Modernism in Serbia: The Elusive Margins of Belgrade Architecture 1919–1941
Ljiljana Blagojević

When Le Corbusier visited Belgrade in 1911 during his famous Journey to the East, he found a “ridiculous” little town, “dishonest . . . dirty and disorganized.”1 Disappointed by not finding the magic door to the East that he had expected, he moved on to look for folk art in the “ideal” Serbian countryside. Only twenty years later, Belgrade was the vibrant capital of the much larger Yugoslavia, marked by vestigial provincialism and the uncritical desire to adopt all the signifiers of modernism. While Le Corbusier later only repeated his scornful judgment of the city, Jože Plečnik, another luminary of modern architecture, wrote in 1927 that Belgrade would “undoubtedly” become “like Vienna or Paris.”2 The city never realized that potential, but in the two decades between the world wars it did transform itself into a large European capital with all the contradictions of modern urban life.

Modernism in Serbia: The Elusive Margins of Belgrade Architecture 1919–1941 traces the meandering paths of the modernization of architecture in the Yugoslav capital during this period. Written by a native, practicing architect and architectural historian, it is the first book in English devoted to modern architecture in Serbia and therefore a unique source that contributes to the growing study of various local modernisms around the world.

A well-illustrated volume, equipped mainly with period photographs, many of which are published here for the first time, Modernism in Serbia delves into the culture of Belgrade to contextualize its modern architecture with a breadth of references lacking in the existing, more conservative local architectural histories.3 In engaging material that eludes clear classification, the book intentionally adopts the format of a collection of essays rather than attempting a comprehensive history. Its fragmented structure notwithstanding, the volume creates a reasonably coherent picture of major modernist developments in the city, functioning simultaneously as an encyclopedic Who’s Who and a critical study. Reducing modernism in Serbia to the architectural scene of Belgrade, however, the book does not fulfill the promise of its title. Although the largest, Belgrade was not the only important center of architecture in the country. This choice highlights a problem shared by most histories of Serbian architecture: they fail to do justice to Serbia’s other local modernisms, particularly those of the northern province of the Vojvodina.

Ljiljana Blagojević’s study reflects a growing wave of interest in Eastern Europe and appeared almost simultaneously with another book from the same publisher that deals with the culture of the Balkan region: Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991, edited by Dubravka Djuric and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge, Mass., 2003). The latter volume, which traces the complex history of avant-garde movements in Yugoslavia in fields ranging from literature, visual arts, and architecture to film and music, can be read alongside Blagojević’s book as a means to remedy the geographic limitation of the Belgrade study. The only essay it contains on architecture, however, “Architecture in Former Yugoslavia: From the Avant-garde to the Postmodern,” by the Slovenian architectural historian Peter Krečič, will prove difficult for an uninitiated reader to follow: with many names and buildings and not enough illustrations, it is a stylistic chronicle covering seventy years that does not attempt a synthetic overview.

Modernism in Serbia consists of five chapters with more or less loosely defined topics. The book opens with an exploration of the emancipating role of the avant-garde movement Zenitism. Ljubomir Micić, the founder and main ideologue of Zenitism, is best known for his concept of “barbarogenius,” the youthful Balkan spirit ready to revitalize old Europe. Blagojević contrasts this idea with Le Corbusier’s regressive view of the Serbs as “noble savages” (3ff.). Blagojević is the first scholar to note that while Zenitism left few purely architectural traces, it was important to the further development of architecture in Belgrade. In this respect, she establishes a new genealogy for Serbian architectural modernism. Equally convincing are chapters four and five. The former deals with the problems of dwelling and everyday life, while the latter offers an analysis of the architecture of Milan Zloković, one of the book’s principal heroes. From the perspective of prior studies of Belgrade’s architecture, Blagojević’s is an innovative work with an eclectic methodology that combines more traditional approaches with cultural and social studies, studies of fashion and photography, and Benjaminian theory. Particularly fruitful is chapter four, which intertwines a well-researched account of the housing crisis and the patterns of dwelling in interwar Belgrade, supported by statistics and contemporary testimonials, with analyses of buildings to create an engaging story that puts architecture into a wider social frame.

Chapters two and three, however, have much more loosely defined themes, which are sometimes confusing. In chapter three, for example, it is puzzling how Nikola Dobrović, the most uncompromising advocate of modernism in Serbian architecture, fits within the story of the more conservative Serbian and Yugoslav pavilions at international expositions. Furthermore, theorizing occasionally seems to serve only as a device to confirm the author’s participation in current architectural discourse. This is particularly evident in the extensive quotations from Walter Benjamin’s writings in chapter three, which at moments work as mere appendices to the text rather than enhancing its meaning.

The most problematic aspect of the book is its implicit definition of mod-
ernism. The author apparently advocates the idea that modernism in Belgrade had loose and unstable boundaries. This could have been a powerful point had it not been compromised by her attempts to distinguish between the “real” modernism and its “unauthentic” versions. It is surprising that a book dealing with such a diversity of formal approaches would characterize “authentic” modernism in ways that do not seem to allow for anything but the most canonical definitions by Sigfried Giedion or Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson.

Blagojević is probably correct when she compares the situation in Belgrade to American architecture and urbanism without the accompanying “social, political, and ethical content” (182). But she fails to emancipate her own subject from the dictates of the modernist canon in ways that American modernism has freed itself in recent years. This is especially true in the treatment of Dragiša Brašovan, the great “style master,” as Blagojević calls him, whose work is comparable both in form and in social background to American Modernist architecture of the late 1920s and early 1930s. For example, intent on deconstructing the mythical status that Brašovan’s Pavilion of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes at the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona enjoys in the history of Serbian modern architecture, the author only perpetuates another myth, the scathing characterization of Brašovan, launched by his radical rival Dobrović, as an “incomplete modernist.” In a comparison with one of the greatest icons of modern architecture, Mies van der Rohe’s German Pavilion at the same exposition, Brašovan’s multifaceted expressionist building is seen as a “contrived . . . formal exercise” with no “transparency or simultaneity of spatial experiences”—criteria of modernism taken directly from Giedion (96).

Apart from the fact that few of the buildings Blagojević praises as “authentically modern” could stand up to judgment by the canonical criteria, the author fails to point out what could be the most interesting conclusion to draw from her research: unlike the more homogenized modernisms in rival cities like Zagreb, with its functionalist school, and Ljubljana, dominated by Plečnik, Belgrade offered a great variety of approaches compressed within a small physical and social space. Almost all the different modernisms of the prewar period simultaneously found a place there, from Loosian architecture and “naked” functionalism, to Italian rationalism, Constructivist-influenced work, and many variants of the Moderne. Except in very broad surveys, the radical and the mainstream rarely appear side by side in the same book, and the very fact that Blagojević discusses Brašovan’s monumental state commissions—no matter how “incompletely” modern—alongside Dobrović’s radical proposals testifies to this compression of the range of architectural production in Belgrade.

Still, Modernism in Serbia offers valuable insights into a body of work that is almost totally unknown outside its own country and the abundant photographs and excellent new drawings will help readers draw conclusions of their own. Equally important, Blagojević’s engaging writing holds the potential to spark new discussions in Serbia itself, whose architectural discourse has greatly suffered from the past decade of isolation.

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Notes
2. Quoted in Dušan Grabrijan, Plečnik in njegova Sola (Maribor, 1968), 70.
3. In the early 1970s, Zoran Manević founded research on Serbian architectural modernism with his doctoral dissertation, followed by many subsequent publications. A number of younger art historians have taken up the task, the most prolific among them Aleksandar Kadijević. The most comprehensive, though rather controversial, study is the recent book by Miloš R. Perović, Srpska arhitektura XX veka/Serbian Architecture of the 20th Century (Belgrade, 2004).

Vincent Scully
Modern Architecture and Other Essays
Selected and with introductions by Neil Levine

How many historians have read Vincent Scully’s splendid essay “The Nature of the Classical in Art”? According to Neil Levine, who has been posing the question for forty years, the answer is none. This is hardly surprising, since the essay appeared in 1958 in Yale French Studies, but other Scully essays are equally elusive. Such is the justification for this overdue and welcome anthology.

Scully owes his reputation to an authorial voice that is as arresting in the classroom as on the printed page. In lecture, it is the elegant literary and formal precision that startles; on the printed page, the intimate spoken quality. This eloquence was honed in the classrooms of Yale University, where he began teaching in 1949, and his most celebrated works, such as The Shingle Style (1955; rev. ed. New Haven, 1971) and American Architecture and Urbanism (New York, 1961), have the sense of urgency of the well-paced slide lecture. But as spirited as these formal set pieces are, Scully’s topical criticism, which comprises much of this volume, is even more pungent.

In Modern Architecture and Other Essays, Levine has gathered twenty pieces from over five decades, choosing those least accessible and most important in showing Scully’s evolving thought about modernism. They form a kind of critical history of American postwar modernism—a history in which Scully was participant as well as commentator. The anthology is a model of editorial probity. Each essay is headed by a generous introduction that describes its genesis, historical context, and critical reception. The essays are printed without revisions, apart from certain minor corrections such as dates or spelling. Rather than reprinting the original pho-