

CROATIAN ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN SOCIALISM AND THE NEW TRADITION

Socialism as installed political system of the state began its almost fifty year existence in Croatia with the revolutionary movement in May 1945, immediately after the end of World War II. It was then that the Independent State of Croatia, that came into being in 1941 during the war, disappeared and Croatia became part of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia as a separate and distinct republic. The new Yugoslavia had been divided between the East and West blocs at the Yalta Conference. Nevertheless, the socialist system set up as a result of the triumph of communism was closely linked to the Soviet Union which during the period between 1932 and 1953 had to undergo the dictatorship of Stalin. In 1945, Croatia became part of the communist world, during the mature period of the personality cult. Through Yugoslavia it was tightly linked with the Soviet Union and rapidly passed through all the political, economic and cultural changes that accompany the revolutionary installation of a new social order. This direct and forceful Soviet influence, imposed by politics and ideology, lasted for only three years. After the Cominform Resolution of 1948, certain changes came about. Tito broke with Stalin, and all of a sudden Soviet influence was considered undesirable. The ideological earmarks of socialism gradually changed, so that from the fifties the self-management concept slowly began to be installed. This was later to dominate both Croatia and Yugoslavia as a whole. Stalin's death in 1953 and the end of the Stalinist era in the literal sense did not have any political influence on the situation in Croatia.

Before beginning to address the problem of architecture in the 1945-1953 period, it is necessary to provide a framework of the economic and cultural circumstances in which architecture was being created. This was the time of post-war reconstruction and building which was manifested in the intensive construction of apartments, schools, houses of culture, sports facilities and the administrative and management buildings of the new authorities and the communist party on the one hand, and roads and great industrial plants on the other. The state was the only investor. Nationalization and the confiscation of property were carried out. This meant that the private ownership of property was reduced to the minimum. The introduction of norms for housing requirements provided the context for, and the manner of, residential housing construction. The Five-Year-Plans of the state were dominated by an area that just built up space and what it contained.¹ Building was then much more important than architecture. It was numbers and results that were in demand, and architects were pushed into the background.² In the centralization process, vast state planning bodies were set up, which were only in the fifties to be broken up into smaller and more effective units.³ Individuality was systematically repressed.

The field of cultural activity and artistic expression was dominated by the idea of satisfying the regulation and ide-

ologically determined cultural needs of the popular masses, and, especially in painting and sculpture, by the glorification of the revolution and of labour, alongside a studied avoidance of any suspicion of influence from the decadent West. In Yugoslavia, and also of course in Croatia, a turning point was marked by the Writer's Congress in Ljubljana (Slovenia) in 1952. At this congress, the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža gave a notable speech attacking socialist realism in the arts. Furthermore, the work of the Zagreb painting group 'Exat 52' brought current world thinking into Croatian artistic work. This was the end of socialist realism in Croatia, which had never actually put down very deep roots.

Prewar Architecture in Croatia

The architecture of this period in Croatia had a specific position. Pre-war Croatian architecture had achieved a very high level of quality. In the thirties, influenced by Le Corbusier, the Bauhaus and the Dutch De stijl it had accomplished some brilliant works, especially in residential architecture. The Zagreb Architectural School was created, in which young architects were trained, both in the Architectural Faculty, and in a special section in the Academy of Fine Arts. Most of the architects of this period pulled to the left politically, and attempted to shape and satisfy in space their ideological aspirations. These were manifested in the attention given to growing social problems, in the attempt to provide good quality housing, and on the insistence on building decent quality buildings for public use like schools, hospitals and social institutes. Plans and their realization of course depended, as always, on investors. In the cities, there was the dominance of high quality rental housing (fig. 1). In Zagreb, which was undergoing very rapid development at the time, this was manifested as an interpolation within the historical urban nucleus, or in some of the housing blocks in the new eastern sections. At the same time single family villas were going up, and urban villas with several apartments (Novakova Street) (fig. 2), in the hilly northern sectors of the city, standardized developments with free standing houses (Cvjetno naselje) (fig. 3) or perhaps with row-houses (the Prva hrvatska štedionica development). The architecture of this time made use of the ideas of functionalism; in the purity of form which expressed function and construction, restrainedly but creatively, it brought in regional features, above all in the choice and treatment of materials. The organization of space demonstrated all the features of contemporary living, separating the common from the intimate part of the living space, from auxiliary or utility areas, with an attempt to link the interior to the maximum extent with outer space (roof and garden terraces, balconies and loggias). Similar features, though modified according to the demands of function, are

to be met with in buildings of other kinds. A high level of architectural production was thus achieved, with a unique way of thinking among the architects of the time being created.

Postwar Requirements

War damage and the newly formulated social needs conditioned the dimension of new construction, and so of the work of architects. The extent of war damage in Croatian cities was not particularly great, except in Zadar, which was mainly hit by allied bombing. There was more damage in smaller towns. Prestige buildings of the government, both at a national and a local level, were on the whole not damaged to such an extent that they had to be rebuilt. Centralization of government directed this kind of building mainly towards Bel-



Bilice, family house by D. Boltar, J. Seissel and M. Miličić, 1945

grade, the capital of Yugoslavia. The trend of construction in Croatia was towards new, mainly collective residential construction in the cities (with Zagreb having the priority) and towards individual residential building in smaller towns which had suffered in the war. In second place came schools and houses of culture in smaller places, cooperative centres in villages, and the new social and ideological centres that were supposed in time to replace the churches. Then cinemas and sports facilities in bigger centres were intended to cover other main social needs, with the new industrial plants, cathedrals of labour, being intended to make economic prosperity possible.

Features of Croatian Architecture immediately after the War

Within a set of needs so defined, architecture had the role primarily of being a technical auxiliary. Although Croatian architecture entered the socialist realism period with very well defined principles of modern architecture which were also well developed in practice, "the management of the construction industry was not up to the situation. Practically oriented solutions to tasks imposed by the plans were more important than creativity... A number of high quality plans simply did not achieve realization."⁴ There was a degree of discontinuity in architectural creativity. On the one hand, one of the reasons was the revolutionary changes, and on the other hand, there was a complete absence of theoretical and critical thinking. Development was characterized by leaps, and was not evolutionary, and so there was the appearance, and reappearance, of errors.⁵

It is important that in spite of a strong ideological pressure, the role of individual architects who had by their participation in the revolution gained a strong social position was such as to gradually affirm the positive trends of the prewar achievements of Croatian architecture. Thus Prof. A. Mohorovičić, seeking the conceptual base for the new ar-

chitecture says that "contemporary monumentality derives from the power of the working masses, and not from the distance of class oppositions, and according to this the forms of contemporary architecture too have to be new, deriving from a new reality of social relations, expressed by new statics and new material... The thesis for a narrow technical functionalism is unsustainable... There is, and can be, no place for historical elements in contemporary archite-

ture... this is, in its essence, an expression of primitivism, and is condemned, like every eclecticism, to be an absolutely worthless cliché."⁶ He theoretically rejects social realist neoclassicism and advocates a modified functionalism. This is confirmed by N. Segvić who, in a foreword to a book by J.M. Richards, 'Modern Architecture', which came out in translation in Zagreb in 1955, says that our contribution was "a broad methodical approach with a rejection of doctrinaire, constructivist or functionalist standpoints.... this is today the basis of our architectural views."⁷

Looking at the most important buildings that came into being in the 1945-1953 period, it is not difficult to understand the architect N. Šegvić, an active participant in this period, who, in 1986, putting on the exhibition 'Architecture in Croatia, 1945-1985' called this a "heroic period" in Croatian architecture, underscoring the view that this was a time of the social transformation that the left-wing architects had actually insisted on before the war.⁸ He stressed four characteristic examples in which aesthetic functionalism prevailed, considering them crucial for an understanding of the Croatian architecture of the period.

In the first place came a residential building in Bilice (fig. 4 a, b) (by D. Boltar, J. Seissel and M. Miličić, 1945) which, alternating vernacular elements of the Karst area with formal elements of modern architecture, showed the way towards a new quality of residential building. This was a simple house, of a functional ground plan, which used stone, the local building material. The second example was the National House in Metković (fig. 5 a, b) (by A. Freudenreich, 1947) which once again used stone, the local building material, but in a more highly worked structure. With a moderate eye for making an impression, Freudenreich followed his own prewar handwriting, without giving in to narrativity or pseudo-monumentality, even though he did use a row of columns under the portico. A residential building in Delnice (fig. 6 a, b) (by S. Planić, 1953) indicates something of the task of smaller units for collective housing, which Planić approached by using formal elements of the local community, while retaining a clarity of outline and a functionality of ground plan. If we add to this the building of the Split municipal council chamber (fig. 7), the former People's Committee of the City (by H. Markovina and B. Pervan, 1951), which won awards later on, then we shall see that it did in its entirety respect the postulates of functionalism, showing, in some elements, the effect of Le Corbusier. This too did not go the way of monumental pseudo-classicism, but kept to earlier principles.

Residential Architecture

While paying due respect to Šegvić's selection, it would be unreasonable to omit a number of interesting buildings put up in this period, which today bear witness to the level of the creative approach of the architects who during this watershed period took part in the building of the land. If we start out from collective residential buildings, we certainly ought to stress the series of residential blocks 'Poljane/Vrbik' (fig. 8) (by Z. Neumann, M. Kauzlarić and V. Potočnjak, 1946) which were built on a matrix of functionalist urbanism with simple, but modern forms, with acceptable ground plans for apartments, and which opened up the development of Zagreb towards the south. From the north, these buildings were closed, towards one of the most important transverse lines in Zagreb, in the west-east direction (with its vari-



Zagreb, People's committee of the commune of Trnje by N. Šegvić, 1947

ous names, Moskovska, Beogradska, Proleterskih Brigada and today the Street of the City of Vukovar speaking amply of its importance) by the administrative building of the People's Committee of the commune of Trnje (fig. 9) (by N. Šegvić, 1947). This is an ascetically simple building. It is modelled with discrete plaster emphases and window formats on the north and with balconies on the southern façade. On the ground floor it is broken up by shops. With its terrace and its tucked in shaped flat roof it showed all the strength of the tradition of the Zagreb school. At the end of this period Ivo Geršić planned in the same street (Ul. grada Vukovara 238) an unusually shaped building (fig. 10 a, b) (executed in 1952) which on the exterior expressed the requirements for a spare dwelling space which was the result of poverty and the restrictive regulations concerning housing in these years. Entry is made into the one-room flats from the open corridor that appears as a horizontal channel along the façade. In spite of the poverty, its form expresses elements of modified functionalism, where form is not derived entirely from function. The apartment building at Iblerov trg 5 (fig. 11) (by Z. Vrkljan, 1948) stands out for its special value: by the material and the formal treatment of the façade and the functionality of the ground plan it shows an almost uninterrupted connection with the prewar architecture of block built houses.

Although these examples of residential architecture speak of values achieved and of the continuation of the tradition of prewar modern architecture, a great number of residential buildings followed the uniform monotony of simple building masses that were often not brought to the level of architecture at all.

"The uniform monotony of residential buildings ... is the result ... of spiritual confusion brought about by a severe ideological trauma ... and the low norms and the standardization of housing resulted in there being created, without theory or criticism ... stark ... unformed building masses".⁹ "In Croatia the communist ideology never stepped foot over the border of the residential threshold".¹⁰ Soon, by 1953 in fact, there was a powerful onward movement in

residential architecture, and Galić's 'Le Corbush' great residential buildings with duplex apartments appeared (fig. 12 a, b) (Ul. grada Vukovara 35 and 43) or the aesthetically shaped interpolation in Svačićev trg.

The work of the architect I. Vitić is very interesting in this period. He never relinquished his own specific way of expression, which could be subsumed under the phrase aesthetic functionalism, which also bears in itself certain features of constructivism. He does this, in a family house (fig. 13) (1945) or in the plan for the Zagreb Rowing Club (1947), in the S. Matavulj School in Šibenik (fig. 14) (1947-1950) which he built in the historical city centre, playfully providing it with stone arches which are in contrast to the wall of glass. This school is an entirely unexpected example of the opportunities for shaping and expression at the end of the 40s. However, it remained for B. Rašica in 1953 in his school in Me-

sićeva Street (fig. 15) in Zagreb to go the way of the challenge posed by the Russian avant-garde,¹¹ and open up the way for many first rate educational facilities that were to follow.

Public, Sports, Cultural and Economic Buildings

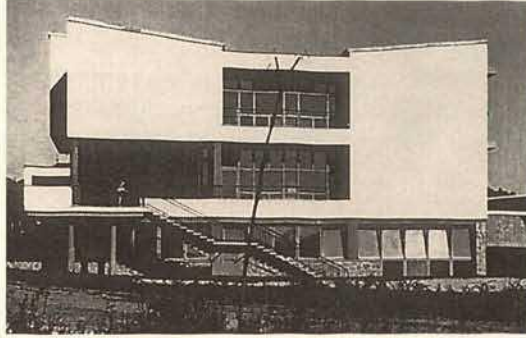
Among the very interesting and valuable buildings of this period, we ought to mention the new part of the Zagreb Fair built on Savska cesta by M. Haberle in 1949. The Technical Museum occupies this building today, though it served, as soon as it was built, as a place for holding communist party congresses. Built of wood (fig. 16 a), with a rounded ground plan (fig. 16 b) in two wings of which the western is higher and the northern lower, including a very dynamic and diverse structure of openings, it carries on in a formal sense from the old building of the fair, and is a supreme achievement of this kind of architecture (fig. 17). Not in a single detail does it show any marks of socialist realism. It is neither monumentally shaped, nor does it have the starkness or uniform monotony of that style. It is a good example of the continuity of the modern way of thinking.

Sports facilities were also at the centre of the interests of the new state government. For its excellent quality, the Zagreb Dinamo Stadium, in Maksimir (fig. 18) (by V. Turina, F. Neidhart and E. Ehrlich, 1946-1954) stands out; it was designed according to Le Corbusier's architectural criteria. It was not conceived as a closed ellipse, but as an airy construction, with stands that are constructively defined, which give it a feeling of airiness and space and establish a connection with the Maksimir woods to the north. Nothing of the monumentality which might have been expected to be added to the construction. A notable example of aesthetic functionalism.

We should also not forget a series of new factories, which were put up by leading architects, but which do not reach any special aesthetic or monumental form. Inspired by the experience of Gropius and Mendelsohn,¹² they shaped them

with a great deal of attention, but in a way that showed a direct linkage with the technology of production and construction. Of particular interest are the R. Končar electrical machinery factory (fig. 19) in Zagreb (by S. Gomboš and M. Kauzlarić, 1949), the Jugokeramika (by I. Vitić) and Fotkemika factories (by B. Milić), and the Dalmatinka cotton thread factory (fig. 20) in Sinj (by L. Horvat, 1947-1953).

The cooperative centres were the most ugly buildings.¹³ On the whole they were not built on the scale of the country environment into which they were inserted, and showed all the defects of state-planned standardized design which paid no attention to the character of the location. These buildings never lived up to their ideological role, and were gradually transformed into cooperative storehouses and small village shops.



Zagreb, Mesičeva str., elementary school by B. Rašica, 1953

Competitions

At the end, and before the conclusion, it should be said that Croatian architects took some first prizes at big competitions for prestigious state and party buildings in Belgrade and Ljubljana. In the competition for the Presidency of the Government building in Belgrade (fig. 21), the first prize was won by V. Potočnjak, Z. Neumann and A. Ulrich. They made a design of a clearly functionalist orientation, evoking the opposition of those who wanted another kind of view, although in the competition it was stressed that what was wanted was an architectural expression of the idea of parallelism with the social system. In the same year M. Kauzlarić won the first prize for a big hotel in Belgrade (fig. 22), without recanting his own modernist approach. Similarly, J. Neidhardt and B. Simčić won the second prize in the competition for the Parliament of the PR of Slovenia in Ljubljana (fig. 23), showing by the crystal volume of two balanced architectural bodies their own understanding of architecture. Many plans for hotels in Plitvice show a balanced relation of modern and vernacular forms, with absolute respect for the landscape.

Conclusion

In conclusion it should be said that Croatian architecture in the Stalinist period really did occupy a space between socialist realism and the new tradition, with the proviso that the term "new tradition" is not identical to that used by H. R. Hitchcock in 1929.¹⁴ In Croatia, a new tradition was created that was based on pre-war Zagreb modern architecture, which respected all the theoretical premises of the modern movement in architecture, but enhanced them with its own local identity and the individual touches of powerful creative minds. It was shown that "it was not only the proclaimed idea that was the bearer and guarantee of creativity, but above all a stable spiritual climate and the desire to embody it".¹⁵ That was the foundation of the Croatian new tradition. Socialist realism did have an influence through

ideological pressures, via collectivization in the process of designing, through the powerful political will for the architecture of the new age to be monumentalized and to satisfy new social requirements. Due to the generation of left-wing architects, of whom some took part actively in the revolution and achieved a certain political position, architecture in Croatia could go a way that was different from those of all the other arts of the period. Croatian architecture managed, both at the theoretical level and in a certain number of actual achievements, to satisfy the seventh point of monumentalism that was set forth by S. Gideon in cooperation with F. Leger and J.L. Sert, that "people want buildings that will represent their social and common life, and which will at the same time mean more than mere functionality".¹⁶ "There was too powerful a continuity of architectural creativity for the doctrines of socialist realism to be able to subdue it, the

more since they had derived from a political constellation of another soil, another ethos".¹⁷ Consequently the best examples of Croatian architecture in the period of Stalinism did not show the deviations of perfunctory revolutionary monumentality or the brutal crudity of the elementary satisfaction of needs, but are witness to a continuity which resulted in the later high quality development of Croatian architecture down to our own day.

Footnotes

- 1 Domljan 1969, in: Šegvić 1992, p. 92.
- 2 Šegvić 1986, p. 119.
- 3 Gomboš 1955, in: Šegvić 1992, p. 88.
- 4 Magaš 1986, p. 28.
- 5 Domljan 1969, in: Šegvić 1992, p. 91.
- 6 Mohorovičić 1947, in: Šegvić 1992, p. 71.
- 7 Šegvić 1992, p. 85.
- 8 Šegvić 1986, p. 120.
- 9 Domljan 1969, in: Šegvić 1992, p. 93-94.
- 10 Odak 1986, p. 36.
- 11 Šegvić 1986, p. 120.
- 12 Šegvić 1986, p. 120.
- 13 Odak 1986, p. 35.
- 14 Frampton 1992, p. 228.
- 15 Premerl 1986, p. 19.
- 16 Frampton 1992, p. 242.
- 17 Straus 1991, p. 15.

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Tirana, textile collective combine 'Stalin' with an entrance decoration and a Stalin statue by the sculptor O. Paskali, 1949

S. Gomboš, Moderna arhitektura u Hrvatskoj [Modern Architecture in Croatia], Belgrade 1955, vol. 11, p. 102-107 in: N. Šegvić 1992, p. 87-88.

B. Magaš, Saznanje i mogućnosti teorijske misli [Concepts and Possibilities of Theoretical Thought], Arhitektura, Zagreb 1986, vol. XXXIX, no. 196-199, p. 27-30.

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T. Odak, Hrvatska arhitektonska alternativa 1945-1985 [The Croatian Architectural Alternative 1945-1985], in: 'Arhitektura', Zagreb 1986, vol. XXXIX, no. 196-199, p. 31-101.

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ture], in: 'Arhitektura', Zagreb 1986, vol. XXXIX, no. 196-199, p. 14-21.

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N. Šegvić, Stanje stvari jedno viđenje 1945-1985 [The State of Things, a Viewpoint, 1945-1985], in: 'Arhitektura', Zagreb 1986, vol. XXXIX, no. 196-199, p. 119-128.

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