

Unfinished Modernisations: Reconstructing the Architectural History of Socialist Yugoslavia

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More than 20 years have passed since the break-up of Yugoslavia, a state that during the 20th century experienced every great turning point in the world—World War I, World War II, the collapse of the Cold War division, the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism—through its own traumatic internal transformation. The region was the testing ground for a variety of ideologies, thus continuing the already complicated history of an extremely heterogeneous territory in terms of ethnicity, culture and civilization.

We conceived the regional research project *Unfinished Modernisations—Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States* in order to explore how the dramatic social and political changes affected the production of the built environment in the region. We centered the project around the keyword “modernization,” rather than modernism or modernity, as a way to highlight the transitory character of the processes rather than the finished products. We argue that Yugoslavia’s multiple unfinished modernizations, with their divergent and often contradictory goals, capture the defining character of the resultant built environments.

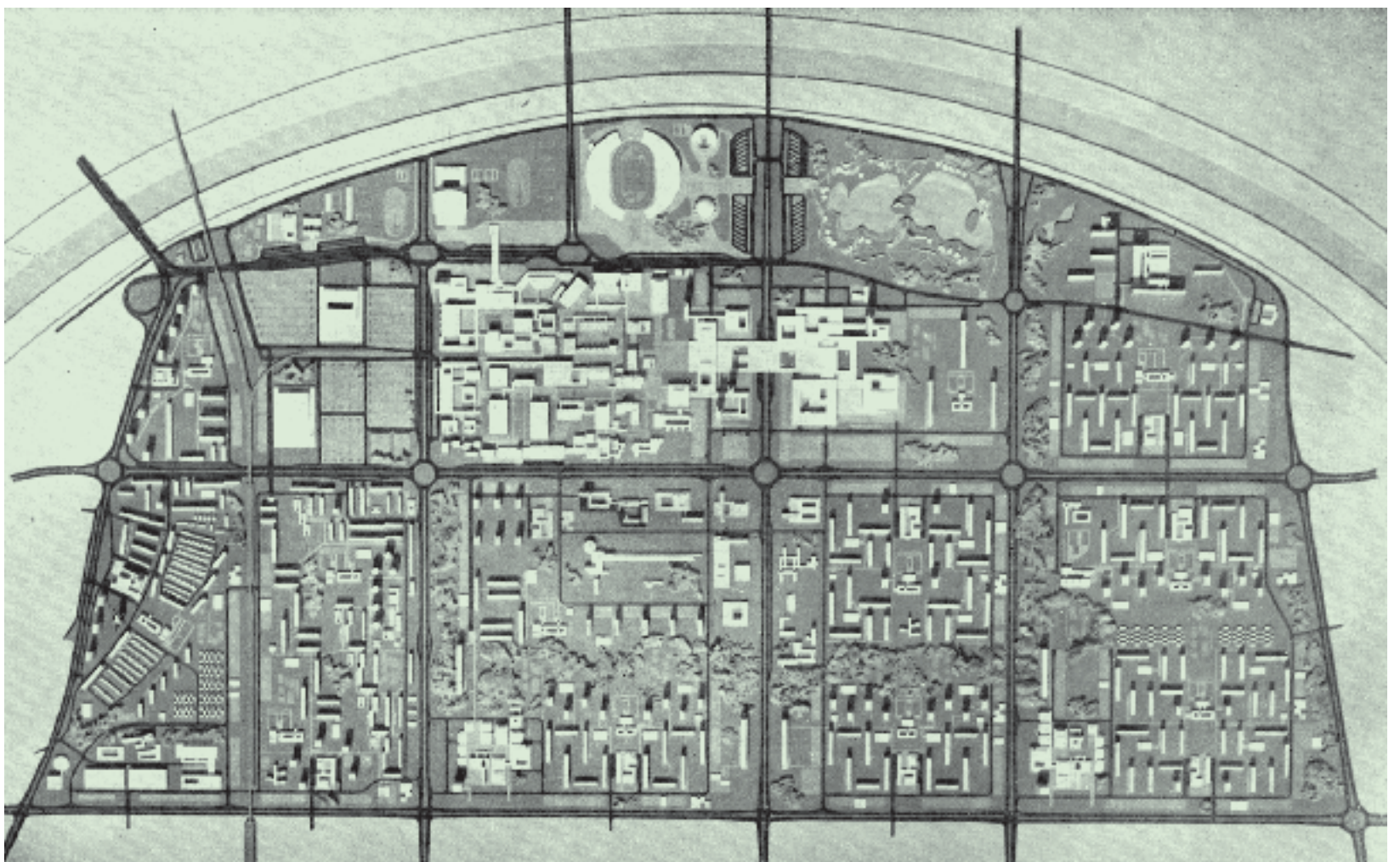
For the purpose of indicating the conceptual and theoretical framework, we understand modernism as a social formation, and modernity as an epoch with its pertaining values. The history of socialist Yugoslavia is still relatively poorly researched, and integrated interpretations are lacking in all fields. The processes of modernization, with their different

motivations and effects, offer an instructive perspective of the ways in which architecture and urban planning were linked to the social context. Modernity’s global diversities and variations manifest themselves particularly through precisely these processes. Here we consider modernity as the point of departure for modernization, and the various modernisms as its forms.

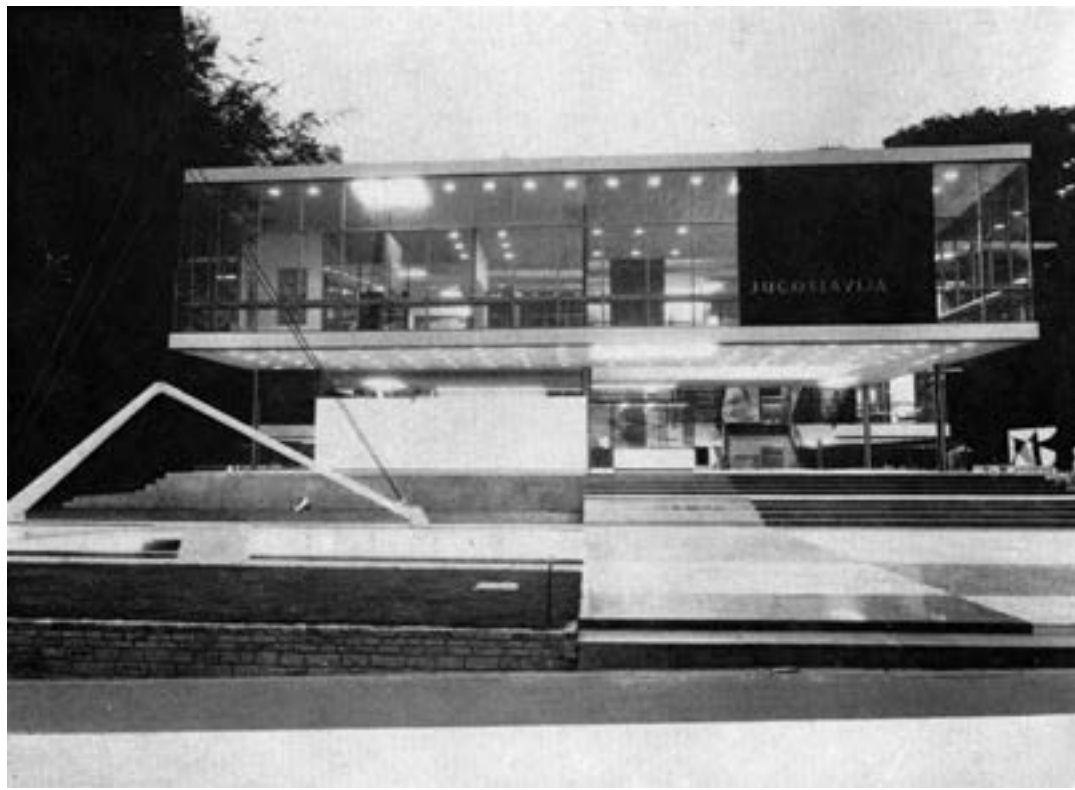
We refer to modernizations in the plural because we consider them to be multiple and fragmented processes: the history of the region is crucially marked by interruptions, attempts at establishing continuity, and the repeated revisions of the concepts of modernization. These processes, whether intentionally or consequentially, showed a certain degree of independence or divergence from how they played out in the international centers of modernity, which was essentially affected by Yugoslavia’s “inbetween” position: between the socialist east and the capitalist west, the economically developed north and the underdeveloped south, progressive cultural experiments and re-traditionalization, between innovative political conceptions and repressive mechanisms of ideological control. Under such conditions, an unprincipled blend of pragmatism and utopia may have seemed necessary both to the governmental elites that carried out the modernizations, and also to the widest strata of the citizenry who expected, if with anxiety and doubt, a better future from these modernizations. Our understanding of the Yugoslav context, then, is based on a reading of two positions



Edvard Ravnikar: Plan of New Belgrade, 1947



Zagreb City Planning Office: plan of New Zagreb, 1962



Vjenceslav Richter: EXPO 58 pavillion, Brussels, 1958



Bogdan Bogdanović: Jasenovac memorial, 1966

“between:” one related to the global and the other to the inner contrasts that fundamentally marked the history of the region.

There are several reasons why we believed that a project like this was necessary at this particular moment. The first is an attempt at intervening in the historical moment with the goal to historicize the recent past while it’s still relatively fresh and while many of its original protagonists are available for interview. Upon the collapse of the socialist state, the architectural history of Yugoslavia had a similar fate to that of another failed multinational state in the region, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Like Austria-Hungary, Yugoslavia was also a polycentric state characterized by a tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, which led to the construction of distinct architectural cultures of the constituent ethnicities, yet under a shared political-economic system, thus resulting in numerous commonalities and overlaps. After the collapse of both states, their closely intertwined cultures were partitioned according to new national borders and the resultant narratives aimed at stressing national selfhood and uniqueness. The built environment produced under the same socio-political conditions thus lost an important common dimension. Attempts at reconstructing the shared architectural history of the former Austro-Hungarian lands emerged only in the 1990s, seventy years after the collapse of the Empire. With *Unfinished Modernisations* we hope to shorten the lag for the former Yugoslavia.

The second reason for *Unfinished Modernisations* was to offer a wide-ranging contextual perspective on the architecture of the recent past and thus to avoid the flattening of the historical perspective that unavoidably results from the passage of time. The past several years have witnessed a veritable wave of coffee-table publications about the architectural heritage of the former socialist world that have flooded the international book market. Often produced by curious outsiders, these publications highlight what is spectacular, unusual, or simply weird about the architecture in question. In a telling example, Frederic Chaubin’s heavily advertized book on the architecture in the former Soviet republics terms its topic “cosmic communist constructions.”¹

Another approach is to highlight the neglect and deterioration of architecture; the indicatively titled *Socialist Modernism* by the German photographer Roman Bezjak thus focuses on the “dirty magic of socialist architecture,” as one of the accompanying essays puts it.² Both approaches ultimately exoticize an unknown “other” that—no longer ideologically dangerous—can be enjoyed for its visual effect, but without much delving either into the background and context of its objects or into the reasons for

their current state. The architecture of the socialist period thus appears as something produced in a cultural, theoretical, and discursive vacuum, or at least something out of reach of contemporary interpretation, as if it were a product of a long-lost civilization whose documents we can no longer read.

At the time when we conceived *Unfinished Modernisations* in 2010, we were not fully aware that the project would be seen as an antidote to such simplified views, simply because most of the described publications had only appeared in the preceding two or three years. Yet our very point of departure was exactly the opposite from theirs. First, we were clearly aware that the architecture we were choosing to study was produced by rich architectural cultures operating under very particular historical conditions and with very particular social goals. Second, we understood that most of the built environments produced under socialism were not only not disappearing, but that they constitute a critical part of the existing urban fabric across the region, frequently more resilient than and superior to those produced in the more recent period under transitional and neoliberal economies. We asked ourselves: how is such resilience possible and what can we learn from it? What are the qualities and meanings of the built environments produced under socialism and how do they compare with the international "canon" of modern architecture, from which they are completely excluded?

There was another aspect that was built into the project from the very start, but that crystallized with increasing clarity as the project evolved. The title *Unfinished Modernisations* evokes Jürgen Habermas's qualification of modernity as an "incomplete project," and a project of emancipation.³ We thus sought to evaluate the emancipatory qualities of the built environments inherited from the socialist past, and also to identify the reasons why the project of emancipation was in some instances only partly carried out, or even completely failed in others. We traced how the successive changes of the social context led to changes in the objectives of modernization, ultimately detecting a sequence of unfinished but mutually linked modernization projects easily discernible in today's physiognomy of the built environment.

Echoing its own theme of constantly shifting modernisations, the project was itself a "work in progress" that somewhat changed its course as it evolved. Originally we planned to pay equal attention to the successive transformations in the concepts of modernization from 1945 until today: the socialist revolution, the continuously evolving socialist state, its collapse in 1991, the post-socialist transition, and the current neoliberal economy. However, it soon



Kenzo Tange: Competition project for centre of Skopje, 1964



Energoprojekt: Lagos Fair, 1973-1977



Vladimir Braco Mušič, Marjan Bežan, Nives Starc:
Split 3 housing district plan, model, 1968

became clear that the socialist period attracted the lion's share of attention from the majority of participants, not only because of its greater length than the subsequent periods, but also as an unavoidable point of comparison. Half-way through, the project's focus thus shifted completely towards the particular socialist modernizations, the complexity and multiplicity of which was nevertheless such that we could hardly exhaust it. Ultimately, the research was structured around the following five "spaces:" Spaces of representation

The section focused on architecture as the means of ideological representation. Besides analyses of buildings, it included parallel interviews with Kenneth Frampton and the Slovenian philosopher Rado Riha, as well as a film analysis of Yugoslav modernization, based on a film festival shown in conjunction with one of the project's conferences, held in Belgrade in 2011.

The break with the East Bloc in 1948 sparked the experiment of Yugoslav self-managing socialism. Both internal and external conditions urgently required the representation of the socialist order as modern, open and progressive. These messages were conveyed both through the aesthetics and the scale of massive construction programs, such as the new urban development of the twin cities of Novi Beograd and Novi Zagreb. (image Nikola Dobrović: Plan of New Belgrade, 1948); image Zagreb City Planning Office: plan of New Zagreb, 1962) Such endeavors had both pragmatic and symbolic value, embodying and representing the modernizing ambitions of the socialist society as on par with the leading international centers. Important building operations were used to legitimize the social order, and the best modernist architects were regularly commissioned for such tasks. In this way modernism became

a signifier of the proclaimed progressive nature of Yugoslav socialism, although this was not an official cultural policy, rather a logically established affiliation. Every architectural execution was presented as one more success of socialist modernization. In return for this aesthetic concession, projects that were particularly ambitious and advanced could be produced in areas of great symbolic significance, such as the building of the Federal Executive Council (the government) and the Defense Ministry in Belgrade, Revolution Square (today Republic Square) in Ljubljana, the incomplete City Hall complex in Zagreb, which was meant to be part of a new main city square lined with civic buildings, or the Museum of Liberation and the Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo. The buildings of party administration, such as the headquarters of the League of Communists in Belgrade, Zagreb, Skopje and Titograd (today Podgorica) were also designed, each in their own way, in a modernist language.

Abroad, considerable attention was devoted to the appearances of Yugoslavia at great international exhibitions. Vjenceslav Richter and associates began designing neo-avant-garde projects for stands and pavilions at such shows as early as the late 1940s. Richter continued to investigate exhibition architecture in his internationally acclaimed projects for the Pavilions of Yugoslavia at the Brussels Expo in 1958 (image Vjenceslav Richter: EXPO 58 pavilion, Brussels, 1958) and the Milan Triennial in 1963. From the mid-1970s architectural representation shifted back to Yugoslavia as the country organized a number of high-profile international sporting and political events that affirmed its positioning in the global context. Among the most important of such events were the 1979 Mediterranean Games in Split, the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo, the 1977 CSCE (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe) Conference in Belgrade, and the 1987 University Games in Zagreb, all of them providing opportunities for major urban development and renewal projects.

An important segment in the symbolic legitimization of the system was the construction of monuments and memorials to the anti-Fascist war and the revolution. Their number was enormous and the quality and aesthetic expression uneven. Perhaps the most important memorials were built by leading artists and architects such as Vojin Bakić, Bogdan Bogdanović (image Bogdan Bogdanović: Jasenovac memorial, 1966) and Edvard Ravnikar. They designed complex non-figural environments that defied the conventional boundaries between architecture, landscape, and sculpture, their artistic achievement transcending the borders of the region.

Spaces of global exchange

Socialist Yugoslavia's position between east and west had major effects on its architecture and urbanism. The country used its specific geopolitical position for the considerable advances in its technical capacities and culture. It facilitated encounters of the rival blocs, and even the merging and hybridization of their experiences. Its leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement opened up the chances for post-colonial collaboration in third world countries. Yugoslav architects underwent advanced training and specialization with the world's leading practitioners and institutions and kept up their international connections. It was highly symbolic that the famous last 10th meeting of CIAM was held in Dubrovnik in 1956, even though the participation of local architects was limited. The long tradition of the Zagreb Fair reached its peak at the height of the Cold War, between the mid 1950s and the early 1970s. The site was a testing ground for modernist architectural experiments in which architects from Yugoslavia and both Eastern and Western blocs built pavilions. Important fairs were also held in Belgrade and Ljubljana. The Biennial of Industrial Design (BIO) was first held in Ljubljana in 1964 and soon acquired an international reputation.

Exchange of exceptional symbolic importance were two large-scale urban planning projects, both co-financed by the United Nations. One was the plan for the reconstruction of Skopje after the disastrous earthquake of 1963, the other large scale regional plans for the Adriatic region. After an international competition, the leading Japanese architect Kenzo Tange and his team were commissioned to design the downtown area of Skopje; this was the first important export of modern urban planning concepts from Japan to the international context (image Kenzo Tange: Competition project for centre of Skopje, 1964). A number of Skopje's public buildings were donations from the various countries of the world, such as an elementary school designed by the Swiss modernist Alfred Roth and the Museum of Contemporary Art designed by the Polish Group Tigers⁴. Skopje thus enthused in a cosmopolitan air of collaboration. Exchange with international architectural discourse significantly contributed to the development local architectural scene. Plans for the Adriatic devised between 1967 and 1972 brought together local town planners and other experts, who had already drawn up a methodology for the analysis and development of the coast with international consulting teams from around the world. The project resulted in meticulously worked-out interdisciplinary plans aimed at the integrated planning of economic and urban growth

with special attention paid to protection of historical and natural environments.

Abroad, the Yugoslav construction industry, which was making progress thanks to modernization on its own territory, became competitive in the international markets too, mobilizing its political links with the Third World and East Bloc countries.

Construction companies offered a full range of services, including architectural and urban planning. Many of these companies, like Komgrap, Tehnika, Industrogradnja, Smelt and Energoinvest built successfully around the world. The largest one was Energoprojekt, which undertook jobs in over 80 countries. Some of these business connections have survived the collapse of Yugoslavia, but on a much smaller scale. (image Energoprojekt: Lagos Fair, 1973-1977)

Politics of urban space

The section explored the evolution and contradictions in the development and governance of urban space. Large construction operations, although planned on rational principles, were in the formative decades of socialism essentially motivated both by pragmatic and political reasons. The appropriation of green field territories for new cities and settlements outstripped the real capacities of the period, and most likely the needs too. Often these areas still remain incomplete, with hollow spaces in the urban tissue that were never filled with the planned programs. Visions of new cities of utopian scale and ambitions certainly did change the social landscape and the demographic structure of society, for they



Janez Lajovic, Vladimir Mušič, Anton Pibernik, Savin Sever: prototype of housing unit, Flat for Our Circumstances exhibition, 1956

Andrija Čičin-Šajn, Žarko Vincek: Hotel Libertas model, Dubrovnik, 1968-72



enabled a major influx of the rural population into the cities, providing a supply of industrial labor and the formation of a new class of urban workers as generators of the development of socialist society. The vast energy put into these operations partially paid off: the basic planning concept of the "Radiant City" of sun, space and greenery was achieved and over the decades was perfected by humanizing the scale and spatial layouts. One of most notable examples of advanced "design for the largest number" is vast residential district Split 3, where the megastructural scheme included cozy pedestrian streets and variations of scales and architectural articulation (image Vladimir Braco Mušič, Narjan Bežan, Nives Starc: Split 3 housing district plan, model, 1968). Prefabricated building systems, such as IMS Žeželj and YU-61, were developed to facilitate their construction. "Public space" was abundant: common ownership of the land allowed for generous open spaces for all, but only in rare instances was that space treated as an active social space of the city. The socialist system, moreover, did not manage to achieve a rhythm of urbanization such as to ensure everyone the right to housing, and illegal and deregulated building was tacitly tolerated or ignored.

One of the consequences of the first wave of mass urbanization during the second half of the 1950s and during the 1960s was the development of the construction industry, which became one of the most powerful branches of the economy. With the economic reforms carried out in the mid-1960s, the influence of the building firms on the production of the built environment was ever more pronounced. The large architectural offices enabled effective planning and technological optimization, but in general did not stimulate conceptual experiments. Although it was constantly pointed out that Yugoslav socialism was supposed to lead towards a "withering away of the state" and to encourage the various forms of social participation, management of the space was in fact technocratic and top-down oriented.

Design of spatial practices

This section focused on the design of the facilities for everyday life, predominantly housing and mass tourism. Urbanization left a particularly deep mark on housing. At the height of modernization, what is colloquially called "crane-urbanism" and the mass produced architecture of the housing estates and blocks produced visually and typologically uniform environments Yugoslavia-wide. These environments may not have been the complete realization of the ideal modern city, but the advantages derived from reliable standards and the lavishness of public space did ensure a sound level of residential building. The floor plans of flats were on the whole at

a high level and their continuous refinement aimed at pulling the maximum spatial qualities from limited resources. Modern housing included the design of furnishings, and was gladly taken as a signifier of general social progress. In 1956, the first all-Yugoslav conference on housing construction was organized in Ljubljana under the title a Flat for Our Circumstances, (image Janez Lajovic, Vladimir Mušič, Anton Pibernik, Savin Sever: prototype of housing unit, Flat for Our Circumstances exhibition, 1956) which included a competition for dwellings, equipment and sanitary fittings. A number of educational exhibitions with similar topics followed in other cities. With the advancement of urbanization, housing was addressed in an interdisciplinary way by incorporating substantial sociological and psychological research. These researches problematized the ways in which modernization affected or reshaped traditional social formations with the "nuclear family", the presumed basic cell of socialist society. At the social level, egalitarianism in the allocation of housing led to social heterogeneity in most of the modernist housing estates, which is largely preserved to this day. Housing construction was accompanied by the production of welfare buildings that formed the basic infrastructure of community services, such as kindergartens, schools, and clinics.

Particularly advanced architecture was produced in situations with complex programs: educational institutions and hospital complexes. The economic development and the increasing openness of society instigated new social practices like mass tourism and consumerism, indicating a shift from collectivism to a more individualist society. This process was accompanied by the expansion of architectural typologies including row-houses, terraced houses and mixed density developments. These were alternatives to modernist slab-and-tower settlements, but also to illegal construction. As a result of the international growth of mass tourism, the Yugoslav coastline became a desirable and suitable destination for visitors from Eastern and particularly from Western Europe. Tourism was one of the main sources of hard currency. Tourist architecture in the period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s became an area of vigorous experimentation with results worthy of international consideration. Thanks to regional planning, the coast remained protected against excessive urbanization. (image Andrija Čičin-Šajn, Žarko Vinček: Hotel Libertas, Dubrovnik, 1968-72) Architectural research of buildings for commerce and the growth in their scale from supermarket to department store to prototype malls developed practically in a straight line from the end of the 1950s to the disintegration of socialism.

Yugoslav architectural space

Should the former Yugoslavia be studied as a whole, considering that its architecture comprised distinct and authentic architectural cultures associated with the national architecture schools? Socialist modernization enabled the emergence of such cultures, which were further aided by the cultural autonomy and high status of the architectural profession. By the early 1920s, there were three architectural schools: in Belgrade (1897), Zagreb (1919) and Ljubljana (1920), followed immediately after World War II by those in Sarajevo (1949) and Skopje (1949). At the beginning of the 1980s a sixth school opened in Priština. All had similar polytechnic curricula, and the mastery of architectural design skills was based on gradually completing increasingly complex typological tasks, indicating a pragmatic education applicable in practice. In spite of their broad similarities, the schools developed distinct aesthetic and conceptual profiles. Such heterogeneity had several sources. Through most of the socialist period, all schools subscribed to a modernist ideology, but at the same time each drew on the greatly differing local traditions of urban cultures and vernacular forms. Leading creative personalities also greatly affected their profiles. Finally, individual schools gravitated towards different international centers where their leading architects completed their advanced training. For example, Ljubljana had contacts with Scandinavia, Zagreb with the Netherlands, and Skopje with the USA. All of Yugoslavia's architectural scenes were well informed of and interested in current international goings-on.

Architecture in Yugoslavia was in no way a monolithic cultural formation; it was largely divided into individual national schools and scenes according to the federal organization of the state. What brought these separate scenes together, however, was a common socio-political context, which enabled the cultural autonomy of architecture and provided the general framework of modernization with its common programs, standards, and resources. Architects worked predominantly within their own republics and professional organizations, such as the architects' associations, were organized at the level of the republic. The intensity of exchange between the different republics fluctuated; during the first post-war years it was strong, particularly when it came to aiding the foundation of new schools in Sarajevo and Skopje; in the subsequent years it had its ebbs and flows. Certain pan-Yugoslav phenomena emerged out of such circumstances, for example the unique success that Slovene architects had at architectural competitions around the country in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in some significant executions. Despite a certain parochialism in all of the republics,

architectural competitions, congresses, exhibitions, and awards organized at the federal level allowed for regular exchanges. (image Marko Mušič: University Complex, Skopje, 1974)

After socialist Yugoslavia

After the collapse of socialism and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the region entered a transition period marked by increasing differences among the newly established independent states. The western part has gradually stabilised, but the central and eastern parts are stagnating and even regressing economically. A strong division into East and West has been reinstated by the Schengen frontier on the eastern border of Slovenia, soon to be moved to the eastern border of Croatia. This has led to a kind of return to the pre-Yugoslav state of affairs. The dissolution of Yugoslavia has brought the countries of the region, from their one-time 'place in-between', once again into a provincial position. During the 1990s and in some places still today, the various degrees of re-traditionalisation and political and cultural regression have denied the achievements of the prior waves of modernisation. But the economic and cultural connections, interrupted during the collapse of Yugoslavia, have been recently gradually re-established, and the attitude to the joint socialist past, in spite of continued resistance, is ever less a taboo topic. Across the region, new actors in the real-estate business have transformed the built environment. At first, it was the local capital created during the controversial privatization in the 1990s, as well as the pettier private initiative that exploited the planning deregulation. The political normalization brought the inflow of international capital, which had an effect on the building boom trend up to the recent financial crisis.

Under such circumstances, both the physical remains and the lessons of previous uncompleted modernisations seem superior to the current situation, both in terms of concrete concepts of urban development, as well as the dominant politics of space that are ever more narrowing the realm of the public good. The occasional outstanding achievements in contemporary design show the continuity of architectural culture, while research into the built environment is turning to analyses of phenomena such as informal building and the active involvement of citizens in decision making about city development. There has been a kind of about-turn in the understanding of the role of urbanisation as against the ideology of the socialist period: pure pragmatism is the only motive for urban development, and any critical counter-proposals take on a utopian character.



Marko Mušič: University Complex, Skopje, 1974

¹ Frederic Chaubin, *Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed* (Cologne: Taschen, 2011).

² Inka Schube, ed., *Roman Bezjak: Socialist Modernism* (Ostfildern bei Stuttgart, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

³ See: Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project," in: Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib, eds., *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997).

⁴ Jerzy Morzynski, Eugeniusz Wierzbicki, Waclaw Klyszewski