



# Basic Development Attributes of Modernist Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia

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<http://doi.org/10.29227/IM-2024-02-76>

Submission date: 17.06.2024. | Review date: 12.07.2024

## Abstract

*Strong economical growth and multileveled development of the entire society that marked 45 years of existence of former state Yugoslavia transformed social conditions of previously non-developed and neglected rural state to the middle developed European country with significant urban, industrial, infrastructural and cultural progress and permanent rise of life standard. Intensive urbanization and construction of hundreds of thousands of residential units and hundreds of new settlements were realized thanks to massive use of numerous of prefabricated systems created and developed in Yugoslavia, designed and built in accordance to established high standards for housing design and construction technology. Related to the modernist ideas, architects and architecture had important role in changing of society, life conditions and way of life in general. Architecture was understood as one of the most representative reflections of proclaimed ideas for creation of new socialist society oriented to the wide spectra of human needs and public interests of the community. Predominant modernist orientation in architectural, urban design and planning approach wasn't uniform and boring, but characterized with freely defined individualism of architects and numerous architectural schools and directions of architectural thinking oriented to researches, innovations and different attitudes to tradition, internationalization, natural context, human-oriented design, art and visual expressions. Architecture of modernism was very often arrogant to context, urban and natural environment, but in case of Yugoslav modernism is significant and clear tendency of modernism to fully respect context of site topography, tradition of place, views, natural and climate conditions. Critical regionalism and organic modernism tendencies are legible from numerous examples, particularly in touristic architecture and existence of schools of architecture that were promoting modernist interpretation of traditional and vernacular architecture.*

**Keywords:** Modernist architecture, Urbanization, Socialist Yugoslavia, social context

## 1. Introduction

Development of society that will be positioned between divided parts of the world after second World War, which will be open and exposed to external influences, allowed ideas and information to blow in some new and mostly progressive winds from different parts of the World. Even Yugoslavia was established as socialist country, it was mostly oriented to the western culture, art, social relations and way of living. Proclaimed ideas of industrialization, modernization and urbanization were complementary with revolutionary aspect of modernist architecture which intended to change way of living and started to reflect social and state determination in Yugoslavia. Socialist economy, property policy and different relation to profit open the possibility for architecture to emphasize human orientation with high level of social responsibility and respect to public interest.

From the huge architectural legacy built in the period of socialist Yugoslavia it is possible to extract some of the visible premises and principles that were promoted in architecture with significant importance:

- urbanization and human approach to architecture;
- understanding of context and development of critical regionalism in architecture;
- heterogeneity and individuality, the existence of numerous schools of architecture and different individual approaches;
- development of construction technology, mass prefabrication, establishment of regulations and standards;
- the role and position of the architect and architecture in society, freedom of design..

## 2. Urbanization and Human Approach to Architecture

Beside the larger urban centers of socialist Yugoslavia, smaller cities, even those that were completely re-established as a result of industrial development, were topics of noticeable and serious work of architects and urban planners on urbanization in accordance with humanistic and modernist aspirations. There are tens of such examples throughout the former state where it is possible to recognize patterns of then modernist planning and urban development.

Urbanization in Yugoslavia, as in the big part of the world, was based on modernist principles. Residential settlements throughout Yugoslavia resembled each other, built according to similar standards and by using similar technologies. Differences arose during the time of formation, through evolution that brought new concepts and rhythms of construction. The symbolic meaning, social aspirations and activated resources could be different, but over time instrumental modernization would show its equalizing effect [1]. As an example, Mrduljaš stated New Belgrade, which was supposed to take over the role of the representative center of Yugoslavia, and Skopje, which after the earthquake was supposed to become an example of a world city, whose reconstruction was coordinated by the United Nations [1].

During the existence of Yugoslavia, the term urbanization was not only related to city planning and architecture. Urban culture flourished in numerous fields, among which, mass education and artistic activities, such as music, film, theater, art disciplines and literature, stand out and very often take a critical stance against the system.

"Modernism promoted the importance of residential architecture, which, driven by ideas of human scale, through an intensive study of human habits and needs, became the subject of significant interest of modernist architects. A similar attitude of urban planners and

architects towards the design of residential areas, buildings and apartments in them, was also established in socialist Yugoslavia, where continuous and intensive effort was made on improving the quality of housing and many aspects of urbanity [2].”

High standards of design and construction represent a visible evolution as the result of the continuous progress of architecture in Yugoslavia that grew during the time. The architectural design was characterized by human oriented aspirations with pronounced heterogeneity of the aesthetic approach. A significant step forward was made in implementation of spatial concepts in residential architecture, adapted to human needs and designed with much more sense and applied scientifically based knowledge and experience, very far from typical residential buildings from the previous decades, built in the 1950s and early 1960s with basic typical apartments and pure formal and aesthetic ranges.

The materialization of the idea of a humanistic society oriented towards human, regardless of his or her status, was reflected through architecture derived from an understanding based on the idea of creating a socialist society. It was a time when was designed and built a lot, a time that had an extremely responsible attitude towards the context and the creation of a humane landscape [3].

### 3. Understanding of Architectural Context and Development of Critical Regionalism in Architecture

Objects of different typologies, but mainly of Yugoslav tourist architecture, are probably the most noticeable examples of an approach to architecture that seeks to establish a direct connection between the newly built and the immediate natural, cultural or (and) traditional environment. It is an approach that existed dynamically in the architecture of Yugoslavia, especially hotel architecture, long before Frampton defined it as critical regionalism. It was at the same time when in the same way architecture was being dealt with by greats like F. L. Wright, A. Aalto, J. A. Coderch, H. Fathy, J.L. Sert, L. Baragan, etc.

According to many theorists, the tourist architecture of socialist Yugoslavia, especially on the Adriatic coast, presents the most representative expression of the modernist period in these areas. It is modern in idea and concept, but also very clearly oriented towards respecting all the natural and social determinants of the place where it is created.

Above mentioned clearly fits into the philosophy of critical regionalism, a direction of modernist architectural thinking and action, which nowadays is gaining even more importance in the context of bioclimatic, energy-efficient and ecologically oriented architecture. This proves that successfully created modern architecture does not have to be and is not alienated or arrogant towards the place, but on the contrary, it offers appropriate answers to the questions of compatibility of architecture on the one hand with climate, vegetation, geomorphology, but also issues of tradition and cultural-historical parameters on the other.



Fig. 1. Grand hotel Neum, Neum, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Source: Adapted from [4]

Critical regionalism in Yugoslavia most often did not search for paragons in the vernacular, but took it as an integral element of approach grounded in a critical sense, together with climate, landscape, culture, craft skills and materials. According to Frampton, his theory should be separated from simplistic copying and evocation of the sentimental or ironic. It could be added that defining regional should be distanced from cheap populism and nationalist interpretations [5]. The national culture and tradition interpreted from the nationalist discourse is actually a burden, it does not enrich or expand, but narrows some (spiritual) space [6].

Tzonis and Lefaivre also insist on purifying the regional from nationalism and kitsch, believing that regionalism should be dynamic and open to influences. They also share their ideas with Lewis Mumford, another one of the greats of architectural theory, who recognizes in Wright's architecture the affirmation of regional features, as opposed to the then dominant ideas of Le Corbusier. Nevertheless, Mumford stressed that when we talk about regional, we should not forget universal values, and although he is often very critical of modern architecture, he recognizes that it inherits regional features [5]. „Far from anti-modernist, Mumford believes (and makes clear from the very start) that regionalism in architecture is a necessary part of modernism [7]“.

### 4. Heterogeneity and individuality, the presence of numerous schools of architecture and different individual approaches

It can be said that work of all important world modernist architects was intensively followed in socialist Yugoslavia and it is easy to notice that many achievements are completely on the same level as the world's most famous examples of modern architecture. It is a noticeable fact there was no homogeneity of stylistic expression at the state level, but each architectural school in different Yugoslav republics had its own approach to modernism. The existence of schools as different approaches to

architecture was conditioned by the existence of five faculties of architecture in the capitals of all republics, except Montenegro. They established authentic architectural philosophies that were profiled under the influence of charismatic individuals and based on scientific work and developed theories [8].

The strongest impression about the architecture of Yugoslavia is the variety of approaches developed within the same political system. On the one hand, it was the result of inherited historical heterogeneity - mosaic of culture, as Kulić named it, which was promoted by leading figures in culture adopted as one of the main features of the Yugoslav cultural space [9].

Post-war architecture in Croatia, is extremely international and negates any national thought or expression [10]. It can be said that in the work of Croatian architects, modern architecture was extremely refined and elegant, intellectual and probably the most consistent in following the basic principles of modernity. It is based on a widely developed theoretical basis that Croatian architects organized in different artistic groups tried to define even before the Second World War, and to follow through practical work, especially after the war and during the decades of existence of socialist Yugoslavia. Le Corbusier's architectural philosophy is indicative and ubiquitous throughout Yugoslavia, and his two collaborators from the 1930s exert an impressive influence in the environments in which they operate. Edvard Ravnikar in Slovenia and Juraj Neidhardt in Bosnia and Herzegovina insist on the development of modernism based on the peculiarities of regional architecture. With the help of Dušan Grabrijan, Neidhardt creates a theoretical and detailed analytical basis in the book "Architecture of Bosnia and the Road to Modernity", which influences the architectural reinterpretation of Bosnian traditional architecture until these days. In the architecture of Bosnian modernists, we recognize the correct interpretation of traditional principles and their artistic interpretation, without imitation and false glorification. Thanks to the federal organization of the state [11], Ravnikar in Slovenia, Neidhardt and later Bosnian architects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, created preconditions for profiling unique identities and placing modern architecture in the found context, upgrade the existing vernacular architecture and through their interpretation adapt it to the needs of modern man with the same level of respect for cultural, bioclimatic and found characteristics [5].

In Skopje, after the earthquake of 1963, under the influence of a large number of international architects outside of Yugoslavia, as well as from other parts of Yugoslavia, various modernist patterns intertwine, but the globally present brutalism and the influence of Japanese architects led by Kenzo Tange were dominant. After the initial enthusiasm towards internationalist architecture, Brutalism has largely characterized the architecture of New Belgrade until the mid-1970s, when the blocks of New Belgrade took on aesthetic and followed the matrix of postmodern architecture that culminated in the 1980s, when an intense flirtation with traditionalist aesthetics began, which, not surprisingly, corresponded in time with the awakening of Serbian nationalism. Explaining the heterogeneity of Yugoslav modernism, Kulić apostrophizes the dominance of internationalism until the mid-1960s as the only common and recognizable stylistic determinant of Yugoslav architectural production, referring to the success of the international style as a consequence of the necessary departure from Soviet social realism, and despite the personal affinities of the communist leadership or President Tito himself [11].

In addition to the described heterogeneity due to the existence of different architectural directions, the individualism of artistic activity is a distinct feature of modernism in socialist Yugoslavia. The work of a large number of top architects who contribute to the richness of the Yugoslav architectural scene with authentic artistic expression is clearly visible. In their art, they are free to explore and create original architecture, even when they formally and essentially belonged to the same architectural school as Juraj Neidhardt and his student Zlatko Ugljen. In the case of Neidhardt is noticeable that the analytical systematicity serves as a basis for the interpretation of tradition, while Ugljen founded its architecture on memory and a sense of the autochthonous, which translates into architecture of strong emotional expression. These are examples of complexity in the understanding of a work of art and stylistic directions that should be observed as part of the social organization of a certain time, because style is a reflection of society and the era in which it is created, but style is also the artist himself - as Bifon explained [12].

Using the example of Bogdanović and Richter, two modernist giants from the period of post-war Yugoslavia, Kulić realizes that the socialist system provided fertile ground for the development of different ideas of modernism. Architects, completely different in approach and realization, cross the divisions between architecture and art with the same ease, due to the same intellectual and artistic roots [11].

## **5. Development of construction technology, mass prefabrication, establishment of regulations and standards**

From the very beginning, modern architecture took into consideration functional oriented optimization and rationality, but also optimization on the construction of buildings, primarily residential architecture. Thus, the planners of the famous Weissenhof settlement,<sup>1</sup> in an article from 1926 entitled "Die Wohnung der Neuzeit" ("Dwellings of the Modern Age") state that the rationalization of all areas of life does not exclude the issue of housing, that the current economic conditions at the time do not allow extravagance and require the greatest achievements with the least resources. Residential construction and current costs require the use of materials and technical methods that will lead to the reduction of operational and construction costs, simplification of management and improvement of the living environment.

The strong industrialization of society, strategic planning and orientation towards the development of domestic production, without dependence on imports, enabled the intensive development of the industry of building materials and prefabricated construction elements. During the existence of the Socialist Federal Republic Yugoslavia, an impressive industry of construction materials was developed, which fully met the needs for all types of materials used in construction. The offer was not excessively rich, but the quality of the most of materials did not differ from average or even better quality of the most of the world's manufacturers. Although there was a dispersive distribution of the construction industry, materials produced in Slovenia stood out in terms of quantity, choice and quality. Already during the 1970s, Yugoslavia became an important producer of prefabricated houses of exceptional quality with numerous eminent factories<sup>2</sup> in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have realized exceptional technical and design solutions and enabled them to achieve impressive export results on the demanding markets of the USA, Germany, Canada and elsewhere. Numerous Yugoslav companies such as Jugomont, IMS Žeželj, Tehnograd, Neimar NS71,

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Jacobus Johannes, Pieter Oud, Victor Bourgeois, Adolf Gustav Schneck, Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, Walter Gropius, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Bruno i Max Taut, Hans Poelzig, Richard Döcker, Adolf Rading, Josef Frank, Mart Stam, Peter Behrens i Hans Scharoun.

<sup>2</sup> The most important were Marles from Maribor, Jelovica from Škofja Loka, Krivaja from Zavidovići, but succesfull production existed in Ilijaš, Donji Vakuf, Delnice etc.

Trudbenik developed and applied prefabricated construction systems on tens of thousands of housing units throughout Yugoslavia. The process was not spontaneous, but it was directed by aimed and extensive scientific work of very serious and well-structured scientific institutes strongly supported by the state.

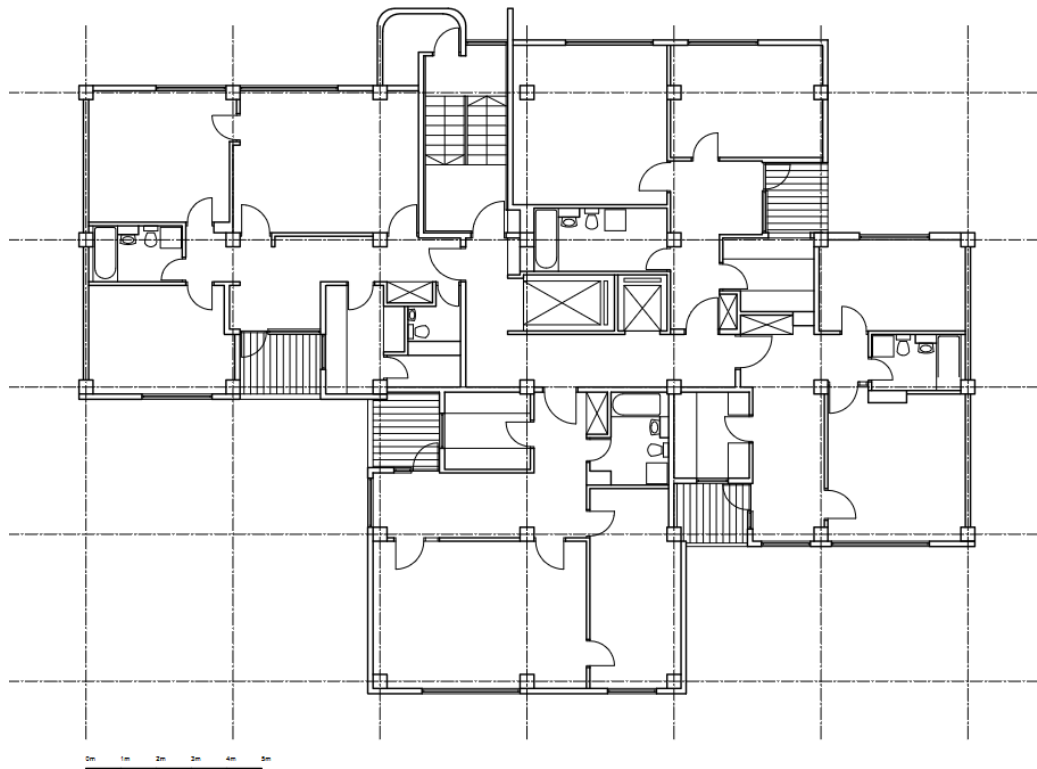


Fig. 2. Alipašino polje – residential buildings constructed in structural IMS system 4.20x4.20m. Source: Adapted from [4]

According to Mihailo Čanak, a Belgrade architect who devoted his entire work to the development of various housing concepts within prefabricated structural systems, Yugoslavian - the so-called industrial Moderna - was at the very top of European architectural achievements and quality of apartments, at the same time when highly productive prefabricated systems covered France, the countries of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia [13]. During long period Čanak was a key person of the Belgrade IMS Institute, which establishes cooperation with similar institutions at the national and international level, such as the Economic Commission for Europe at the United Nations. With only 16 employees, the institute, in addition to an impressive number of architectural projects, realized a series of scientific and technological research and practical experiments, such as numerous apartment blocks in New Belgrade, but also throughout Yugoslavia, the results of which were later translated into construction and design norms and standards [14].

All standards and norms were reached through a series of operational researches of specialized scientific institutions and institutes, and they defined the optimal relationships between residential and auxiliary rooms to avoid losing of living space in bad communications areas. A lower limit of quality was established below which it was not allowed to go, and an upper limit which was not socially and economically justified to be exceed [13]. The Yugoslav Army adopted somewhat more comfortable norms for its residential constructions, which significantly influenced the establishment of criteria for the construction of civilian apartments. Major cities in Yugoslavia had their own standards during the 1970s and 1980s without any major deviations in content. The only attempt at unification at the federal level was the "Temporary standard of an apartment in directed residential construction" from 1973, which was created by the Construction Center of Slovenia from Ljubljana and the Housing Center from Belgrade [13]. The social system of that time recognized the necessity of the existence of norms and proper standards. In present times it will be reflected in the possibility of establishing a strong instrument of influence on the conscience of unscrupulous designers, but primarily in the direction of investors that are exclusively interested for the enlargement of profit. It is more than clear that this type of appeal has no chance in today's post-Yugoslav transition circumstances, so it is also clear why compliance with norms has completely disappeared in the recent practice and education of architects, even previously established Yugoslavian standards for design and construction of residential buildings have never been officially repealed anywhere.

## 6. The role and position of the architect and architecture in society, freedom of design

Janson believes that all political, economic and social forces must be engaged in the construction and planning of cities, but architect got essential role in this complex process of developing an alternative to the conventional high-rise construction of residential blocks in densely populated areas. With structure of flats that are not uniform or expensive, that will provide enough light and airiness, security and a number of other desirable features [15]. The idea of modernism that architecture and architects must take an active part in social movements, as well as Le Corbusier's views that it is possible to introduce revolutionary changes in the way of life through architecture, brought strong strides in the general acceptance of the role and importance of architects, urban planners and engineers in socialist Yugoslavia. The architects of that time built for a society with clearly profiled political ideals, clear guidelines for development and cultural aspirations, and architecture itself did not belong to an individual, capital or the state, but to society and the people [16]. Mass construction and development of society was a key factor that enabled the affirmation of a large number of



successful individuals, as well as the architectural profession. Immediately after the war, the institution of architectural contests was established, which were announced for every significant urban or architectural project. In this way, the importance of the profession was promoted, and at the same time extremely young and progressive architects were enabled to realize ideas that reached the aspirations and levels of current trends on the then world architectural scene. As a result of the mass construction, the opportunities for gaining practical experience and knowledge in designing, process of construction works, supervision and scientific work on the domestic and international level were exceptional. Political or party control of artistic creations in architecture or imposition of solutions by investors was absent or reduced to an acceptable measure, which enabled freedom of creation, thinking and action. Architects won this freedom not only at the level of aesthetics and representation, but through the shaping of space and the creation of innovative concepts, which is certainly in direct conflict with the newly established theses about the totalitarianism of Yugoslav socialism, according to which politicians were the givers and creators, and the architects were mere executors [9].



Fig. 3. Headquarter building of Union of Communists of Croatia, Zagreb 1961, arch: I. Vitić. Source: Adapted from [4]

Investors' requirements were defined at the beginning, often in the competition itself, and related to general ideas about the concept or appearance, while the conceptual details, idea, form, materialization or aesthetic solutions were left to the expertise of the architects.

"Those communist investors gave us an almost completely free hand in the whole business - the only conditions for the competition and the creation of the main project were set at the beginning and they demanded two things: the building should be modern and functional, and to radiate by modesty and simplicity [17]."<sup>3</sup>

Yugoslav architects worked in the range that Jencks recognizes in the period of Soviet architecture, shortly after the revolution, when architects create extraordinary formal architecture with new social functions, complementary to the progressive and idealistic goals of society [18]. Similar to Jencks interpretation of the position of architects in contemporary society, the architects of Yugoslavia often operated at the other end of the above-mentioned range. They were proposing idealistic alternatives with clearly defined social contents whose conceptions aspire to utopian vision of socialism that reflected a critical opposition to the system and indicated a positive direction of action [18].

Kuzović and Gligorijević were commenting the contemporary change in the circumstances and position of the architect and the architectural profession after the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia and stated that a professional identity based on innovation and creativity has become unnecessary and that architecture has become only a reproductive activity, which mean the active and respected social role of architecture and architects is now evidently marginalized [19].

## 7. Conclusion

The authenticity of architecture and urbanism from the period of Socialist Yugoslavia, the extent of its realization and most importantly; the high level of artistic and engineering achievements, so often at the level of the world's most significant modernist achievements, are elements that must be recognized as features of extremely valuable cultural heritage and placed under protection from further deterioration and destruction. The architecture of international modernism created on the territory of the former state, was an indicator of its active participation and belonging to the ultimate world trends in the field of architecture. However, it was

<sup>3</sup> "Ti isti komunistički investitori davali su nam skoro potpuno određene ruke u celom poslu - jedini uslovi konkursa i izrade glavnog projekta bili su postavljeni još na početku i zahtevali su dve stvari: da zgrada bude moderna i funkcionalna, i da zrači skromnošću i jednostavnošću."

visible existence of several different schools of architecture and numerous architects with pronounced original approach to architectural concepts, understanding of function, form and visual expressions that all together contributed to very heterogenic and rich architectural scene.

At the same time architecture and construction industry was regulated and highly standardized in accordance to scientific and professional studies of domestic institutions and professionals and experiences that were earned and further implemented in prefabrication and construction of hundreds of thousands of built flats and different kind of public buildings across Yugoslavia and abroad.

In the way of living, culture life and architecture, but in many other areas was visible that the Socialist Yugoslavia was belonging part of the world, particularly middle European cultural circle, not just as a passive observer, but more and more often as an active creator of progressive tendencies.

Today, under influences of recently established nationalist preferences, Yugoslavian internationalism is recognized as opposite from orientation to traditional culture and architecture from more ancient past, which mostly was influenced or built by foreign conquerors. Blinded by particular private interests camouflaged with rigid nationalism, new political establishments were not able to understand that only in the period of modernism the origin architecture was developed by local architects. The game of words implies the paradox that beside vernacular, the real national autochthonous architecture of this region is in fact international architecture created in the Socialist Yugoslavia.

Social transition to capitalism promoted the idea that new investors have right to do whatever they want and to completely ignore the public interest, human needs and progressive ideas and professional opinion of architects and urban planners, including demolitions and neglecting of architectural heritage from the period of modernism and socialism.

It is interesting to make a comparison from the experience of architectural work in the contemporary circumstances of newly established social conditions and their systems of value - on one side, and to compare them with the contemporary status of the profession in general and architects in it - on other side.

By understanding and analyzing the architecture of the time of Socialist Yugoslavia, we can talk about the preferences and the type of state and society within which it was developed, with all the contradictions related to that system which existed in the past, present, and for sure, it will be exist in the future.

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