



Network

Habsburg



elma elman zarecor on Blagojevic, 'Modernism in Serbia: The Elusive Margins of Belgrade Architecture, 1919-1941'

Habsburg Author: Ljiljana Blagojevic Reviewer: kimberly elman zarecor

Ljiljana Blagojevic. *Modernism in Serbia: The Elusive Margins of Belgrade Architecture, 1919-1941.* Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2003. 336 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-02537-9.

Reviewed by kimberly elman zarecor (School of Architecture, Iowa State University)

Published on HABSBERG (October, 2005)

Architectural Modernity on the Edge of Europe

In the introduction to her beautifully illustrated and well-written history of interwar modern architecture in Serbia, Ljiljana Blagojevic remarks that the architects of Belgrade's modernist circles "were neither friends nor disciples of any of the masters of the European modern movement, they knew not their 'gods' in person, they followed only reflections and translations" (p. x). Working with the themes of marginality, authenticity and identity formation, Blagojevic argues convincingly that modernity in Serbia was expressed formally through a borrowed, western European style that masked traditional building methods and spatial arrangements behind fashionable facades.

The book challenges the long-held assumption that originality must be valued over all other artistic and creative components of a work of art or architecture. Blagojevic emphasizes that the lack of originality in the Serbian case positions it as ideal ground for exploring the limits of the modern project at the edges of Europe. She offers "translation" as a paradigm that could be useful to understand this "marginal" condition (p. xii), although one of the book's failings is that she never fully explores the potential of this idea in the text.

This is the first comprehensive English-language study of the work and ideas of these architects, who remain wholly outside of the architectural canon. The book's five main chapters present a trajectory of Serbian modern architecture that started with early experimentation in two-dimensional architectural representation and ended with an automobile plant completed in Belgrade in 1940. Chapter 1, under the heading "Shift," locates the origins of architectural modernism in the fantastical spatial paintings of Jo Klek, a member of the Zenitism movement, which coalesced around the early 1920s journal, *Zenit*, owned and edited by poet and critic Ljubomir Micic.

Zenitism drew from Micic's concept of "barbarogenius," which proposed the Balkans as a point of origin for "a new symbolic figure of an artistic/creative genius invested with a pure barbarian force" (p. 10). This "new Man" was given a supranational, rather than an international, European identity that benefited from the interface created by "East-West creative friction" (p. 10). Blagojevic emphasizes that *Zenit* was part of a European-wide network of avant-garde magazines, including *De Stijl* in Holland, *ABC* in Switzerland, and *Stavba* and *Devetsil* in Czechoslovakia. For example, Hannes Meyer was a correspondent for *Zenit* and El Lissitzky was in personal contact with Klek. In this sense, she undoes her earlier assertion that Serbian modernism operated in a space that was cut off from the wider modern movement by highlighting these international

Bookmark & share



Sponsors



Options

[View](#)[View/Add Comments \(0\)](#)

1476 subscribers



Subscribe to this network to join the discussion

Browse Habsburg Commons

- Discussions
- Reviews
- Blog
- Images
- Video
- Audio
- Documents
- Links

Search Habsburg



connections.

With the title "Construct," chapter 2 introduces us to the Group of Architects of the Modern Movement in Belgrade (GAMM), formed in 1928 by four architects, including Trieste native Milan Zlokovic, whose own 1929 house was "the first realization of modernism in Belgrade" (p. 27). Other founding members included Jan Dubovy, a Czech trained in Prague; Dusan Babic from Banja Luka and trained in Vienna; and Branislav Kojic, a Serb trained in Paris. At its height GAMM included eighteen members, who built modern projects throughout the new Yugoslavia, including houses, banks, schools, restaurants and the large Belgrade Astronomical Observatory.

Unlike *avant-garde* groups such as Devetsil in Czechoslovakia or De Stijl in Holland which included artists, architects, writers and other creative characters, GAMM members had to be architects and the organization's mission was to "provide a modernizing impulse in the profession" (p. 59). Blagojevic deems the group a moderate success, although they never promoted a unified modern style and they broke up in 1934, just as modernism was gaining acceptance as a "fashionable new style" (p. 71). Blagojevic misses the opportunity here to engage a broader historical discourse surrounding the 1929 dictatorship. She tempts the reader with the enticing tidbit that GAMM's first public statement was published in the newspaper, *Vreme*, on January 6, 1929, the same day that the dictatorship was announced, but sadly her discussion of this convergence is no more than a few sentences.

Chapter 3, titled "Exposure," explores Yugoslavia's tentative embrace of the modern style in its international exhibition pavilion in Barcelona (1929), as well as the 1930 competition for the reconstruction of Terazije Terrace in central Belgrade, won by the Prague-trained Serbian architect Nikola Dobrovic. Dragisa Brasovan, a successful architect working in traditional styles who adopted a modernist vocabulary, joined GAMM in 1929, and designed the Barcelona pavilion. It was an attempt to define a style for the new nation that expressed its modernity while remaining faithful to local tradition. Its defining formal element was the unusual cladding, alternating horizontal stripes of grey and white stained Serbian wood prepared by builders in Belgrade and shipped to the site. The combination of a hard-edged volume and the geometric stripes gives the building a strength and solidity that was in stark contrast to its neighbor at the exhibition, Mies van der Rohe's canonic marble, glass and onyx German Pavilion.

The chapter ends with Dobrovic and his unbuilt project for the reconstruction of Terazije Terrace. Blagojevic sees his victory in an open international competition as a positive sign for modernism in the country. Although for her, the competition marks the "crucial point of rejection of modern architecture and planning" in Belgrade, since Dobrovic's entry, along with many of his other early 1930s projects, were never built (p. 112). Blagojevic attributes these repeated failures to a growing conservatism within the country's elite. Once again, a look at the political situation would have informed and strengthened her argument here.

Chapter 4, "Byt Mode," considers the housing question and the many single-family houses, workers' settlements and apartment blocks constructed in a modern style in the 1930s. Blagojevic illustrates how modern architectural forms became interchangeable and trendy, "like women's dresses on the streets" (p. 165). She contrasts an early social vision with the need to fulfill clients' wishes. This forced architects to work for an elite clientele who wanted outwardly stylish homes that preserved their conservative social values and family structures within. Blagojevic writes that modern houses were a form of *haute couture* that were "generated on ... the desirable image of modernity" (p. 144), but failed to have a strong impact on the way that their inhabitants went about their everyday lives.

The fifth and final chapter, "Departure," is a case study of architect Milan Zlokovic. Calling his work, including Commerce Hall in Skopje and the Fiat Automobile Service Building in Belgrade, "the very substance of Serbian modernism" (p. 191), Blagojevic argues that Zlokovic was alone among his contemporaries in synthesizing the local and international influences around him into a style that can be described as Serbian modernism. Strangely the book lacks a substantive conclusion; there is only a postscript called "Vision" that gives some personal reflections on the "incompleteness" of the modern project in Serbia.

As my summary suggests, the text is addressed primarily to historians of European modern architecture, a group with limited knowledge and, arguably,

little desire to be educated on the topic, with the exception of those of us who are specialists in eastern Europe. Although one hopes that an accomplished volume such as this will prompt more architectural historians to look at the developments in the region, the more realistic goal for the project might have been to reach out to an interdisciplinary audience of regional specialists while remaining focused on architecture.

In this regard, Blagojevic misses the opportunity to connect this project to larger questions surrounding Yugoslavia's early history, the 1929 dictatorship, and the attempted creation of a Yugoslav national identity. She remains devoted to the traditional understanding of architectural history as a narrow discussion of stylistic developments and artistic movements. The book is significantly better than some of its counterparts, such as Luminita Machedon and Ernie Scoffham's *Romanian Modernism: The Architecture of Bucharest, 1920-1940* (1999), which is appalling for its disregard of historical context and blatant nationalist agenda. One of the best examples of the possibilities for such integration is Eve Blau's *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-1934* (1999). This masterful account of the housing programs of the Viennese Social Democrats in the 1920s never loses sight of its core audience of architectural historians, while engaging and contributing to an interdisciplinary examination of Vienna in the period.

For readers expecting more than a useable and well-illustrated introduction to interwar architecture in Serbia, the most significant problem with the text will lie in its methodology. Blagojevic orients her discussion towards the existing literature on western European modernism, replicating its ongoing love affair with the Frankfurt school and critical theory, as well as the exaltation of modernism's heroes. The result is a text sprinkled with underdeveloped references to theorists such as Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer, Georg Simmel, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and most often, Walter Benjamin. In some examples, the discussions prove interesting. For example, she makes some useful connections between Benjamin's concept of interior space and the "Bosnian Hall" in one of Zlokovic's Belgrade villas (pp. 44-50). The overall effect of this overlay, however, is to imply that a qualitative equivalency can be developed between the canonical modernism of western Europe and the "marginal" modernism of Serbia. This argument suggests that if both can be analyzed within the same conceptual framework then the Serbian work deserves more recognition in the canon or attention from scholars.

The problem has a second dimension in this case, as the architects themselves are equated with the recognized masters of the modern movement, again suggesting a kind of artistic equivalence. This tendency manifests itself most fully in the case study on Zlokovic, who is portrayed as the Serbian Adolf Loos and at times takes on the traits of Le Corbusier or Guiseppe Terragni. Authors who have written about these other architects are quoted in the discussion as if their texts were as applicable to Zlokovic as their intended subject. Michael K. Hays's characterization of Le Corbusier's photographs onboard an ocean liner "as the actual forms of knowledge of things" is applied to a similar series by Zlokovic, because "the choice of ambience and, in particular, the central perspective of the frame in Zlokovic's picture of father/captain on the deck of the *Carniola* can be seen as directly comparable to Le Corbusier's photograph of the *Aquitania* side deck" (pp. 205-206). The desire to find sources and models for this lesser-known work is a legitimate part of the process of any architectural analysis. The difficulty here is the transposition of the personalities and the co-optation of the critical discourse on these other architects to compensate for the lack of a secondary literature on Zlokovic.

Finally, there is underlying problem with the construction of the concept of "marginal" modernism in the project. Blagojevic began the text with the ambitious goal of "attempt[ing] to comprehend the power of modernism's wider message" at the "very margins of Europe" (p.x). In her postscript, she proposed that the foundation of Serbian modernism lies in its "time lag and incompleteness"(p. 231). The implication from this statement is that somewhere in western Europe there is a "complete" form of modernism that is always operating "in the moment" to create something new. Although I do not want to undo the center-periphery construct that is useful in thinking about culture in central and eastern Europe, it is necessary to define which center and which periphery we are talking about. Modernism in western Europe cannot be reduced to a single, definitive style that could be copied and "translated" as an organic whole into the Serbian context. The modernism of the center was just as varied, contentious and imperfect as what one finds at the "margins." Compare for example the modernism of Erich Mendelsohn to Hannes Meyer or Guiseppe

Terragni.

The Czechoslovak example is instructive here. Within Blagojevic's narrative, Prague is portrayed as a center, a point of reference. Serbian architects attended university there, they exhibited their work and hoped for some recognition from the "masters" in Prague (p. 65). Yet within the canon of modern architecture, Czechoslovakia remains on the periphery, another context in which the modern project can be tested at its "very margins." This nested set of center-periphery relationships can be found in every European context; no other French city is a center when considered in relation to Paris, for example. In the end, the notion of a "complete" modernism breaks down. The more important and instructive questions to ask about modernism, and how it was translated and adapted across Europe, come from an understanding of local conditions. The political, economic and social context in which architecture is designed, built and occupied provides more fruitful ground for architectural history than only the question of how or why architectural styles moved across national boundaries.

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=10925>

Citation: kimberly elman zarecor. Review of Blagojevic, Ljiljana, *Modernism in Serbia: The Elusive Margins of Belgrade Architecture, 1919-1941*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. October, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10925>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

[About](#) [Search](#) [Site Map](#) [Editors](#) [Donate](#) [Contact](#) [Help](#) 

H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online

Copyright © 1995 - 2011

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](#).