircase of the observatory. © Darja Radović Mahečić, 2005.

In February 1927, a narrower Building Committee was selected[6] , and they studied the blueprints that were designed by Neidhardt "under the valuable guidance of Professor Jože Plečnik from Ljubljana." As a part-time employee of the city administration (in close cooperation with the Building Committee), Neidhardt not only designed the final project but also supervised the construction until 1928, when he fell ill. The keystone was laid in June 1927, and most students were able to enter the completed buildings as early as October 1928. The entire institution– „an entire small town for 600 boys" [7]–was functional and opened to the public in June 1929. Due to Neidhardt's illness, the chapel was finished later, and it is precisely here that Plečnik's „poetics" is most recognizable, given his direct influence as an artistic consultant.[8]

Although the spatial organization of the seminary was later compared to that of a monastery (especially the Benedictine monastery in Melk) (Juračić, 1987), its urban concept, functional and economic, is primarily aligned with a building cluster system and a contemporary education strategy at the time. The saying, "a healthy mind in a healthy body," ruled this period and was manifested through a series of school buildings and children's holiday camps. The investor himself said at the time:

> *"What modern technology knows and can do, was used according to need and possibility so that the stay of cadets is useful and comfortable here… Light and air, sun and greenery. What their body needs, what their noble soul desires; what enlightens the mind, what strengthens the will; what ennobles the heart, what toughens the character—everything is there"*
> *(Barac, 1929, p. 60).*

The demanding program was fully elaborated and meticulously laid out by Neidhardt, and its rapid construction was responsible for the authenticity and unity of the ensemble [FIGURE 02].

"BUILDING IDEA" FOR THE SEMINARY

The Archiepiscopal Boys' Seminary is located on the Šalata Hill, northeast of Zagreb's center, formerly an archiepiscopal vineyard with a large vista. Apart from the buildings of the "Institute of Pathology and Anatomy" and "Faculty of Medicine" (which dominated the west side of Šalata Hill since the beginning of the 20th century), the seminary was surrounded by meadows, orchards, and vineyards on about 13 acres of land. "The entire composition was determined by the climatic conditions and the configuration of the soil," [9] read the project description. The axially composed ensemble of huge pavilion buildings was adapted to the hilly terrain that extends over 5,5 acres. Towards the surrounding roads, the complex is enclosed by a high brick and iron fence, and with this, it additionally presented the idea of an interpolated organism, a world unto himself.

The tension of the compositional axis of the complex is achieved by the dominant tower of the observatory in the north and the chapel, which is like a spike pointed towards

02 Archiepiscopal Boys´ Seminary under construction, around 1929 © Photographer unknown, Muzej grada Zagreba [Zagreb City Museum], no. MGZ-photo-2198.

03 Detail of the staircase connecting the eastern student pavilion with the refectory to the north. © Photographer unknown, published in Barac, 1929.

the city in the south. At the height of the first floor, on both sides of the chapel, congregation halls are connected with the student pavilions. They enclose the most intimate of courtyards. In these powerful pavilion wings with accented eaves, the classrooms and halls for daily living are located on the ground floor, and student dormitories are on the upper floors. Covered passages and pedestrian bridges connect pavilions with the gymnasium in the north, with a refectory, library, laboratories, and the observatory "*as a pinnacle of human knowledge.*" [10] [FIGURE 03]

To the west of the gymnasium is the "Entertainment Pavilion" with a sports hall on the ground floor and a representative hall with a stage for 600 seats above. For greater privacy, the professor's pavilion is located closest to the road on the west side and rounds off the well-defined ensemble.

The project avoids any emphasis on the main entrance, each pavilion acting as a unit in itself, and individualization of certain parts of the seminary was consistently implemented. The chapel is located at the lowest elevation point. Still, it is easily accessible both from the student pavilions and from the road by the general public, with an outward orientation towards the city and the horizon. The optical perception is important; a non-interrupted view is achieved by the gradual revelation of a series of spaces, closed and open, which flow into each other.

The dramatic expressiveness of the assembly is underlined by large dimensions, bold lines, steep ramps and stairs, rhythmical rows of windows, and a recurring circle motif. It appears in the form of small glasses on solid wooden doors, is slightly larger on the diagonally arranged windows of the staircase, and transforms into recessed dramatic hemispheres on the underside of the staircase's legs.

Neidhardt established himself as a significant large-scale urban creator very early in his career. As part of the Archibishop's Seminary, he developed the idea into a vast, large complex of open volumes as part of a thoroughly designed agglomeration that can only be experienced by gradual observation and movement. He applied a meandering path of movement to an apparently symmetrical arrangement of pavilion buildings. This spatial principle of overflowing space into space (unlike closed squares of earlier times) will become one of the leading principles in urban planning and a topic that will be repeated in Neidhardt's work. When writing about Neidhardt's work on the occasion of his solo exhibition in 1937, architect Dušan Grabrijan repeatedly emphasized that the seminary's „building idea, "a notion that Neidhardt insisted on, is refined and clear (Grabrijan, 1937a).

EMPHASIS ON NEW PRINCIPLES IN ARCHITECTURE

As a testimony of the ambivalence of the architecture of the 1920s–large buildings in a bold monumental stripped classical form, marked by uniquely composed symbolism, showing traces of expressionism–the seminary was the first large-scale demonstration of the viability and vitality of new initiatives and objectives (Radović Mahečić, 2007b).

It was built following the footsteps of the rationalist-classical German architectural movement, to which Behrens was close, and in the city of Zagreb, where the inclination towards rationality was nurtured. Like Behrens at the time, Neidhardt was interested in large and picturesque effects and broad strokes in architecture as an expression of modernity. Thus, as a drift from established architectural tradition and based on proto-functionalist criteria, the seminary was considered an early and solitary example of a new architecture, rational for the modern age.

04 Observation tower. © Darja Radović Mahečić, 2023.

05 Staircase in the gymnasium building. © Darja Radović Mahečić, 2005.

The seminary is also important in the context of the expressionist section of Croatian architecture. Plečnik drew attention to expressionism in his work as early as in 1920 in his function as an advisor. The expressionist impulse was directly transferred to Zagreb by Professor Drago Ibler from Hans Poelzig's atelier in Berlin in 1922. As the Head of the School of Architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts (1926-1942) and a key figure in interwar Croatian architecture, Ibler certainly influenced a wider circle of young architects with his expressionist sensibility (especially Stjepan Planić, Neidhardt's acquaintance from high school). Still, in the context of the modest but existing expressionist section in Croatian architecture, Neidhardt's seminary (as opposed to Ibler's unbuilt projects) has a much more prominent place (Damjanović, 2015) [FIGURE 04].

Certain impulses are present here as refined and fresh, such as the staircase with hemispheres under the stairs or the observatory tower with a coded rhythm of massive circle windows. Noteworthy here is the north side of the observatory tower, often referred to as "the only echo of Mendelsohn in Croatian architecture." (Čorak, 1981) [FIGURE 05].

From the mid-1920s onwards, Zagreb became a major construction site. While Neidhardt was finishing the seminary, Peter Behrens came to Zagreb to design the renovation of the Feller-Stern building on the Jelačić square, transforming it from Art Nouveau into a German *Neue Sachlichkeit* modernist composition (1927/28). By introducing smooth façades and shapes akin to the Bauhaus, Behrens certainly paved the way for changes and acceptance of the modern movement in local architecture.

PARALLEL REALITY, AFTER THE SEMINARY

After the construction of the seminary and with the desire to further develop as an architect, Neidhardt went abroad. At the same time, a whole series of architectural competitions were taking place throughout Yugoslavia, which opened up opportunities for local architects like

never before. Neidhardt participated in some of those competitions, especially in those for Zagreb. In his proposal for the Foundation Block, the most significant large-scale urban development project in central Zagreb in the interwar period, he proposed the idea of overflowing a smaller square, bounded by an oval building, into the larger Jelačić square (1929) (Bjažić Klarin, 2010). Solving the urban planning problems of the city of Zagreb, he proposed the idea of the „Green Artery", which would connect the north and the south of the city, and the urbanization of the Sava Plain (Trnje) according to the principles of modern urbanism (Neidhardt, 1937). After returning to Zagreb in 1935, „full of energy and desire to promote modern principles in architecture" (Planić, 1939), he continued to work on a series of competition projects, such as the Zagreb Fair (1936), Headquarters of the Croatian Rowing Club (with his brother Franjo, 2nd prize, 1936), Crafts School (1936), Yugoslav Pavilion for the Paris Exhibition 1937 (award, 1936), etc. He particularly stood out with his proposal for the regulation of Jelačić Square with its unique northern façade. From everything presented, it was clear that the scope of architectural creativity has expanded and that the architecture of an individual building is becoming a detail of urban planning (Grabrijan, 1937b).

As an architect, Neidhardt wanted to be uncompromising and, therefore, failed to find a suitable job in Zagreb where he would demonstrate his abilities in the local environment (Planić, 1939, p. 63). He decided to exhibit his previous projects in the most important architectural centers of Yugoslavia at the time, in Ljubljana, Belgrade, Sarajevo, and, of course, Zagreb: in January 1937 at the Technical Faculty (where the seminary still was his only built project). After that, he searched for work, first in Belgrade and then in 1939 in Sarajevo.

CONCLUSION

The seminary was usually mentioned in the context of Neidhardt's successful work as a young architect, so the original photographs of the seminary were published in the *40th Anniversary Memorial book* of his Technical School in 1932/33 (Širola et al., 1933), in *Građevinski vjesnik* (Construction Herald newspaper) on the occasion of his solo exhibition in 1937, and in the catalog of the exhibition "Half a century of Croatian art" in 1938 (Krizman et al., 1938). He received well-deserved attention in the 1981 monograph on architect Drago Ibler, where the seminary was highlighted in the expressionist section. In the thematic issue „Zagreb-retro" of the journal *Arhitektura* in 1987, the Seminary was included among the „forgotten buildings" of the 1920s that *„resist unequivocal classification*, "and whose importance lies in *„ambiguity, associativeness, historical reference, non-identified relation to the basic conceptual and stylistic dilemma of their era.* " (Juračić, 1987).

In the surveys of architecture of the interwar period that followed and publications with an emphasis on the 1930s, the stylistic position of the seminary was established on a trajectory that leaves neoclassicism and goes in a new direction; as an example of architecture that starts with changes, and whose momentum around 1930 will take place throughout Europe.[11]

Thanks to Neidhardt, Croatian architecture was largely directly connected to the centers of European events of the 1920s and 1930s, as evidenced by many of his later projects. In his architecture, as well as solving urban problems, Neidhardt strove to achieve a synthesis of functional elements and new ideas, whereby he paid special attention to the relationship of the building and entire urban units to the city environment or landscape.

After 1945, in socialist Yugoslavia, the number of seminarians dropped drastically and part of the seminary was used as a military hospital. A one-story connecting wing was added, which, although architecturally correct, broke the direct connection between the smaller southern and larger northern courtyard.

Since the transition of the 1990s, the fragmentation of the once unique spatial concept, now with different functions, has continued. The American School was located in one part, pharmaceutical companies were located in the other due to the proximity of the clinics, the playgrounds became parking lots, and a large part of the land belonging to it was sold to build a residential area for the upper class. The areas north, west, and east of the seminary gradually became examples of family-house neighborhoods from as early as the end of the 1920s.

For almost 100 years, the gymnasium building has been continuously working at full capacity and is unchanged. Many of the cabinets have been preserved with their original interiors, including furniture, appliances, and accessories (mostly made in Germany in the 1920s), until the earthquake in 2020 [FIGURE 06].

After the earthquake that hit Zagreb on March 22, 2020, the seminary was ranked as „damaged and unusable" until thorough renovation. The challenges that lie ahead concern both structural renovation and finding a way to preserve the complex, whose spaces are divided and aligned with each other as a functional unit (Šlosel, 2023).

06 Renovation after the 2020 earthquake in 2023. © Darja Radović Mahečić, 2023.

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ENDNOTES

1 GRABRIJAN, D.—NEIDHARDT, J. (1957), *Arhitektura Bosne i put u savremeno* [Architecture of Bosnia and the Way towards Modernity], Sarajevo: Državna založba Slovenije.

2 PREMERL, T. (1989), p. 129.

3 An additional reason for giving priority to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna could have been direct enrolment. Namely, for admission to the Faculty of Engineering in Zagreb, a Gymnasium - high school graduation was required, and with a completed Technical High School, one had to take distinction exams.

4 ZEVROS, Ch. (1935), p. 75, and in the continuation of the same article: Juraj Neidhardt, Urbanisme de Zagreb, Aeroport "AEO", pp. 83-85.

5 Bogumil Sykora was Neidhardt's classmate in Royal Craft School in Zagreb, in 1920 renamed the State Technical School. See: ŠIROLA, Bo., Širola, Br., & Prestini V. (Eds.). (1933), pp. 74-76.

6 The expert Building Committee included the most distinguished local architects August Pisačić, Martin Pilar and Janko Holjac.

7 - (1937), Nadbiskupsko dječačko sjemenište u Zagrebu / Archiepiscopal Boys' Seminary in Zagreb, In Građevinski vjesnik 1, p. 3.

8 The chapel was completed by architect Vincenz Rauscher by 1934.

9 See: Endnote 7.

10 State archive in Zagreb, Zagreb City Council, Civil engineering department, Voćarska road 106.

11 PREMERL, T. (1989), pp. 56-57; RADOVIĆ MAHEČIĆ, D. (2007), pp. 71-76.; LASLO, A. (2011). Architectural guide Zagreb 1898-2010, Zagreb: Arhitekst & DAZ, p. 160.