

21st INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF AESTHETICS, Faculty of Architecture, Belgrade, Serbia, 2019

PROCEEDINGS



POSSIBLE WORLDS OF CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS: AESTHETICS BETWEEN HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY AND MEDIA

ORGANIZED BY: University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture, The Society for Aesthetics of Architecture and Visual Arts Serbia (DEAVUS), and International Association for Aesthetics (IAA)

Editors

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Book title

Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Aesthetics,
Possible Worlds of Contemporary Aesthetics:
Aesthetics Between History, Geography and Media

Publisher

University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture

For publisher

Vladan Đokić, Dean

Number of copies

500

Print

Grafik Centar

Place and year of issue

Belgrade, 2019

ISBN 978-86-7924-224-2

Under the auspices of
International Association for Aesthetics

Organized by
University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture
The Society for Aesthetics of Architecture and Visual Arts Serbia (DEAVUS)

The Congress was supported by
Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of
Serbia

In collaboration with
Goethe-Institut, Belgrade, Serbia
Singidunum University – Faculty of Media and Communications

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THE CONCEPT OF THE CONGRESS

The Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade and the Society for Aesthetics of Architecture and Visual Arts of Serbia (DEAVUS) are proud to be able to organize the 21st ICA Congress on “Possible Worlds of Contemporary Aesthetics: Aesthetics Between History, Geography and Media”.

We are proud to announce that we received over 500 submissions from 56 countries, which makes this Congress the greatest gathering of aestheticians in this region in the last 40 years.

The ICA 2019 Belgrade aims to map out contemporary aesthetics practices in a vivid dialogue of aestheticians, philosophers, art theorists, architecture theorists, culture theorists, media theorists, artists, media entrepreneurs, architects, cultural activists and researchers in the fields of humanities and social sciences. More precisely, the goal is to map the possible worlds of contemporary aesthetics in Europe, Asia, North and South America, Africa and Australia. The idea is to show, interpret and map the unity and diverseness in aesthetic thought, expression, research, and philosophies on our shared planet. Our goal is to promote a dialogue concerning aesthetics in those parts of the world that have not been involved with the work of the International Association for Aesthetics to this day. Global dialogue, understanding and cooperation are what we aim to achieve.

That said, the 21st ICA is the first Congress to highlight the aesthetic issues of marginalised regions that have not been fully involved in the work of the IAA. This will be accomplished, among others, via thematic round tables discussing contemporary aesthetics in East Africa and South America.

Today, aesthetics is recognized as an important philosophical, theoretical and even scientific discipline that aims at interpreting the complexity of phenomena in our contemporary world. People rather talk about possible worlds or possible aesthetic regimes rather than a unique and consistent philosophical, scientific or theoretical discipline.

Miško Šuvaković and 21st ICA Organizing Committee

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MOBILIZING THE IMAGE: IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE IN THE INTERIOR DESIGN OF THE SAVA CENTER

Abstract | The paper will examine the process of design and construction of the Sava conference center in Belgrade and its role in the creation of the ideological narrative on the disciplinary level through the conceptions of space. During the Cold war, Yugoslav cultural space was in a unique position between East and West, building its international image on the idea of political neutrality and the Non-aligned movement. The Sava center was built in 1977, for the purpose of hosting the second Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Non-Aligned Movement in 1983. The building of the conference center was not only the functional necessity but was also an important factor in presenting Yugoslavia on the international level. By questioning the critical theory and the postmodern condition in the domain of representation of architecture, the main aim of the research is to trace the possible aspects of reading the aesthetic and symbolic layers within the interior design of Sava center. The main hypothesis is that that interior space was a crucial element in the creation of the continual simulacrum, which embodies the idea of political neutrality and self-managing socialism, presenting the Yugoslavian politics as diplomatic and open unlike its communist counterparts in the USSR. The Sava center is typically considered through the prism of political and economic aspects while neglecting the design approaches, images and conceptions of space. The idea of building the new center can be related to the postmodern understanding of losing imposed centrality in the vision of history and the dominance of the single image as a condition for the unquestionable way of interpretation. By analyzing primary sources stemming from the period of its construction and numerous visual materials, the research aims to discover the possible influences and conditions by which the architectural approach to designing was determined. In general, it the awareness of the importance of critical examination of the socialist heritage in the modern context for the current understanding of the discipline.

Index terms | *Sava center, socialist architecture, postmodern condition, ideology, narrative, detail;*

INTRODUCTION

“This wonderful facility that will serve us both for international meetings and our internal meetings shows the high capacity of our builders. This means that in our country we can build everything that is created in other highly developed countries.”

Josip Broz Tito, May 15, 1977. The opening of the Sava Center

The Sava Center was built among 1976-1977 with the aim of becoming a hosting venue for the second forum on security organized by The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. The initiative by Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito came after the first meeting of OSCE was held in Helsinki in 1975. At this critical international political event, the representatives of all European countries were present together with Canada, the USA and the USSR, discussing the future steps towards the strengthening of the world peace and security and the promotion of fundamental human rights, economic and social progress and well-being for all people. (Kongresni centar u Beogradu, 1977). Since Belgrade did not have a building with the capacity to host the international conference of that scale, the new project had to be designed and built within a year. The government avoided standard processes of planning and design, by prioritizing the Sava center construction as the state project of the utmost importance and choosing the architect from the Belgrade Land Development Public Agency to complete the task. In the period preceding the start of the building, the Government had the architect sent to examine the building of the same typology mostly located in Western Europe, among which are Finlandia Hall in Helsinki, Pompidou Center in Paris, and Bella Center in Copenhagen. Additionally, different teams of experts from leading construction companies in Yugoslavia were dedicated to the architect Stojan Maksimović.

This research focuses on the aspects of the interior design of the aforementioned case, in order to analyze the ideological narrative behind the image of architecture. Starting from the theoretical background in postmodern theory, the aim is to offer a possible reading of the design as an expression of the unpolarized politics of the state and its subsumed identities, which was fundamental for the understanding the loss of its apparent purpose. The period of socialism, from 1945 until the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in 1992, is one of the most influential historical periods in the Balkans, whose influences are still visible in all segments of social life. After a period of great socio-economic changes that caused the crisis after the Second World War, the idea of returning to the unity of society and the security of the community were the main goals of the political establishment. In addition to the empowering the community, unity and equality, through new products and new spaces, the new identity of the society was being constructed. The desire for prosperity is also noticeable in the stylistic and typological characteristics of architecture and urban spaces, by the rejection of the social realism and the turn towards the modern approaches of the Western countries (Blagojević, 2007). The residential architecture of New Belgrade, department stores and hotels that form new city centers all over the country, residential buildings with wide common spaces, represent only some of the tremendous spatial changes that have strongly influenced the creation of the identity at that time.

This research focuses on architectural praxis which emerged on the territory of Former Yugoslavia, questioning the purpose, function and meaning of the style, tectonics and

concept, as ideological constructs. Additionally, it discusses the utopist conception of „a city within the city“, which was employed to represent a message of modernity and social prosperity via the design of the specific renowned object, the Sava center. The central objective in this paper stems from the discourse on critical theory and postmodernism, which offer different possibilities to analyze and understand the relation between the hi-tech tectonics of the object, discursive image and the representation of architecture.

BUILDING THE IMAGE

„We were looking like the fanatics who wanted to change the helpless world.“

Miloje Popović, the first director of the SC (Popović, 2007, 54)

The public opinion about the building was divided, albeit the Sava center has won Borba award, the significant professional recognition in 1977. In the years after its construction, the Sava Center was conceived as a new modern institution, trying to define itself outside its political role as the main cultural center of New Belgrade. The international presence of Yugoslavia and the ambitions of the City of Belgrade to develop the city as an international metropolis, aimed at organizing international meetings, business and renting out space, recognized the importance of the Center as a venue for Yugoslavia’s self-promotion. Having in mind geopolitical position of Yugoslavia, and the aspiration to define itself as the center of the Non-Aligned Movement in the age of the Cold War, the Sava Center becomes a crucial project for the presentation of the states unpolarized politics. Some of the events which could give the broader picture on the political importance of the project are the 11 Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in 1983 (Figure 1a), Annual Meeting of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group (1979), and the Non-Aligned Movement Meeting (1983). The Sava Center was conceived as a modern institution of advanced society, but also as a “political factory”, which without the support of the highest authorities and Josip Broz Tito, was difficult to realize (Figure 1b) (Popović, 2007).

In these significant goals, each of the functions found its occupation space within the primary setting of the object, transforming the interior space in accordance with ideological, economic and social changes and the space management agenda. In order to understand the nature of these changes, we must try to see the representation of this architecture from a higher degree of self-reflection, through interdisciplinarity and overlapping interpretations of the phenomenon of the perception of modernity in philosophy, sociology and culture (Vattimo, 1997).

SUBSUMED IDENTITIES

Political ideologies can act as a form of social frame, that provides social groups with a set of unifying values and beliefs. These beliefs reflect life experiences, interests and aspirations of social class, in the case of Yugoslavia the working class, and help to foster a sense of belonging and solidarity (Heywood, 2005). A unifying set of political ideas and values can develop naturally within a society. However, it can also be enforced from above in an attempt to manufacture obedience and thereby operates as a form of social control and manipulation, with the aim of creating the desired behavior or set of values. Observing the architecture both as the text (Barthes, 1991) and space of representation (Lefebvre, 1984), the relation between the political ideology of socialism in Yugoslavia and the transmission

of the narrative about modern society through architecture can be traced. Technological aesthetics of the visible structure and fragments could be observed as a form of stylistic narrative, which is used to portray the political aspiration for the non-alignment and openness of the societal utopia. It stems from the depiction of the progress in the late modernism, which based its contemporaneity on the technical means of production and the expression of the tectonic unconscious (Mertins, 2011). In that sense, the architect becomes a narrator whose spatial practice turns into a form of representational space, thus creating the sense of space through the narration on progress (Figure 2a). However, the narrator's only competence for telling the story is the fact that he has heard it himself (Lyotard, 1984). The current narratee gains potential access to the same authority by merely listening, acquiring and delivering the same knowledge. Secondly, the transmission of knowledge about the particular subject is quintessential for the formation of the customary knowledge, which follows distinctive, pragmatic rules: "know-how", "knowing how to speak", and "knowing how to hear" (Ibid). The collectivity that takes narrative as its essential form of competence does not need to remember its past, since the repetition and the recitation of these narratives assure their contemporaneity, consequently forming the strong social bond and assuring the future transmission of the same narrative through time. In the field of architectural representation, this could be observed on the level of ideological construction of inherent meaning, by creating the mythologization of the reality.

MOBILIZING THE IMAGE

„Architecture worthy of human beings thinks better of men than they actually are. “

Theodor Adorno (Functionality today, 1997)

The tension between what a building wants to be and the architect's idea of the buildings function challenges the architect's decisions regarding the design itself (Venturi, 1997). The design of the Sava Center building is dominated by semi-public spaces, which architects call "squares and streets", where the dehumanizing aesthetics of the "technical truths" of the architectural form is tempered by the use of natural materials, wood, leather, wool, and greenery (Šaletić, 1977). One of the goals is the dematerialization of the interior of the building and construction of the artificial environment within the object, which would be a place for meeting, conversation and contemplation (Figure 2a). The combination of natural materials with huge green and water areas was directed towards creating a city like leisure zone. A city within a city was also a concept for the design of the press-centre, comprised of modular cells equipped with the telecommunication equipment (Figure 2b). Although it was designed as a polyvalent space, whose flexibility influenced the structural solution and aesthetics of „the open architecture of our time“ (Maksimović, 1979), the object had been adopting and transforming ever since it was open.

According to the first director Miloje Popovic, at that time art and money were merged through donations and the help of state-owned companies and banks, thus building a sustainable system within the facility. In the first year, the building was closed for the public, and the entrance of the civilians was largely scrutinized and controlled. The inner landscape was a few years later transformed into Bazaar, a mini shopping mall, in which reputable social enterprises and firms such as Department Stores Belgrade, Prosveta, travel agency Putnik, but also British Airways, had their offices. The reconstruction of the internal landscape and the construction of commercial facilities instead were carried out under the supervision of architect Stojan Maksimović and interior architect

Šaletić. The main goal in the first years after the opening was to broaden the Centers offer by attracting cultural activities and different creative groups, such as filmmakers, painters, musicians, and the young. In line with that, the governing board had adopted several plans for the upcoming period, with an aim to continually produce another idea about the possible role of the Center in the enriching the cultural offer to the new society of the stable middle class.

FROM PURPOSE TO SENSE OF SPACE

Adorno states that what a language defines as necessary can later become superfluous, even terribly ornamental, as soon as it can no longer be legitimated in the second kind of language, which is commonly called “style” (Adorno, 1997). The discipline of architecture should be examined from the outside of its own limits, since that could suggest the loss of control regarding different contexts, such as cultural, historical, political, natural, economical, or in other words, the contexts which architecture cannot directly control (Grosz, 2001). However hard the practicing architects try to distance themselves from the aforementioned contexts, their relation to them persists and reflects them in nuanced and complex ways. In this dynamic notion of the purposeful architecture, the whole building could at a certain point become exclusively ornamental, or more precisely representational. The function of the object is independent of its purpose, while the purpose could be understood as any type of intention related to the construction of the desirable narrative. The notion of purposefulness is closely related to the social aspects, as purposeful forms as the rejection of style become a style by themselves. The ability to articulate space “purposefully” is linked to the creation of the „sense of space“ through architectonic imagination (Adorno, 1997). Technology within functionalist dialectics resemble the existing ideal in socialist utopias – the useful object is the highest achievement, „cleansed of profit motivation “ (Adorno, 1997).

Lefebvre calls for the comparable approach, which would analyze not things in space, but space itself, with a view to uncovering the social relationships embedded in it. The spaces themselves are specialized and they presuppose and imply a „logic of visualization “, which could be noticed in the design of the public and state building, whose main aim is to convey an impression of authority to each spectator (Lefebvre, 1984). The spectators can relate themselves to the set of images, signs and symbols, through the creation of the relation between the part and the whole. Lefebvre states that any determinate and demarcated space necessarily embraces some things and excludes others, being at the same time a „subject “ and an „object“.

After 1978 crucial part of the strategy for achieving the metropolitan image of the building, was the embellishment of the foyers with the art pieces. (Popović, 2007). This was directed at participants of international conferences and sponsored by working organizations and state banks. In 1979, in January, the first artwork “Veterans” of the famous Yugoslav artist Peđa Milosavljevic was solemnly installed in the main hall of the gallery. It was followed by the installation of dozens of sculptures, tapestries of the noteworthy Yugoslav artists (Figure 3a). In this process, we can follow the ideological line in which the representational model is changing, moving from the technology and truth-to-material logic to introducing decorative elements in the interior design, which transfer the message of cultural values and artistic achievements of the society at that specific moment.

The process of embellishment followed the setting of the “world clock” in the main

hall, which shows time in the scattered metropolises of the world. The clock is located between the dominant vertical installation elements - bunches, and info-desks, creating the impression of involvement and active tracking of world trends.

At the main entrance, the first thing the visitors are introduced with is the brass table containing the etching with the quotation of Tito's opening speech. It is followed by the Sava Center physical model, exhibited in the glass box, and ordered during the phase of the embellishment. Large photo-wallpapers with the resorts on the Adriatic coast were also placed within the foreign delegation units, but also the tapestry with the motifs of the National Liberation Struggle (Figure 3b). The tapestries by the prominent artists Ninela Pejović and Mirjana Morača, used as a cladding for the main conference hall, despite evident artistic expressiveness, were more frequently perceived as the elements of the interior design. It could be assumed that the works chosen by the architect Šaletić in the original interior design were too abstract to convey the ideological message clearly. Together with ambitions of the establishment, these embellishments and further transformations of the inside contest the original modernist premises of the authors. On the other hand, they are reflecting a rise in the postmodern culture of consumption and image-driven society, even within the self-managing socialism in Yugoslavia.

CONCLUSION

Postmodernism as an aesthetic context can be more precisely understood as "ultra-modernism", because it to a certain extent represents a critique of the "tradition" of modernism, as understood by Adorno. It is necessary not to consider historical consciousness as radically new, but as a difference within what constitutes a human relationship to the present. The development of the relationship between the discovered – semantic, and the basic – ontological, based on history as an objective track of events, with historical traditions, is destabilized through the idea of simultaneity of the event, which comes to the point of the idea of progress as a unique flow. In a world where there is a lack of a robust and homogeneous idea, which would have a particular role, the meanings are accumulated without order and rules, from a pure nostalgic tendency to fill the void. The loss of the functional and symbolic significance of the Sava Center, and the crisis in which it has been in the last 10 years, is actually the result of the loss of the symbolic importance of its representation model in the context of the neoliberal economy, based on the profit and feasibility of investments, in which culture equals the spectacle. The Sava Center's former role regarding expressing political and societal progress could be understood as the narrative whose transmission failed to continue once it had lost the connection with concepts and values that are considered to be preferable by the society. On the other hand, the loss of the central position in the representation of the state and the regime can be regarded as a vast potential for the future development of this architectural edifice. In general, once the building liberated itself from the shackles of the fixed meanings, the polyvalence of its form emerged, manifesting in various ways the multiplicity and complexity of the society and culture.



Figure 1a, 1b: Interior of the Planery Hall, source: The Sava Center archive



Figure 2a: Interior drawing by Aleksandar Šaletić, source: Special editions of Jugoslovenska revija Kongresni centar u Beogradu

Figure 2b: Press centre interior design, source: Special editions of Jugoslovenska revija: Sava Centar u Beogradu



Figure 3a: Peđa Milosavljević "Veterani", collage, 1978. Source: The Sava Center archive
Figure 3b: Mateja Rodiči "Užička Republika", tapestry, 1978. Source: The Sava Center archive

Acknowledgements

This paper is part of the research on Scientific Project TR 36034 Research and systematization of housing development in Serbia in the context of globalization and European integrations for the purpose of improving housing quality and standards, funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

We thank Jasminka Vitković architect, from the Sava Center, for the assistance and allowance to use documents and construction project books and for comments that greatly improved the paper.

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CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

72.01(082)
7.01:111.352(082)

INTERNATIONAL Congress of Aesthetics (21 ; 2019 ; Beograd)

Possible worlds of contemporary aesthetics: aesthetics between history, geography and media [Elektronski izvor] : proceedings / 21st International Congress of Aesthetics ICA 2019, Belgrade, 2019 ; organized by University of Belgrade, Faculty of Architecture [and] The Society for Aesthetics of Architecture and Visual Arts Serbia (DEAVUS), and International Association for Aesthetics (IAA) ; [editors Nataša Janković, Boško Drobnjak and Marko Nikolić]. - Belgrade : University of Belgrade, Faculty of Architecture, 2019 (Belgrade : Grafik Centar). - 1 elektronski optički disk (CD-ROM) ; 12 cm

Sistemske zahteve: Nisu navedeni. - Nasl. sa naslovne strane dokumenta. - Tiraž 500. - Biografske beleške o autorima uz radove. - Bibliografija uz većinu radova.

ISBN 978-86-7924-224-2

а) Архитектура -- Естетика -- Зборници б) Уметност -- Естетика -- Зборници
COBISS.SR-ID 277570572