Evocations of Byzantium in Zenitist Avant-Garde Architecture

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The Byzantine legacy in modern architecture can be divided between a historicist, neo-Byzantine architectural style and an active investigation of the potentials of the Byzantine for a modern, explicitly non-traditional, architecture. References to Byzantium in avant-garde Eastern European architecture of the 1920s employed a modernist interpretation of the Byzantine concept of space that evoked a mode of “medieval” experience and creative practice rather than direct historical quotation. The avant-garde movement of Zenitism, a prominent visionary avant-garde movement in the Balkans, provides a case study in the ways immaterial aspects of Byzantine architecture infiltrated modernism and moved it beyond an academic, repetitive formalism. By examining the visionary architectural design for the Zeniteum, the Zenitist center, in this article, I aim to identify how references to Byzantium were integrated in early twentieth-century Serbian avant-garde architecture and to address broader questions about interwar modernism. In the 1920s, architects, architectural historians, and promoters of architecture came to understand the Byzantine concept of space in ways that architects were able to use in distinctly non-Byzantine architecture. I will trace the ways Zenitism engaged the Byzantine architectural construct of total design, in which structure joins spirituality, and related philosophical concepts of meaning and form derived from both Byzantine and avant-garde architecture. This reassessment of Zenitism, an Eastern European architectural movement often placed on the margins of the history of modern architecture, has broad implications for our understanding of the relationship between tradition and modernism.1

The Byzantine Legacy in Early Twentieth-Century Serbian Architecture

The neo-Byzantine style was one of numerous eclectic historical styles developed in the nineteenth century and widely used in European architecture by the 1920s. Architects and architectural historians turned to Byzantine architecture as a source of inspiration out of sociopolitical and theological concerns as well as aesthetic preferences.2 Religious, institutional, and palace buildings across Europe incorporated “typical” formal elements from Byzantine Christian Orthodox churches, particularly large and prominent domes and monumental interior decoration in mosaics or frescoes with religious figurative themes (Figure 1).3 Architects of this period were inspired by Hagia Sophia and its restoration, despite the fact that many of them had not personally experienced the church or studied its architecture. Byzantine vaulted spaces inspired architects and engineers who developed new aesthetics for modern building types.

Byzantium’s association with Greek roots, Roman imperial traditions, the Balkans, and the Eastern Mediterranean caused Western Europeans to see it as “Oriental,” as regressively primitive and underdeveloped, hierarchically less significant, more unstable, and more decadent than the Gothic.4 Ironically, this essentially colonial attitude allowed a reevaluation of the Byzantine legacy. In nineteenth-century France, a group of radical architects and architectural historians, including Henri Labrouste and Félix Duban, promoted Byzantine architecture as a kind of avant-garde mode.5 According to their theory, the Byzantine was the “new Greek” (néo-Grec) because it formed a transition between academic classical antiquity and its revival

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during the Renaissance. They associated Byzantium’s critical period of unpredictability and disjunction with modern life, similarly a period of constant change and transition.

In Central and Eastern Europe, as in other parts of Europe, the academic revival of Byzantine architecture was divided between romantic, unconventional modes of creative expression, often lacking historical accuracy, and structural and aesthetic qualities useful for the development of modern architecture. The academic revival of Byzantine architecture was divided between romantic, unconventional modes of creative expression, often lacking historical accuracy, and structural and aesthetic qualities useful for the development of modern architecture. In the Balkans, where Byzantine medieval churches survived, Byzantine architecture could have been a tangible architectural and cultural heritage rather than a product of the distant and exotic East, as it was in France or Great Britain. In the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1918–29) enthusiasm for historic and social rebuilding through architecture gave rise to a peculiar “Serbo-Byzantine” style that became the official national style (Figure 2). This style, which Western Europeans could have considered Oriental, was based on the neo-Byzantine revival found in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in particular in Vienna.

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, a strong interest in Byzantine art at the University of Vienna informed academic architecture in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, especially that of architect Baron Theophilus Edvard von Hansen (1813–91), a professor at the University of Vienna. Hansen remains best known for his neoclassical design of the Academy of Athens, the University of Athens, and the National Library in Athens—the “Trilogy.” His knowledge of Byzantine and Islamic architecture in Attica was matched by his deep understanding of German neo-Romanesque Rundbogen and neo-Gothic Spitzbogen styles. These neo-medieval hybrid styles provided him with an academic route for the development of a Viennese neo-Byzantine style, which was essentially an imaginative combination of various Byzantine and non-Byzantine elements, including some from Islamic and Jewish architecture. Hansen had several Serbian students, including Svetozar Ivačković, Jovan Ilkić, Dušan Živanović, and Vladimir Nikolić. After finishing their studies, these architects returned home, bringing with them the Viennese academic neo-Byzantine style, which became especially prominent in Serbia between 1880 and 1914. This style provided the foundations for the Serbo-Byzantine national style of the 1920s created by Serbian architects, some of whom had never left Serbia. As Carl Schorske has demonstrated, Byzantine architecture remained exotic and foreign in Vienna, which meant the neo-Byzantine style simultaneously transformed and rejected its traditional cultural associations. Paradoxically, the ideological agenda of the Viennese neo-Byzantine style inflected the Serbo-Byzantine architecture of the 1920s.

Following the major academic trends in Europe, Serbian architects included formal references to the ecclesiastical architecture of Serbia and the Byzantine Empire, combining Orthodox Christian religiosity and culture. They claimed
that the Serbo-Byzantine style reflected the identity of the new kingdom, especially its Serbian territories. As a result, idiosyncratic “medieval-modernist” Serbo-Byzantine solutions were used both for major civic projects as well as for churches. The Serbo-Byzantine style, like its precedent in Vienna, was essentially an imaginative construct that used various Byzantine, vernacular Serbian, and academic Western European architectural elements as anachronistic decorative tools. By the 1920s, Belgrade was an important regional center for Byzantine historical studies because of the strong history department at the University of Belgrade, the work of which was complemented by archaeological and architectural research into Byzantine heritage in the Serbian territories. Seminal books on Byzantine art and architecture, such as Oscar Wulff’s *Die Byzantinische Kunst* (1914; second edition 1924) circulated widely. Serbian architecture students went to Italy to study Byzantine art and architecture, such as Saint Mark’s Basilica in Venice. In 1927, the second International Congress of Byzantine Studies was held in Belgrade. While neo-Byzantine architecture was officially promoted in Serbia, however, academic circles in Serbia did not critically examine it with regard to its roots in Western European sociopolitical thought.

In 1920s Serbia, historicist Serbo-Byzantine architecture was not universally accepted. Neo-Byzantine architecture was belittled as one of many “archaeological” revivals and criticized for being imitative and derivative, thus defying two of the major imperatives of modernism—originality and authenticity. As I will demonstrate, a region-wide interest in Byzantine architecture also inspired avant-garde architecture in Serbia. The theoretical platform of Zenitist avant-garde thought incorporated the Byzantine past, the Balkans, and Christian Orthodoxy as part of its program.

**Zenitism and Architecture**

In the 1920s Zenitism was the major visionary avant-garde movement in the Balkans. The name Zenitism derives from the word *zenit*—meaning the highest point in the celestial sphere directly above the observer—revealing the group’s ambition to situate itself high in contemporary avant-garde discourse of the post–World War I world. Zenitism was
founded by poet, literary critic, and polemicist Ljubomir Micić (1895–1971) in Zagreb, Croatia, in 1921 (Figure 3).20 In the same year, Micić published “Čovek i umetnost” (Man and art), which served as the Zenitist manifesto, and launched the international journal *Zenit* to promote the mission of the movement.21 The initial group of Zenitists was small, but its members aimed to create an international presence from the movement’s inception. The first Zenitist manifesto was signed by Micić, who then lived in Zagreb; by Belgrade novelist, literary critic, and film artist Boško Tokin; and by French-German poet and writer Ivan Goll.22 Similarly, the editorial staff of *Zenit* included members living in other parts of Europe: Boško Tokin in Belgrade, Micić’s brother Branko Ve Poljanski in Prague, and Rastko Petrović in Paris.

From the beginning of Zenitism, however, Micić remained the central figure of the movement. Conflicts with Micić led to frequent changes in the group’s membership and shifts in the editorial board of the journal, which Micić edited alone after May 1922. In January 1923, the Zenitists were forced out of Zagreb as a result of Micić’s critique of Croatian culture, which he mocked as a pseudo-Europeanized imitative confection.23 In 1924 the group established a new center in Belgrade, where, after a hiatus of eight months, the members continued publishing their journal. They remained active until 1926, when the group dissolved after the Serbian authorities threatened to shut it down because of its open embrace of Bolshevik Marxism. During the five years of its existence (1921–26), the group attracted more than 150 members and collaborators. Among the collaborators were architects who would later become prominent in the history of modern architecture, such as Walter Gropius, El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg, Adolf Loos, Erich Mendelsohn, and Vladimir Tatlin.24

The Zenitists promoted their work in Serbia and internationally. In April 1924, they organized The First Zenitist International Exhibition of New Art in Belgrade, and they also presented their works at an international exhibition in Bucharest. In 1926, they exhibited at the Moscow show *The Revolutionary Art of the West*, organized by the State Academy of Art Studies VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) (Figure 4). Zenitism was the only avant-garde movement in the Balkans with a manifesto and a journal, *Zenit*, which over the course of five years was published monthly. Micić insisted that authors for the journal should express themselves in their chosen languages as carriers of identity and culture; thus, *Zenit* published texts by him and others in a dozen languages, including Esperanto. *Zenit* was distributed internationally, reaching beyond Europe to museums and galleries in New York and San Francisco.25

Ljubomir Micić, the major force behind Zenitism, was a highly controversial figure.26 Born into a modest Serbian family in Sošice (now part of Croatia) in 1895, Micić was interested in theater in his formative years, but he went on to receive a bachelor’s degree in philosophy from the University of Zagreb in 1918. His early interest in theater and philosophy informed his interest in total design, which combined architecture, visual arts, industrial and graphic design, theater production, poetry, and urban planning, erasing the boundaries between these fields.27

Micić’s personal background reveals a deep understanding of neo-Byzantine culture and architecture but also divergences from these. While he was a great promoter of architecture, Micić was not a trained architect. He certainly knew about Hagia Sophia, given that he made references to the church in his texts, but the building itself was inaccessible to him, as it was to most Europeans from modest backgrounds. Micić was familiar with Byzantine architecture simply because Byzantine tradition occupied such an important role in Serbian culture. He was born into a Serbian minority in the
Croatia-Slavonia region of the Kingdom of Hungary, which was later incorporated into Croatia. In this poorest region of the Balkans, known as the Military Frontier, Serbs were regularly recruited to defend the territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire against the Ottoman Empire.28 In this part of the world, the Western European cultural elite, which was aligned with Roman Catholic Habsburg culture, considered impoverished Serbs “a backward and inferior race” and their Christian Orthodox faith primitive.29 Micić’s opposition to Western European norms, including neo-Byzantine architecture, aligned with his attempts to reverse the negative associations of Byzantium, the Balkans, Orthodox Christianity, and Slavs with backwardness.30

Micić wrote the main Zenitist manifesto, “Čovek i umetnost,” in 1921 and subsequent manifestos in 1922 and 1926.31 These antiwar, humanist manifestos argued for a new art centered on man and humanity, or what he called “man-art.”32 By making recurrent references to Christ as an ideal man and by reversing the major Christian dogma of the Incarnation of God, Micić proclaimed Zenitism as a new faith and stated that “man-art” is a Zenitist “theophany,” of which the only true creator is man himself.33 In 1924, in the first issue of Zenit published in Belgrade, Micić also wrote “Zenitosofija ili Energetika stvaralačkog zenitizma: No made in Serbia” (Zenitosophy or energetics of creative Zenitism: No made in Serbia), which provided a kind of theory of Zenitist art.34 This radical theory is based not on scholastic philosophy but on creative energetics, “a synthesis of all phenomena in the highest and essential forms of life and worlds.”35 In the first manifesto, Micić had emphasized that
one “cannot ‘understand’ Zenitism unless you feel it.”46 By 1924, he defined “man-art” as the essential concept of Zenitism, as “zenit-art” devoid of superficial symbolism and aestheticism. Micić presented the ten principles of Zenitism in the form of the Ten Commandments; the Zenitist second principle highlights zenith-art as everything related to what Micić called unspoiled, pure, and vital “barbaric genius” (barbarogenije).37 In 1926, in “Manifest varvarima duha i misli na svom kontinentima” (Manifesto to the barbarians of spirit and thought on all continents), written in the language of the October Revolution, Micić proclaimed Zenitism a global artistic movement, a revolution that would “de-civilize” Europe on the model of barbarogenije.38 Therefore, Micić rejected any form of traditional and religious authority and proclaimed in the Zenitist manifestoes that modern spirituality is not based on religious faith. Micić advocated for an emotional and expressive spirituality in Zenitism, a spirituality that was liberated from colonialist Western European constructs of civilization. This spirituality could be accessed through the collective “barbaric genius” that voiced the “new identity category [of] a confident and liberated minority culture.”39 As I will show, this “new primitive” Zenitist agenda relates to the “neo-Byzantine” on ideological, philosophical, and architectural levels.40

Architecture was prominent in the forty-three issues of the journal Zenit. The Zenitists’ promotion of architecture evinces their experimentation in the arts and their quest for creative innovations that facilitated avant-garde discourse. For example, in 1921, Zenitist Dragan Aleksić published a Dada-inspired poetic interpretation of Vladimir Tatlin’s work.41 An article about Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International (1920) that appeared in the February 1922 issue of Zenit may have been the first publication of the monument outside Soviet Russia (Figure 5).42 In 1922 an entire double issue of the journal edited by El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg was dedicated to new Russian art and architecture.43 Subsequent issues contained articles on new types of construction, works by Adolf Loos and Erich Mendelsohn; the Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau, by Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant, and the Russian pavilion, by Konstantin Melnikov, at the 1925 Decorative Arts Exposition in Paris; the Rosenberg House, by Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren; and Van Eesteren’s winning design for the Unter den Linden in Berlin.44 In 1926, Zenit provided book reviews of eight Bauhaus publications, including Walter Gropius’s International Architecture, Paul Klee’s Pedagogical Sketchbook, and László Moholy-Nagy’s Painting, Photography, Film, thus promoting a holistic approach to architecture and design not bound by traditional artistic disciplines.45

In 1921, in the fifth issue of Zenit, Micić published a text by Zenitist Boško Tokin, who wrote from Rome about the dome of Saint Peter’s Basilica as a paradigmatic example of historical architecture of extraordinary impact. Tokin noted how, given its continual construction and reconstruction over prolonged periods, the dome could be viewed as simultaneously Roman, Byzantine, and Renaissance, an argument that hinted at the Zenitist position that the “new Byzantine” style could dissolve traditional historical and geographic divisions.46 Tokin emphasized the way the Byzantine dome combines painting, sculpture, relief, architecture, music, poetry, and visual poetry. The dome of Saint Peter’s in Rome became a paradigm for what Byzantine architecture meant to the Zenitists.47 Micić’s interest in the Byzantine concept of space manifested in his focus on monumental reinterpretations of the dome and the wall. For him, the Byzantine dome is a pure form that should be the “head” of the building.48

In “Beograd bez arhitekture” (Belgrade without architecture), published in the November/December 1925 issue of Zenit, Micić wrote about the essence of architecture as a meeting of heaven and earth, referring directly to the philosophy and form of Byzantine architecture as the spirit of the new architecture. He made clear references to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Serbian Byzantine architecture and painting as the “only monuments of true architecture” and expanded on his positive assessment of traditional vernacular and monastic architecture in the Balkans as sources for modern architecture.49 Micić highlighted what he saw to be the important spiritual aspects of Byzantine architecture, ideas presented in the designs for a Zenitist center, the Zeniteum.

**Zenitist Reinterpretations of the Byzantine Dome and Wall**

The origins of the Zeniteum cannot be determined with certainty, but there was a greater emphasis on modern architecture in the Zenitist journal after the transition to Belgrade in 1924. Because Micić saw the Zeniteum as both an expression of and the essence of the Zenitist movement, I would assert that the Zeniteum was originally Micić’s idea. In the spirit of the Zenitist manifesto’s declaration that “Zenitism is the idea of all arts,” “beyond dimensions,” and equal to “eternity,” it seems likely that the Zeniteum was a visionary project and never meant to be built.50 Two diagrammatic drawings for the Zeniteum were created by the only architect member of the Zenitist group, Micić’s protégé Jo Klek (born Josif Seissel, 1904–87).51 Micić published the two designs for the Zeniteum in Zenit in December 1924, the same year Klek started his architecture studies at the University of Belgrade (Figures 6 and 7).52 In architectural form and essence, the Zeniteum projects relate to the Zenitist programmatic striving for “man-art” as a “limitless circle that starts nowhere and ends nowhere” and is “centered in Zenit.”53 The use of the dome for the Zeniteum reflects this notion of circle and center and evokes Byzantine solutions. In that regard, both
designs differed from other Zenitist architectural designs and installations, such as Klek’s design for a Villa Zenit, published in the October 1925 issue of Zenit (Figure 8).

The designs for the Zeniteum were inspired by centralized sacred space, like that found in Byzantine architecture, but the nonimitative character of Zenitist architecture precluded the use of more specific references to Byzantine style.54 Klek’s diagrammatic drawings show the influence of Byzantine, medieval Romanesque, and ancient Roman architecture, which relied on massive, load-bearing masonry walls and dome structures. The concentric circular drums crowned by a dome in the first Zeniteum drawing (see Figure 6) suggest a reference to the hierarchy of Neoplatonic thought, such as that of Dionysius the Areopagite, whose philosophical thought influenced medieval European architecture.55 In his 1924 statement of Zenitosophy, Micić posited the ten principles of creative Zenitism by proclaiming a new God, “art-man,” and defined Zenitist theory in terms of hierarchy and symbolism. Zenitism is the “ordering of all human creation, economy of collective feelings, and synthesis of all individual forces into a big circle of the whole.”56 The Zenitist vertical dimension connects earth, sun, and man (the
Figure 6  Jo Klek (Josif Seissel), Zeniteum I, 1924 (Zenit, no. 35 [Dec. 1924], n.p., in Zenit 1921–1926, ed. Vidosava Golubović and Irina Subotić [Belgrade: Narodna Biblioteka Srbije, 2008]; courtesy Irina Subotić.

Figure 7  Jo Klek (Josif Seissel), Zeniteum II, 1924 (Zenit, no. 35 [Dec. 1924], n.p., in Zenit 1921–1926, ed. Vidosava Golubović and Irina Subotić [Belgrade: Narodna Biblioteka Srbije, 2008]; courtesy Irina Subotić.
new God); it is “a metacosmic triangle, the only Zenitist symbol.”57 As I see it, the pseudo-Byzantine dome of the first Zeniteum is an expression of the “circle of the whole” that embraces all individual forces. Its stairs, framed by round Roman-Byzantine arches, may evoke religious intellectual and spiritual quests or the pilgrimage steps on Mount Sinai (Figure 9). The Ladder of Divine Ascent, a seminal Byzantine text by John Klimakos, may have been another inspiration.58 According to Micić, Zenitism is a magical and electric interval between the microcosmos and the metacosmos—between man and the zenith.59 The Zeniteum illustrates “the connection between earth and heaven, heart with heart, soul with soul.”60

The second design for the Zeniteum is another interpretation of Zenitist architectonic concepts. It has an axial composition of three superimposed, vertically stacked domes of diminishing size intersected by vertical and horizontal planes (see Figure 7). The domes are articulated by rows of arcades. In this project, a single dome on the very top, without structural divisions, is superimposed on the structural frame of the bottom two segments. The cross serves as an organizing principle of the entire design, with three domes set in three different vertical layers. The attenuated domes of this second design might have been inspired by Bruno Taut’s 1914 Glass Pavilion (Glashaus) or his visionary architectural drawings for the City Crown (Die Stadtkrone) and the House of Heaven (Haus des Himmels) in Alpine Architecture (1919) (Figures 10 and 11).61 Taut’s Glashaus and Stadtkrone concepts highlighted the use of glass and polychromy in a search for reconciliation between spirituality and modern architecture. Taut returned to the medieval past as a comprehensive idealism, with the idea that the Gothic cathedral
provided the highest architectural quality embedded in a
mythic “nonnational” European culture without borders and
governments.62

Rather than modeling Zenitism on the Gothic cathed-
dral, however, Micić advocated reference to a Byzantine
paradigm.63 As Micić postulated in the first issue of Zenit,
the Zeniteum united the immaterial microcosmic and mac-
rocasmic realms and put man in the center of the macro-
cosm, echoing the sequential ordering of triplets in the
Byzantine concept of earthly and heavenly hierarchies that
are rooted in Neoplatonic pseudo-Dionysian philosophy.64
Yet Micić despised equally the decadence of European
bourgeois culture and the monumental “tasteless” decora-
tion of Byzantine churches, an attitude reflected in the two
designs for the Zeniteum, which did not employ any for-
mal decorative features of Byzantine churches. He la-
mented, “It is quite rare that [architects] work with the
pure arch of the ‘Byzantine’ dome, which could have been
very successfully used in contemporary urbanism in recent
[modern] architecture.”65

In his critique of Belgrade’s architecture, Micić wrote of
the “Byzantine” space in an unnamed monastery in the
woods near Belgrade, on the fringes of the historical and
geographic Byzantine reach. In describing this monastery as
a kind of “otherworldly town,” Micić seemed to be opposed
to the prevailing Western European city and its bourgeois
and capitalist political economy. Micić claimed that the
monastery church “represents a completely purified form:
the zenith of architecture!” His description of its simple white
geometrical planes and domes, “devoid of Byzantine-Greek decoration and tasteless ornamentation,” indicates he was referring to the Rakovica Monastery, a major spiritual center (Figure 12).66 This monastery, possibly built in the fourteenth century, is remarkable for its two domes on drums, a possible inspiration for domed elements in the visionary projects for the Zeniteum.

The Zeniteum may also have been inspired by Rudolf Steiner’s Goetheanum, as the names and design concepts might suggest (Figure 13).67 Like the Zeniteum, the better-known Goetheanum borrowed from both avant-garde and Byzantine architecture. Both projects used large domes and, in particular, the unusual intersection of several domes. The first Goetheanum (1913–19) appeared as an axial composition of two intersecting domes of unequal size (Figure 14).68 Their form resembled the vaulting system of Hagia Sophia, where the massive central dome is flanked by two smaller semidomes along the east–west axis, or the two unequally sized domes of the Church of Archangel Michael in the twelfth-century monastery Pantokrator (today Zeyrek Camii) in Istanbul (Figure 15). The first Zeniteum project had a massive single, stepped dome, yet the second iteration revealed an experimentation with domical structures and verticality, with its three attenuated domes stacked on top of one another.

Jo Klek’s designs for the Zeniteum were never realized. Another of Klek’s interwar designs, the Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Sušak, Croatia (Figure 16), which

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Figure 12 Rakovica Monastery near Belgrade, Serbia, possibly fourteenth century, mentioned in text in the sixteenth century (photo courtesy Ljubomir Milanović).

Figure 13 Rudolf Steiner, Goetheanum I, Dornach, Switzerland, 1913–19 (Benzinger © Rudolf Steiner Archive).

Figure 14 Rudolf Steiner, Goetheanum I, Dornach, Switzerland, 1913–19, floor plan and cross section (© Goetheanum Dokumentation).
also was never built, followed Zenitist ideas, incorporating the evocative capacity of Byzantine architecture as Klek did in the first Zeniteum project (see Figure 6). This centrally planned church with a massive dome combined what architectural historian Vesna Mikic has identified as “International” and “Mediterranean” architecture without explicit references to medieval Byzantine architecture. The project incorporated topographical elements and open terraces, which also occurred in the design for the second Zeniteum (see Figure 7). Cyril and Methodius were Byzantine saints and missionaries who devised the first alphabet for the Slavic people, which was crucial to their cultural development. In this design, Klek combined references to the saints and a pedagogical mission, advancing its ontological and epistemological qualities, which were critical to the Zenitist movement.

In the search for a “nonstereotypical” monumentality in modern architecture, devoid of academic and historicized romantic references, Klek’s two designs for the Zeniteum create architectural monumentality through massive walls and domes, which is typical of the Byzantine idiom. Both schemes for the Zeniteum have an undecorated form, purified of excessive exterior decoration and congruent with Micić’s appraisal of the white, clear planar surfaces of the monastery church in Serbia. The three-part vertical organization of the second Zeniteum suggests the triplets (tripartite ordering) of the Middle Byzantine church, topped by a free dome. The round-arched perforations of the solids suggest permeability and the dynamics of the structure of medieval walls. What Steiner called “etheric walls” (spiritual walls) can be seen in the best-preserved examples of Middle Byzantine architecture, the Greek monastery churches of Hosios Loukas and Daphni. The wall texture of these churches resembles the “etheric walls” found in Steiner’s first Goetheanum and also in the design for the second Zeniteum (Figure 17). All have tripartite geometric and textural organization of surfaces, from a solid ground level through a porous, “dematerialized” middle zone crowned by a dome, which Micić highlights as a pure, spiritual form and the head of the building.

The triple domes of the second Zeniteum evoke the three-stepped design process itself, reflecting a Neoplatonic concept. This concept, also used in Byzantine architecture, underlies the creation of architecture in a threefold process: first, an idea forms in the mind of an architect; second, the idea acquires its form and materialization in the material world through total design; and third, the idea is ultimately dematerialized as the beholder moves toward the spiritual realm through the experience of space. The Byzantines explained this process in the connection between heaven and earth; similarly, Micić wrote about a spiritual connection between earth and heaven through architecture and urban design.
Structure and Spirituality in Zenitist Architecture

To understand the relationship between Zenitist modernism and Byzantine architecture, it is important to understand the role of conceptual design in Zenitist architectural practices. The unbuilt, visionary project for the second Zeniteum has memorable aesthetics. One of the basic features of Byzantine architecture, as exemplified by Hagia Sophia, is an aesthetics of “dematerialization.” This is evident in the weightless loftiness of Hagia Sophia’s interior space, which is pierced by numerous windows and topped by a dome with a lower ring of windows that make the dome appear to be floating in light, as if suspended from high above (see Figure 1). This effect is complemented by the lacelike design of visible structural elements such as columns, usually placed on top of arches, the most fragile structural parts of the building.75 The second Zeniteum, with its “racked” thin orthogonal planes on which the domes are “stacked,” defies constructional logic but also reflects the nonmaterial, spiritual quality of Zenitist architecture.

Zenitist architecture evoked the Byzantine architectural constructs of total design and dematerialization aesthetics in diagrammatic visionary drawings. These drawings consistently emphasize the “Byzantine” dichotomy of wall and dome rather than the trabeated system of Western European architecture, providing opportunities for altering the prevailing academic architectural canons of the early twentieth century.76 The subtle evocations of Byzantium in Zenitist architecture, instead of a rigid adoption of Byzantine architectural elements, suggest how Micic and Klek moved beyond the Byzantine-medieval past in their novel solutions.

The Zenitists also discussed what they termed the “art of structure” (konstrukcija) and the “architecture of painting,” which were critical aspects of other modernist movements.77 El Lissitzky’s proun (an acronym from the Russian for “project for the affirmation of the new”) had a strong influence on Micic’s philosophy and Klek’s work (Figure 18). Lissitzky...
and Ilya Ehrenburg published an article on *proun* in *Zenit*, “Ruska nova umetnost” (Russian new art), that was critical to the wider avant-garde networks of the 1920s and to Zenitism (Figure 19).\(^7\) In their article, Lissitzky and Ehrenburg traced the development of new Russian art from icon painting to suprematism and constructivism, from panel painting to painting in space, and addressed the potential for art to create a new society on a grand scale.\(^79\) With his concept of *arbos* (from *artija-boja-slika*, or paper-color-painting, translated into German as *PaFaMa*, from *Papier-Farben-Malerei*) of 1922, Micić conceived of painting as constructed of paper and color, as opposed to romantic mimetic notions of painting (Figure 20).\(^8\) Like Lissitzky’s *proun*, which Lissitzky defined as a “construction” (*konstrukcija*), Micić’s *arbos* was described as a construction. Similarly, in the 1920s Micić’s idea of a nonmimetic practice shifted from painting to “dematerialized” architecture, expressed as a composite of all arts (literature, music, plastic arts, and painting) (see Figures 4 and 20).
The connections among the avant-gardes in Russia and Serbia were part of the wide search for new, nonimitative, socially engaged architecture, as indicated by the membership of the Zenitists in the short-lived Moscow-based Association for New Architecture (ASNOVA), founded in 1923 and dissolved in 1929.81 In 1926, the founders, Nikolai Ladovsky and El Lissitzky, named Ljubomir Micić as the only ASNOVA representative from Yugoslavia and the Balkans among seven activists for the new architecture; the others were Adolf Behne from Germany, Le Corbusier from France, Mart Stam from Holland, Lundberg Holm from the United States, Emil Root from Switzerland, Karel Teige from Czechoslovakia, and Murayama from Japan.82

Like other avant-garde architectural groups, ASNOVA was prolific in promoting ideas and visionary architectural projects, but its members rarely built.83 Led by Ladovsky, ASNOVA developed a rationalist approach in architecture based on psychoanalytic methods, emphasizing investigations of psychological and physiological perceptions of space through conceptual compositional design and application of conceptual design to specific architectural projects.84 For both the Zenitists and members of ASNOVA, space rather than structure formed the major element in architectural design. Moreover, ASNOVA insisted on team projects not based on the traditional master-and-apprentice model of architectural training, in which students followed their professors’ guidance and suppressed their own creativity. This organization of ASNOVA work paralleled the societal aspirations of the newly formed Soviet Union. By contrast to ASNOVAs’s collectivism, Micić focused on the active social role of those Zenitist creative accomplishments that promoted individualism. In his view, the individualism of a Zenitist’s socially engaged creative process arose from within, not outside, the artist. The Zenitists sought to create a society where humans would be at the center of a microcosmos in which the highest circles would be art and philosophy.85

Micić insisted that all creation results from both the mystical (spiritual) and the intellectual. By making recurrent and provocative use of Christological references and employing terminology usually reserved for the liturgical services of the Orthodox church, he attempted to combine modernism and religion within the anti-European primitivism of Zenitist art and architecture. When Micić scheduled a Zenitist public performance in Zagreb in January 1923, he called the event Great Zenitist Vespers, the poster for which featured Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International and a call for the Balkanization of Europe (Figure 21).86 By making reference to the vespers service in Byzantine-rite churches, which glorifies God the creator of the world, Micić similarly glorified Zenitism as a “new religion” and a “new mysticism.”87 The Christological references in his polemical texts emerged from Micić’s consciousness of his Serbian-Byzantine-Orthodox heritage, but the meaning of his religious references should be sought in the culture of the Balkans rather than in the church itself. As a leftist and a Serbian nationalist, Micić embraced the spiritual framework of his cultural background, but he failed to see that Zenitism as a “new religion” was discordant with modernism.88 Ultimately, his attempts to combine modernism and religion and to promote the Zeniteum as a kind of new temple were destined for failure. In the end, even Lissitzky dismissed Zenitism as incompatible with modernism, which denied any national or religious reference.89

Figure 21 Ljubomir Micić, poster for Great Zenitist Vespers, Zagreb, 31 January 1923 (Vidosava Golubović and Irina Subotić, eds., Zenit 1921–1926 [Belgrade: Narodna Biblioteka Srbije, 2008]; courtesy Irina Subotić).
Conclusion

Micić’s modernism emerged from his context—the Balkans and their Byzantine past. In a way typical of the scholarly reception of Balkan culture, Steven A. Mansbach maintains that Micić’s philosophy of Zenitism is rooted in the native primitivism of the Balkans and of the Southern Slavs, widely considered mystical and irrational. In academic discourse, the accomplishments of the Balkans have been perceived as devoid of culture and history, and thus marginalized in scholarly discussions and removed from “canonical” consideration. Yet Micić’s Byzantine-modernist connections were crucially different from those in other parts of Europe. The Byzantine “archetype” in Zenitist modern architecture was not an idea meant to be replicated literally; rather, it was intended to evoke the spiritual essence of Byzantine architecture. Micić’s resistance to Western European colonization of Eastern Europe—its “close other” in Piotr Piotrowski’s terms—took the form of a turn to the architecture closely associated with Byzantium.

For Micić, Slavs were the barbarogenije (the barbaric genius) who resisted the “cultivation” imposed by others and thus preserved an uncorrupted “self” and spirituality beyond their intellectual, ideological, and socioeconomic realities. In his view, barbarogenije could be a vehicle of new art and spirituality in the “sixth continent,” the Balkans. As explained by Igor Marjanović, growing up on the impoverished Military Frontier, surviving World War I, persecuted by the authorities in the 1920s in both Croatia and Serbia, and thus displaced from any obvious homeland, Micić evoked barbarogenije as a creative space removed from traditional narratives and academic creative disciplines. At the same time, barbarogenije was the avant-garde voice of the Zenitists and Serbs, who denounced Europe, its tyranny, its colonization, and its geographic borders. In the last issue of Zenit, published in 1926, just before the journal was shut down by the government, Micić wrote: “Down with Europe! Down with today’s tyranny; down with the exploitation of man over man; down with state borders.”

Europe, he stated, was the synonym for greedy capitalism and barbarization of Europe. Far from the historicist neo-Byzantine architectural style that originated in Vienna, Zenitism used evocations of the Byzantine to create a unique and dynamic Byzantine-modernist architecture.

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Notes

1. This article results from my long-term interest in Byzantine architecture and its relevance to modern and contemporary architectural practices. Various versions of this research were presented at the 2012 Yale conference “Byzantium/Modernism,” at the School of Design at Iowa State University in fall 2012, and at the 2013 convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Euroasian Studies, held in Boston. I am immensely grateful to JSAH editor Pat Morton and to the reviewers for their suggestions and questions that helped me improve this essay. Thanks are also due to Miloš R. Perović, Aleksandar Kadijević, Thomas Leslie, April Eisman, Kurt Forster, Ljubomir Milanović, Marina Mihaljević, Irina Subotić, Tanja Daniljanić-Conley, Erin Kalish, Lilien Filipovitch Robinson, Liluca D. Popovich, Elena Konstantinovna Murenina, Elena Boeck, Anna Sokolina, Maria Taroutina, Jane Sharp, Mikesch Muecke, Ulrike Passe, Karen Bernmann, Kimberly Zarecor, Matthew Gurdy, Heidi Reburn, Joyce Newman, Trudy Jacoby, Anna Pauli, Danielle Pelunik, Gordana Staninšić, Dragana Ćorović, and Dušan Danilović. This research was supported by a grant from the Center for Excellence in Arts and Humanities at Iowa State University.

4. Ibid., 8.
7. In 1929 this kingdom became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929–45).
10. Aleksandar Kadijević, Jedan vek traženja nacionalnog stila u srpskoj arhitekturi (sredina XIX–XX veka) [One century of searching for a national style in Serbian architecture (mid-nineteenth–twentieth centuries)], 2nd ed. (Belgrade: Gradjevinska Knjiga, 2007).
12. Starting with the formation of the Serbian medieval state, the Serbs received from Byzantium the Cyrillic alphabet, state organization and philosophy of the state law, arts and literature, and Christian Orthodox religion, while Serbian church architecture was based on Byzantine models. Serbo-Byzantine style hence became an official style of the new state. Kadijević, Jedan vek traženja; Branislav Pantelić, “Nationalism and Architecture: The Creation of a National Style in Serbian Architecture and Its Political Implications,” JSAH 56, no. 1 (Mar. 1997), 16–41. Tanja Đančljanović demonstrates that a variety of modernist expressions in architecture do not support a national distinctiveness of either Serbian or Yugoslav architecture. Đančljanović, “The Question of National Architecture in Interwar Yugoslavia: Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2003). Aleksandar Ignjatović claims that modernist architecture in the interwar period was an active and constitutive part of representing and materializing the national idea of Yugoslavia. Aleksandar Ignjatović, “Đančljanović v arhitekturi 1904–1941 [Yugoslavism in architecture 1904–1941]” (Belgrade: Gradjevinska Knjiga, 2007).
14. In 1883, Mihajlo Vlatković, architect and professor of archaeology at the University of Belgrade, founded the Serbian Archaeological Society, which documented archaeological remains in Serbia, including medieval heritage. Tanja Đančljanović, Vlatković i Milutinović, 3 vols. (Belgrade: Istorijski Muzej Srbije, 2006–8).
17. The first International Congress of Byzantine Studies was held in Romania in 1924. The founders of the Association International des Études Byzantines (AIEB) included French, Romanian, Russian, and British scholars C. Diehl, H. Gregoire, N. Iorga, N. Kondakov, G. Millet, and Sir W. Ramsay.
32. Micić, “Čovek i umetnost.”
33. Ibid. Theophany is the manifestation of God to man.

35. Ibid.


43. Lisitskiy and Ehrenburg, “Ruska nova umetnost.”


Finally, yet another critical text on international modernist architecture is Walter Gropius’s Internačionalna arhitektura [International architecture], Zenit, no. 40 (Apr. 1926), n.p., this article features an illustration of the Rosenberg House, an image repeated on the issue’s cover page. The same issue also shows Van Eesteren’s first-prize-winning design for the Unter der Linden. See also Perović, “Zenitism and Modernist Architecture.”


47. See also Kadijević, “Evakucije i parafraze vizantijskog,” esp. 388, 389, 391.


49. Ibid. For references to primary sources that describe Hagia Sophia as the meeting of heaven and earth, see Linda Safran, “Introduction,” in Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium, ed. Linda Safran (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 1, 11.


52. Jo Klek remained closely associated with Zenitism until its dissolution in 1926. In the last issue of Zenit, Ljubomir Micić, writing under the name Dr. M. Rasinov, published “Zenitizam kroz prizmu marksizma” [Zenitism through the prism of Marxism], Zenit, no. 43 (Dec. 1926), 12.


57. Ibid.


61. Bruno Taut, Alpine Architektur (Hagen: Folkwang-Verlag, 1919). I thank Tanja Conley and Patricia Morton for discussing with me Taut’s architecture and the reference.


63. For the pseudo-Gothic font used on the covers of Zenit, see Zenit, no. 1 (Feb. 1921) and several subsequent issues; for prominently used Cyrillic font, see Zenit, nos. 26–33 (Oct. 1924).

64. Micić, “Čovek i umetnost”; Bogdanović, “Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy.”


66. Ibid.

67. Perović, Srpska arhitektura XX veka, 66–70. Rudolf Steiner was the founder of anthroposophy, which had its center at the Goetheanum. See, for example, Anna P. Sokolina, ed., Arhitektura i antroposofija [Architecture and anthroposophy] (Moscow: KMK, 2010), summary in English, 261–64; Willy Rotzler, “Das Goetheanum in Dornach als Beispiel der Integration der Kunste,” in Rudolf Steiner in Kunst und Architektur, ed. Walter Kugler and Simon Baus (Cologne: Dumont, 2007), 291–98; David Adams, “Rudolf Steiner’s First Goetheanum as an Illustration of Organic Functionalism,” JSAH 51, no. 2 (June 1992), 182–204.

68. Steiner’s First Goetheanum, fully completed under Steiner, was lost to fire in 1923. The still extant second Goetheanum was built posthumously. On the architectural idea of the Goetheanum, see Rudolf Steiner, Der Bau des Goetheanums: Einleitender Vortrag mit Erklärungen zu den Bildern des Bau (Dornach, Switzerland: Philosophisch-Anthroposophischer Verlag am Goetheanum, 1932), 19–26.


70. After World War II, when Klek took a position as professor of architecture in Zagreb, he became a practitioner of rigidly orthogonal international modernist architecture. He did not continue to experiment with Byzantine-modernist paradigms or refer to his formative years in the Zenitist movement under the strong influence of Micić. “Biografije saradnika zenita,” s.v. “Jo, Josif Klek.”

71. On the demands for purity of form, color, and space and the first Zenitist project, see Micić, “Nova umetnost.” On the austere monastic architecture in the Balkans “purified” of the excessive decoration of Byzantine architecture, see Micić, Beograd bez arhitekture.”
See, for example, Slobodan Ćurčić, Architecture in the Balkans: From Dioecian to Suleyman the Magnificent (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), 297–300, 383–90, 435–36, 472, 478. Baron von Hansen’s drawings of Hosios Loukas had been published in Allgemeine Bauzeitung in 1853; see Wagner–Rieger, Der Architekt TheoPhil Hansen, 266, as cited in Jovanović, “Teofil Hanzen,” 244. Other publications were also available by this time; for example, Robert W. Schultz and Sidney H. Barnsley, The Monastery of Saint Luke (London: Macmillan, 1901).

73. Ćurčić, “Beograd bez arhitekture.”

74. Ćurčić, “Nova umetnost.”

75. Ćurčić, Architecture in the Balkans, 196–98.


77. Ćurčić wrote about the “structure of poems” and “words in space” and addressed these comparative notions in architecture. Ljubomir Ćurčić, “Kategorički imperative zениtistичке pesničke škole” [Categorical imperative of the Zenitist poet’s school], Zenit, no. 13 (Apr. 1922), 17–18. See also Lajos Kassák, “Arhitektura slike” [Architecture of painting], trans. Ljubomir Ćurčić, Zenit, nos. 19/20 (Nov./Dec. 1922), 67.

78. Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, Ruska nova umetnost, 50–52.

79. Ibíd. See also K. Malević, “Zakoni nove umetnosti” [The rules of new art], Zenit, nos. 17/18 (Sept./Oct. 1922), 53–54. Also in this issue of Zenit, Lissitzky’s image titled Konstrukcija (another word he used for proum) appears (see figure 19).

80. Ćurčić, “Nova umetnost.”


82. Lissitzky and Lissitzky, from ASNOVA; Khan-Magognedov, Pioneers of Soviet Architecture. Ćurčić’s specific role in ASNOVA remains unknown.


85. Ćurčić, “Covek i umetnost.”

86. Ljubomir Ćurčić, poster for Velika Zenitistička Večernja (Great Zenitist Vespers), Zagreb, 31 Jan. 1923.

87. Ćurčić, “Covek i umetnost.”


89. Levering, “Ljubomir Ćurčić.” Ultimately, Ćurčić was abandoned by his leftist fellows in Tito’s Yugoslavia, where he lived on charity. “Biografije saradnika zenita,” s.v. “Ljubomir Ćurčić.”


92. For Piotrowski’s, the “close other” refers to “Eastern Europe” despite the fact that the region’s architecture and arts developed in parallel to Western European traditions. In that context, the “close other” is not the “real other,” as in Southeast Asia or Africa, but its culture remains marginalized. Piotrowski Piotrowski, “On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History,” Umeni/Art 5 (2008), 378–83, reprinted as shorter versions “Towards Horizontal Art History,” in Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration, and Convergence, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2009), 82–85; and “Towards a Historical Horizon of the European Avant-Garde,” in Europa! Europa! The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent, ed. Sascha Bru, Jan Baetens, Benedikt Hjarthson, Peter Nicholls, Tania Ōrum, and Hubert van den Berg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 49–58. See also Jelena Bogdanović, “On the Very Edge: Modernisms and Modernity of Interwar Serbia,” in Bogdanović et al., On the Very Edge, 1–29.


97. Ibíd., 12.


99. Ibíd.

