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Vladimir Kulić<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Florida Atlantic University, Fort Lauderdale, FL, USA

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# 'East? West? Or Both?' Foreign perceptions of architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia

Vladimir Kulić

Florida Atlantic University, Fort Lauderdale, FL, USA

## Introduction

Socialist Yugoslavia blurred the contours of the Cold War and the implied definitions of 'East' and 'West'.<sup>1</sup> The defining moment of its history – the expulsion of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia from the Cominform in 1948 – led to a spectacular political summersault in which the former staunchest ally of the USSR came to the brink of joining NATO before reinventing itself again as a leader of the non-aligned movement. Eventually, the country carved out a special niche for itself between the two blocs of the Cold War world, softening the contrast between socialism and capitalism, between the planned economy and the free market, and between liberal democracy and the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Despite the uncontested rule of a communist regime for forty-five years, Yugoslavia was never part of a full-fledged communist bloc; its stint as the closest satellite in the Soviet orbit ended before that orbit coalesced into an officially organised military and economic alliance. Such a position emphatically determined the personal and collective identities of Yugoslav citizens; endowed with a higher standard of living and freedom to travel, they proudly perceived themselves as distinct from and often somehow superior to their 'poorer relatives' behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, the wars of the 1990s almost seem like an ironic punishment for such hubris.

Architecture and art were important tools in constructing Yugoslavia's distinction from other communist countries, especially at the height of antagonism with the Soviet Union, when such

distinction was paramount to bare survival. By defying the stereotypical image of architecture in a socialist country, Yugoslav modernism provided a clear visual statement of cultural affinity and, by extension, political alliance with the West. But once the hostilities with the communist bloc subsided in the late 1950s, which coincided with the final demise of Socialist Realism, the prevalence of socialist typologies allowed Yugoslav architecture to be seen positively in the East as well. Out of a broader framework of the Cold War, two opposed but complementary interpretations thus emerged, which rendered not only Yugoslavia's politics, but also its architecture ambiguous.

Beside the Cold War, there was also an older interpretive framework in which Yugoslavia's position in the East or West could be considered, carrying its own binary assumptions, images and stereotypes. Defined by a *longue durée* perspective, this framework subsumed a host of various schisms: between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, between Islam and Christianity, and between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs. They all met on Yugoslav soil and all left indelible architectural marks on it. The resulting mixture gave rise to an often confusing and contradictory picture, interpreted within a specifically Western discourse developed to deal with the broader region of the Balkans. Inspired by Edward Said's concept of orientalism, Maria Todorova termed this related but distinct discourse 'balkanism'.<sup>3</sup> According to Todorova, while the West saw the 'Orient' as a complete Other to its own civilisation, it presented the Balkans as a

transitional, incomplete Other, Europe's own semi-civilised backyard. Moreover, while the Orient promised the lure of exoticism, material wealth and sexual seduction, the Balkans were prosaically poor and ultimately unattractive. The pervasive balkanist interpretations, however, did not necessarily eliminate a simultaneous application of Said's idea of orientalism.<sup>4</sup> An excellent illustration was Le Corbusier's disappointment with Belgrade during his famous 1911 Journey to the East, when, instead of the expected magic door to the East, he found a 'dirty and disorganised little town', whose pathetic provincial attempt at modernisation only brought with it the most prosaic problems of modernity.<sup>5</sup> His balkanism was, therefore, the result of a frustrated orientalist expectation.

In this paper, I will analyse the dynamic of foreign perceptions during the Cold War in correspondence with the country's ever-evolving international position. Rather than purporting to present an exhaustive overview of foreign perceptions of architecture in Yugoslavia, I will analyse only a few characteristic snapshots that reveal the underlying classificatory systems and engage with the implied questions: Where did socialist Yugoslavia belong (more), to the East or to the West? And, to exactly which East or West did it belong? That the most explicit and partisan answers to these questions came from the two ideological centres of the Cold War world, the United States and the Soviet Union, is no coincidence; the two superpowers were the ones who drove the division and who had the most at stake in maintaining it. While offering new perspectives of an understudied region, texts analysed here speak even more of their authors:

of their explicit or concealed assumptions, not only about Yugoslavia, but, even more importantly, about the social and political meanings ascribed to architecture. Ultimately, therefore, I will use Yugoslav architecture less as a subject in itself than a vehicle to examine the very lenses through which it was viewed.

### Views from the West

In February, 1944, the American journal *Architectural Forum* published a brief note about architecture in occupied Yugoslavia:

#### Architecture's Melting Pot

Of all the Nazi occupied countries, Yugoslavia is most in the news and least known as a place. When American troops land there many will wonder that geography books ever classed it as a European country. Veiled women, bearded priests, towering minarets contribute eastern flavor. But that isn't all. In crumbling old towns held to the hillside by fortress-like retaining walls are some of the most modern schools and office buildings in Europe. No record could express more vividly Yugoslavia's contradictory political, social and cultural currents than does its building pattern.

In a remarkable example of literary economy, the text took less than a hundred words to raise a whole range of stereotypes: first, an outright orientalism, which virtually expelled Yugoslavia from Europe and cast it as an exotic, little-known Other; immediately after, a simultaneous, more nuanced balkanist view, claiming that the country is perhaps not entirely foreign to Western civilisation, but rather an ambiguous place where the modern

West transitions into a backward East, a rugged mongrel plagued by contradictions; third, the deterministic idea that architecture serves as a direct expression of society; and finally, an implied paternalistic sympathy for a struggling ally to be liberated by American troops. And while the degree of validity of the first three assumptions may be open to discussion, the expectation that at the end of the war the US troops would land on eastern shores of the Adriatic proved wrong. Instead, Yugoslavia was liberated through the joint efforts of local Communist-led Partisans and the Red Army, a fact that would put the Communist Party in power for the decades to come, while launching the country into the Soviet orbit as the most prodigious satellite.

Socialist revolution affected Yugoslav architecture profoundly and in many ways, but the political pressure to impose Soviet-style Socialist Realism produced little result, even when all other spheres of cultural production succumbed to it. This was not a result of some rampant anti-communism among architects but, on the contrary, of the fact that many modernists among them, thanks to their left-leaning and anti-fascist reputations, enjoyed sufficient amounts of political clout to avoid blindly following Soviet examples. Taking advantage of the fact that in architecture Socialist Realism was never clearly defined, they paid lip-service to it and at the same time subverted its rhetoric to argue against monumental historicism, which, in the absence of a more precise definition, amounted to a practical *differentia specifica* of the doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Thus, if the conventional wisdom equated communism with the grandiose historicist architecture in the vein of the Palace of the Soviets, Yugoslavia defied

the facile connection between 'building patterns' and 'political, social and cultural currents' even before its break from the Soviet orbit.

There is no doubt, however, that the expulsion from the Cominform and the subsequent rapprochement with the West still exerted a profound effect on architecture. Soon after 1948, political pressures on culture were relaxed as the country stopped emulating the Soviet Union. Modernism could again be openly named for what it was, without the need to be presented as a version of Socialist Realism. Moreover, the lessons of Western heroes of modernism (since, by this time, the ones from the East had already been thoroughly purged) could be freely applied after being condemned with the notorious label of 'bourgeois formalism' only a few years before. Within a very short time, Yugoslav architecture radically changed its international frame of reference, switching from a politically imposed orientation towards the communist East to a gradual integration into Western modernism.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most symbolic of this integration was the last, tenth meeting of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux de l'Architecture Moderne), which Yugoslav architects hosted in Dubrovnik in 1956, even though their own presence in it was barely visible. Despite subsequent further swings between the two political blocs and especially in the direction of Third World non-aligned countries, the westwards attention of Yugoslav architects would be rarely distracted again.<sup>8</sup>

Yugoslavia's political reorientation was also directly responsible for the way in which the West interpreted its architecture and art during the 1950s. In this view, modernism was a symptom of

the break from the Soviet circle and of democratisation and liberalisation (however limited) of the society. Such an interpretation was part of a broader Cold War discourse that directly associated artistic styles with political ideologies. For the past thirty years, art historians have been embroiled in a protracted argument about the use of modern art as a 'weapon of the Cold War', focusing on the intriguing question of whether the US government (and the CIA as a primary suspect) covertly contributed to the international promotion of Abstract Expressionism as symbol of America's succession on the cultural throne of the world.<sup>9</sup> But this question, regardless of the answer, masks a broader and more significant fact that, during the early Cold War years, modernism was constructed as a natural expression of Western liberal democracy, in a direct visual and philosophical opposition to Socialist Realism that the Soviets pushed in their own sphere of interest.

This politics of style, however, was not as obvious as it may seem. It required the concerted efforts of many pundits, especially in the United States, to erase the prewar leftist associations of modern architecture and art and thus to counter the resistance of the conservative public that cast modernism (and especially its more radical European strains) as 'communist' and 'un-American'.<sup>10</sup> The reasoning behind this operation went like this: the Nazis and the Soviets – both arch-enemies of American democracy – promoted similar conservative academicism while detesting and relentlessly suppressing modernism. The presence of modernism in a society was therefore understood as a sign that art in it was free to develop in its 'natural' direction,

further indicating the existence of personal freedoms in the given society. Clement Greenberg's doctrine of artistic autonomy provided the theoretical grounds for this position; but other texts, like Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt's *Art Under a Dictatorship* (1954), promoted such views in much more explicit and partisan ways. Published in at least four editions by the early 1970s, the book effectively equalised Nazi and Stalinist art and went on to claim that attacks on modernism by American conservative politicians posed a 'challenge to democracy' itself.<sup>11</sup>

Such views strongly coloured Western, especially American, perspectives on Yugoslavia in the 1950s. While still adhering to communism (although in a reformed and much less repressive form than before), the country now played the role of a 'wedge' in the previously monolithic communist bloc, with the expectation that further cracks would follow. It was also a US ally that enjoyed significant financial and military aid. But in an atmosphere of rabid anticommunism, financing a communist state, however beneficial to immediate American interests, was a glaring contradiction that the US officials had to explain to their suspicious public, which never shed its fears that Yugoslavia was 'Moscow's Trojan horse'.<sup>12</sup> Art and architecture thus served as powerful visual signifiers that the country was distinct from the communist bloc. Its allegiance to modernism was enthusiastically highlighted and old balkanist stereotypes were conveniently forgotten. Moreover, in the early 1950s, the cultural production of the communist bloc had a limited presence in the West, so Yugoslavia was not only a curiosity for its modernism, but also for being accessible at all.<sup>13</sup> In one of the first

statements that explicitly linked the visual arts with the country's political reorientation, Aline Loucheim, the art critic of the *New York Times* (and soon to become Mrs. Eero Saarinen), described Yugoslav participation in the 1953 Sao Paulo Biennale as a deliberate statement of 'Tito's break with Russia':

One country in particular realized how emphatically art can make a point. Yugoslavia, keenly aware that the Western World queries how philosophically deep the break with Russia is, shrewdly eschewed the overlife-size bronze of Tito... which dominated the Yugoslavian pavilion in the Venice international show three years ago. Here all its eggs were put into one modern basket – the work of Petar Lubarda. It was perfectly clear that these semiabstract, expressionist and extremely forceful works indicated a freedom of expression and a modern idiom which... would not have been acceptable in the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup>

Describing Lubarda as 'semiabstract expressionist' notwithstanding, Loucheim's article, suggestively entitled 'Cultural Diplomacy', made it perfectly clear that modernism had acquired a decidedly political meaning. Lubarda's was not the only Yugoslav success in Sao Paulo; the Croatian architect Zvonimir Požgay had also won a prize for a small beach complex on the Adriatic coast, thus finding himself in the company of such rising American stars as Paul Rudolph and Philip Johnson.<sup>15</sup> If Loucheim omitted specifically to mention him, there is little doubt that her assessment could be extended to his work too. In 1957, the *New York Times* published another similarly explicit view, this time focusing on the new architecture in Belgrade. It came at a particularly charged moment, one year

after Yugoslavia thawed its relations with the Soviets. The author was Harrison Salisbury, a reputable expert on Eastern Europe and a Pulitzer-Prize winner for his reports from the Soviet Union, who apparently lent his authority to reinforcing the fact that Yugoslavia was still independent from the communist bloc:

To a visitor from eastern Europe a stroll in Belgrade is like walking out of a grim barracks of ferro-concrete into a light and imaginative world of pastel buildings, 'flying saucers', and Italianate patios.

Nowhere is Yugoslavia's break with the drab monotony and tasteless gingerbread of 'socialist realism' more dramatic than in the graceful office buildings, apartment houses and public structures that have replaced the rubble of World War II.

Thanks in part to the break with Moscow and in part to the taste of some skilled architects no Stalin Allées, Gorky Streets or Warsaw skyscrapers mar the Belgrade landscape...

...Simplicity, airiness, pastel pinks, blues, and yellows are the hallmark of the new Belgrade school, sharply contrasting not only with the mixed baroque of Stalinist style but with the heavy, dark constructions that were typical of the pre-war city.<sup>16</sup>

Salisbury's suggestive rhetoric divided the world into a set of visual opposites: the simplicity, airiness and imagination of the 'free world' opposed to the heaviness, darkness and 'baroque' of its antipode behind the Iron Curtain. While on the surface speaking of architectural qualities, these words had obvious moral connotations, evoking a quasi-religious imagery of good and evil, heaven and

Figure 1. Central New Belgrade in the early 1960s: in the background, the tower of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, designed by Mihailo Janković and Dušan Milenković, 1960–64, and in the foreground, the Federal Executive Council building, original design by Vladimir Potočnjak, Anton Ulrich, Zlatko Neumann and Dragica Perak, 1947; redesigned and completed by Mihailo Janković, 1954–62. (Photograph courtesy of the Aleksandar Janković Collection.)



hell. The architecture that in Salisbury's description represented the 'forces of good' was essentially a Yugoslav version of the International Style, which at the time was in the process of not only transforming Belgrade, but also the centres of virtually all major cities in the country (Figs 1, 2, 3, 4). It is ironic that in the popular discourse in Yugoslavia, it was precisely this kind of architecture that became identified – wrongly but revealingly – as a 'socialist realism', thus highlighting the powerful connection that was established between modernism and the socialist state.

Statements like Louchheim's and Salisbury's, published in America's leading opinion-making paper,

made it clear to Yugoslav officialdom that modernism was a powerful tool for strengthening the country's international position. With the support of the Federal Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and other state institutions, throughout the 1950s artists exhibited in the West fairly frequently and with considerable success; but praise was commonly accompanied by surprise at the quality of the exhibited works, which seemed to contradict the expectations associated with their geographical, cultural and ideological origin.<sup>17</sup> Architects gained much less exposure, simply because of the nature of their medium; but when they did, similar perpetual surprise followed



Figure 2. Kazimir Ostrogović: City Hall, Zagreb, 1956. (Photograph: © Wolfgang Thaler.)



Figure 3. Živorad Janković: *Energoinvest* Office Building, Sarajevo, 1962. (Photograph by the Author.)



Figure 4. Aleksandar Serafimovski: residential towers in central Skopje, 1959. (Photograph by the Author.)



Figure 5. Ivan Antić and Ivanka Raspopović: Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, 1965. (Photograph by the Author.)

them well into the 1960s. Occasionally, the single-minded focus of such interpretations reached absurd levels, as in the case of a 1966 *Newsweek* article that described the newly opened Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade – a remarkably inspired modernist building filled with modernist artworks – as a ‘joyful tombstone to socialist realism’(Fig. 5).<sup>18</sup> But novelty eventually wore off and the political distinction of Yugoslav modernism lost its edge, especially after cultural reform under Khrushchev allowed modernism from other East

European countries to reappear on the international scene.

Arguably the greatest foreign success of Yugoslav modern architecture came precisely at the turning point after which distinction could no longer be claimed solely on the basis of style. The national

Figure 6. Vjenceslav Richter: Pavilion of Yugoslavia, Universal and International Exposition, Brussels, 1958. (Photograph courtesy of the Archive of Serbia and Montenegro, Belgrade.)



pavilion at the 1958 EXPO in Brussels received a very warm reception, primarily the building itself, an elegant modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk* designed by the Croatian architect Vjenceslav Richter (Fig. 6). It was indeed an embodiment of ‘simplicity, airiness, and imagination’ and it got rave reviews from Western critics, including such leading luminaries of modernism as Alfred Barr Jr of the New York Museum of Modern Art and Jean Cassou of the Paris Museum of Contemporary Art.<sup>19</sup> *Architectural Review* proclaimed the building one of the six outstanding pavilions of the Exhibition, the only one representing a socialist country.<sup>20</sup> Inspired by the

success of Richter’s pavilion, two years after the EXPO, the journal still expressed interest in Yugoslav achievements: ‘If there is an architecture which stands in need of shrewd and deep interpretative study at present, it is that of Yugoslavia.’<sup>21</sup> But old stereotypes were still present: while flocking to see Richter’s work, architects and architecture students reiterated the usual surprise that Yugoslavia – being both a socialist and Balkan country – was capable of presenting such superb modern design. There was also similar surprise that the architect was educated in Zagreb and not somewhere in the West.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, the communist bloc was back on the broader international scene: the USSR, Hungary and Czechoslovakia all had their pavilions in Brussels, and Czechoslovakia even won the EXPO's highest prize for the best overall exhibition. But despite the fact that all three countries presented modernist buildings, their sober, down-to-earth architecture could not yet compete with Richter's self-conscious, highly aestheticised work, which made original statements on the main themes of modernism: space, structure and the synthesis of visual arts. Moreover, the virtual absence of overtly ideological symbolism in Richter's pavilion further stressed the visual contrast with other socialist countries, which still displayed a residue of Socialist Realism, especially heavy in the case of the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> But this was a distinction that was about to fade; had Poland built its pavilion in Brussels, as was planned, it would have been a major competitor for architectural accolades.<sup>24</sup> Within a few years, rising modernism in the communist bloc became increasingly visible.<sup>25</sup> It thus not only obliterated the glaring aesthetic difference with the West, but also produced a diversification within itself that undermined the perception of the region as a monolithic unit.

By the early 1960s, Yugoslavia had firmly established its political equidistance from both blocs, thus finally terminating the expectations that it would at some time defect completely to the West. The motive for presenting the country as Western (or 'semi-Western') thus ceased too, which finally allowed its architecture to be seen outside of a predetermined framework. It also allowed some of its previously ignored ideological

content to become visible. In 1965, the *New York Times* correspondent in Belgrade put an end to the praises previously published by his paper. Otherwise sympathetic to his host city, the journalist described the newly finished Yugoslav Army Headquarters (highly acclaimed by local architects) as an 'architectural nightmare... in concrete and pink stone' that was a clear 'sign of the Communist rule'.<sup>26</sup> Soon after this, Americans apparently lost all interest in Yugoslav architecture, while European journals, mainly Italian, French and British, continued to publish occasional articles, generally devoid of ideological innuendo.

### **A view from the East**

Yugoslavia's architectural relations with the communist bloc were perhaps even more volatile than those with the West. Before 1948, Soviet architecture and the doctrine of Socialist Realism enjoyed high visibility in the Yugoslav press. The actual practical influence, however, came from elsewhere: as a result of long-standing pan-Slavic sentiments, several Czech architects from Prague designed buildings for Yugoslavia, thus, ironically, transplanting their modernism (which would not be purged from Czechoslovakia until the communist coup in 1948) at the height of the country's Stalinisation.<sup>27</sup> After 1948, all relations were severed virtually overnight and were not re-established for almost a decade, and, when they were, it was with much less intensity than before the break. After the thaw, Soviet architecture would never again reach great visibility, but some communist countries acquired a comparably high architectural presence. Political relationships with Poland were especially

Figure 7. Jerzy Morzynski, Eugeniusz Wierzbicki and Waclaw Klyszevski: Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje, 1970. (Photograph by the Author.)



warm, which enabled a number of Polish architects to build in Yugoslavia; but such interactions never resulted in any sustained presence or influence (Fig. 7).<sup>28</sup> In return, the stabilisation of political relationships with the communist bloc opened up a large new market for Yugoslav construction companies and their resident architects, especially in the 1970s and 1980s; but it seems that this fact did not translate into anything out of the ordinary either.

The lack of comprehensive indices and databases makes the study of the reception of Yugoslav architecture in the communist bloc far more complicated than its reception in the West. But due to its sheer size, one text clearly stands out in this

respect: *Современная архитектура Югославии* (*Contemporary Architecture of Yugoslavia*) by the Russian architectural historian Vladimir N. Belousov, published in two editions in 1973 and 1986.<sup>29</sup> Keeping in mind the repeated calls by Western observers for a 'deep interpretative study' of Yugoslav architecture, quoted earlier in this text, and the inherently political meanings ascribed to it, it is somewhat ironic that the only foreign book-length study of the subject came from the other side of the political divide. But what makes Belousov's book particularly interesting in this context is how different its interpretation was from what Western observers must have had in mind.

Belousov's view was no less politically coloured than the views of his Western colleagues. It shared with some of them the fundamental goal of eliminating the ambiguity of his subject by emphasising its similarities with the writer's own world; his ideological assumptions were, of course, completely different. The author thus invoked the 'historical friendship' between the peoples of Yugoslavia and the USSR, repeatedly mentioning the role of the Red Army in the liberation of the country during World War II. Past rifts were overlooked. Belousov euphemistically presented the officially imposed Soviet influence in the first postwar years (which local architects unanimously dismissed as a forced aberration) as 'exploring the rich experiences of Soviet architecture.'<sup>30</sup> The few structures that qualified as Socialist Realist – something which, by that time, Yugoslav architects openly scoffed at – got the same treatment as everything else and were mentioned in a positive light for their ideological content. But at the same time, many of the buildings that Westerners like Salisbury praised received equally positive treatment from Belousov, although for different reasons. Reading the text, one almost feels as if the author was trying to draw the country into the Soviet orbit closer than it actually was, and certainly closer than what most Yugoslavs at the time would have found comfortable.

Especially in the first edition, Belousov strongly emphasised Yugoslavia's socialism as the primary explanation for the success of its architects. Their achievements were thus due 'not so much to their high mastery', but to the 'clarity of ideological-artistic tasks' that were placed before them.<sup>31</sup> While hardly flattering, this statement draws

attention to a fact that Western observers frequently overlooked: that Yugoslav architects indeed dealt predominantly with typologies characteristic of a socialist society, private commissions being diminutive both in number and scale: hence the essential correctness of their 'ideological-artistic tasks'. Belousov's book is therefore organised not chronologically, geographically or stylistically, but according to typological categories that stress architecture's social utility, rather than its cultural or aesthetic roles. Opening with a chapter on urban planning, the book continues with sections on industrial buildings and housing, and concludes with civic structures: educational, medical, cultural, sports and tourist facilities. The second edition also adds a substantial chapter on memorials, the least utilitarian structures with the highest ideological content. Moving from the general to the particular and from the material towards the ideological, this very structure evoked the concepts of 'social basis' and 'superstructure', staples of the Marxist theory of dialectical materialism, thus lending Belousov's account an aura of scientific rationality.

According to this materialist interpretation, all creation was a direct result of 'productive forces' and architecture was therefore a rational, productive activity that primarily fulfils basic human needs. That is why quantities played an important role in Belousov's text: it is full of dimensions and amounts, numbers of flats per year, square metres per person, etc. On the other hand, the aesthetic dimension, whilst not completely irrelevant, was secondary. Formal analysis was, therefore, something that the author used only sporadically and most of his aesthetic descriptions were vague:

'pleasant', 'beautiful', or 'unusual'. This was consistent with the renewed functionalism of the years following Khrushchev's reform in the Soviet Union, which, in its critique of the aestheticism of Socialist Realism, drew attention away from aesthetic judgement. Belousov's refusal to engage with formal trends, which were of considerable importance for Yugoslav architects and critics, was not only the result of an extreme functionalism, but also had a meaning in terms of political geography. In his view, formal trends were symptoms of undesirable Western influences; terms like the International Style, structuralism, brutalism, etc., were thus typically placed in quotation marks, accompanied by the attribute 'so-called' and associated with 'capitalist buildings'. Yugoslavian architects, however, were then immediately redeemed from any accusation of succumbing to the seduction by praise of the sobriety of their designs and their avoidance of 'unjustified ostentation' and 'structural solutions that contradict common sense'.<sup>32</sup> Even the term 'modern architecture' itself was replaced by a 'so-called new architecture', thus implying a view of twentieth-century architectural history that radically departed from what had been established as the canon in the West. This view also departed from the way the Yugoslavs perceived their own architecture at the same time, generally classifying it on historical and stylistic grounds.<sup>33</sup>

If the communist bloc was not an aesthetic monolith, it was neither frozen in time and the first edition of Belousov's book presented only a characteristic snapshot at a specific moment. In the second edition of the book, the author considerably revised some of his earlier views, showing a far

greater sensitivity to formal and stylistic analysis and tolerance for Western influences. This was clearly indicative of an evolution in Soviet architectural discourse in the intervening decade and of further dissolution of aesthetic borders. Moreover, Belousov was not the only Soviet author who wrote about Yugoslav architecture and thus his possible representative status should not be overstated. Telling in this case are the Soviet accounts of the work of the Yugoslav architect Bogdan Bogdanović, who attracted much attention both in the East and the West for his surrealist-inspired war memorials (Fig. 8). Some Soviet writers, perhaps because of the linguistic proximity with Serbo-Croatian that allowed them to read Bogdanović's expansive writings, analysed his complex symbolism in an exceptionally informed and sophisticated manner, much more so than anyone in the West at the same time.<sup>34</sup> Still, what was common both to Belousov and these other Soviet writers was that, once they finally started writing about Yugoslav architecture, they never presented it as an 'other' in the ideological framework of the Cold War, and especially not in terms of the balkanist and orientalist discourses.

### A circle closed

Around the time of the second edition of Belousov's book, another foreign text came out that devoted a chapter to Yugoslav architecture: Udo Kultermann's *Zeitgenössische Architektur in Osteuropa (Contemporary Architecture in Eastern Europe, 1985)*.<sup>35</sup> The book was part of Kultermann's pioneering attempt at creating a global picture of international modernism across geographical, cultural and political divides, thus representing yet another testimony to the



Figure 8. Bogdan Bogdanović: Partisan Necropolis, Prilep (Macedonia), 1961. (Photograph: © Wolfgang Thaler.)

architectural rapprochement across the Iron Curtain. Its main goal was to correct the many misconceptions that Western readers had of architecture in Eastern Europe based on ignorance and ideological prejudice. But in order not to rouse such misconceptions, the book steered away from any kind of polemic, even though much of the presented material called for ideologically sensitive analyses of iconography, patronage or standard of living.

Kultermann's text is indicative of the changes in Western views of Yugoslavia. Eastern Europe was for him clearly a political rather than geographical term (otherwise Greece would have been included in the book) and it is significant that Yugoslavia was now firmly in the company of other socialist states. Twenty or thirty years before, while the

West was still hoping to co-opt the country, such inclusion would be far less likely. Nevertheless, Yugoslavia still had a special place: it was described as standing 'in the middle between Eastern and Western concepts', a fact that was emphasised by positioning the respective chapter at the very end of the book, farthest from the opening chapter on the USSR.

But the greatest change exemplified in Kultermann's text was a re-emergence of the old division into 'East' and 'West' along historical and religious, rather than ideological lines. Kultermann organised his chapter on Yugoslavia geographically, dealing with the country's constituent republics independently of each other. While his gaze from the West seemed precise and comprehensive when he

observed Yugoslavia's own West, it became increasingly blurry towards the Southeast. Sections on Slovenia and Croatia, regions with historical ties to Austria, were longest, quite detailed and abundantly illustrated. The section on Serbia, which until the nineteenth century was part of the 'Orient', was shorter, although still substantial. But the remaining three republics, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia, and the province of Kosovo, were lumped together under the subtitle 'Southern Regions' and their contemporary architecture was summarily described as part of a 'completely different tradition' and being 'under strong Oriental influence'.<sup>36</sup> As illustration, Kultermann used the National and University Library in Pristina – indeed an 'Orientalising' building – calling it a 'typical example of the regional character of new architecture in Southern Yugoslavia' (Fig. 9).<sup>37</sup>

In reality, the Pristina Library was anything but typical; moreover, it was designed by a Croatian, ie, 'Western' architect. No other building Kultermann showed in this section was very 'Oriental', unless a modernist mosque counted as such simply because of its function.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the claim that the region was in 1985 under 'Oriental influence' was at best imprecise, if not entirely wrong. Bosnian architecture, for example, had been under direct Western influence for over a century, dating back to the days of the Austrian occupation. Attempts at reinterpreting the Ottoman heritage were consistently products of outsiders who arrived there from the West.<sup>39</sup> Even Juraj Neidhardt, the patriarch of local regionalist modernism, received his formative education under Peter Behrens and Le Corbusier. The alleged 'Oriental' character of Bosnian modern architecture was thus a

self-fulfilling prophecy, a mirror-image of the West's own Orientalism. The case of Macedonia was perhaps even more at odds with the 'Oriental' label, as that land after World War II experienced an extremely complex mixture of architectural influences, especially during the highly internationalised reconstruction of the city of Skopje after the disastrous 1963 earthquake. None of the many countries that played a role in the reconstruction – from Poland to the United States – qualifies as 'Oriental', unless we ascribe that attribute to Kenzo Tange, who designed the urban plan for the city's centre.<sup>40</sup>

Kultermann's text, unlike Belousov's, reveals that Yugoslavia's cultural and ethnic ambiguity, dormant for almost forty years, reappeared with a renewed vigour in the 1980s. To resolve the resulting discomfort, Kultermann split the country into two 'completely different' civilisations: one presumably 'Western', the other closely corresponding with the stereotypical notion of the Balkans. As the Cold War drew to a close, Western treatments of the region indeed refocused on this balkanist perspective, especially with the onset of the Yugoslav wars in 1991. If Kultermann's account seemed prophetic in that respect, it was perhaps because he was aware of the rising ethnic tensions that already shook the country through the 1980s. This story thus completes a full circle: starting from a balkanist view of 'clashing civilisations' in 1944, it ends on a similar note forty years later, as if Yugoslavia's universalising modernist culture of the intervening years never occurred.

\* \* \* \*

Yugoslavia's volatile and ambiguous international alliances opened up its architecture for widely



Figure 9. Andrija Mutnjaković: National and University Library, Pristina, 1981. (Photograph: © Wolfgang Thaler.)

divergent political interpretations. At the same time, its ethnic, cultural and religious heterogeneity rendered these interpretations even more complex. Yugoslavia thus emerged as a doubly ambiguous place, which oscillated between two different sets of 'Easts and Wests': one defined by the Cold War, another by a *longue durée* perspective based on ethnic, cultural and religious affiliations. Which classification would take precedence was largely a result of the contemporaneous geopolitical situation: the Cold War perspective, while it lasted, overruled everything else, but as soon as Cold War tensions weakened, the old set of preconceptions quickly re-emerged. What united these two frameworks, however, was the fact that Yugoslavia's ambiguity was often eluded rather than faced. As

the anthropologist Mary Douglas famously claimed, ambiguity makes us uncomfortable because it threatens our classificatory systems and thus the basic cognitive order of our worlds.<sup>41</sup> Confronted with an ambiguous entity, we may try to avoid the problem, for example, by privileging one of the available interpretations and thus pretending the entity is not ambiguous at all; or by proclaiming it dangerous and thus placing it off limits for normal interaction. One might also add: by dividing, if possible, the ambiguous entity into two.

Foreign observers of Yugoslav architecture frequently resorted to these strategies. Despite their diametrically opposed ideologies, American and Soviet writers had a similar approach: to choose one interpretation over another and to present

their subject as belonging 'more' on their own side. Yugoslav architecture could thus be presented both as visually completely distinct from the communist bloc and as closely affiliated with it. And while such representations did not occur exactly simultaneously, they did refer to practically the same body of work. Reading some of these texts next to each other, it almost seems as if their writers were engaged in a tug of war over Yugoslavia, trying to draw it into their own orbits. In the divisive atmosphere of the Cold War, this made perfect sense, because for both sides acquiring some control of the country would have been a major strategic gain. On the other hand, the orientalist/balkanist discourses dealt with ambiguity either by placing Yugoslavia outside a 'civilised world' (as was the case of the 1944 *Architectural Forum* article) or by dividing it into two (Kultermann). There was little direct political gain in such an approach: instead, it was based on long-standing cultural and religious sympathies and affiliations. The fact that they survived a forty-year hiatus and re-emerged with fresh force in the 1980s, speaks of their extraordinary resilience.

Ultimately, this was a story about competing concepts of modernism and modernisation and about varied relationships between aesthetics and the political meanings of architecture. The Cold War cast an intense light upon these relationships. The picture that emerged in Yugoslavia was a complex refraction pattern, rather than a sharply contoured shadow. But just like the refraction in optics reveals the ambiguous nature of light itself, so in the case of Yugoslav architecture one cannot but wonder whether its alleged ambiguity actually

points to the very ambiguity of the gazes that were cast upon it and the ambiguity of architecture as a medium of political communication.

### Notes and references

1. The title of the article quotes a chapter title from one of the chief Cold War studies of Yugoslavia: George W. Hoffman, Fred Warner Neal, *Yugoslavia and the New Communism* (New York, Twentieth Century Fund, 1962), p. 417.
2. Dubravka Ugrešić provided an excellent literary articulation of such self-perception after the collapse of Yugoslavia; see: Dubravka Ugrešić, 'Zagreb – Amsterdam – New York', in *Cross Currents*, no. 11 (1992), pp. 248–56. For a scholarly account of the evolution of Yugoslavia's 'place in the world' and the construction of corresponding self-identifications, see: Predrag J. Marković, *Beograd između Istoka i Zapada 1948–1965* (Belgrade, Službeni list SRJ, 1996), pp. 73–101.
3. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997).
4. Some scholars have convincingly analysed views of Yugoslavia within an orientalist perspective; see: Robert Hayden, Milica Bakić-Hayden, 'Orientalist Variations on the Theme "Balkans": Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics', in *Slavic Review*, 51, no. 1 (Spring, 1992), pp. 1–15; Milica Bakić-Hayden, 'Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia', in *Slavic Review*, 54, no. 4 (Winter, 1995), pp. 917–31.
5. Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East*, edited and translated by Ivan Žaknić (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1989), p. 43.
6. This redefinition of Socialist Realism was most obviously expressed in a prolonged polemic on the pages of the journal *Arhitektura* (Zagreb) between

1947 and 1949. The predominantly young architects who contributed to this redefinition included the journal's editor, Neven Šegvić, together with Andrija Mohorovičić from Zagreb, Milorad Macura from Belgrade and Mira Kreigher from Ljubljana. For more on this topic, see Chapter 2, 'Architectural Culture of a Stalinist State', in my forthcoming dissertation, *Land of the In-Between: Modern Architecture and Politics in Socialist Yugoslavia 1945–65*, The University of Texas at Austin, 2009, supervised by Prof. Danilo Udovički-Selb.

7. By 'international orientation' and 'frame of reference' I mean foreign sources that informed architectural discourse in Yugoslavia: published articles, exhibitions, destinations for travel, etc. After 1948, these became of almost exclusively Western origin; articles on architecture in the communist bloc became exceedingly rare. For more on this topic, see: *ibid*, Chapters 2 and 6.
8. Strictly geographically speaking, an exception was the fascination with Kenzo Tange after he won the competition for the reconstruction of central Skopje in 1965. But in political terms, Japan was by this time an integral part of the Western world.
9. The bibliography of this topic is extensive; see, among other sources: Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1983); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York, The New Press, 1999); Paul Wood, Francis Frascina, Jonathan Harris and Charles Harrison, *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, in association with the Open University, 1993).
10. In the context of architecture, characteristic of the situation was the advocacy of Elizabeth Gordon, editor of *House Beautiful*, that proclaimed the austere modernism of European immigrant architects 'un-American'. She received support from Frank Lloyd Wright, but also vigorous protests from the AIA. See: Monica Penick, *The Pace Setter Houses: Livable Modernism in Postwar America*, doctoral dissertation (University of Texas at Austin, 2007).
11. Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art under a Dictatorship* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 236–48.
12. Yugoslavia's own anticommunist diaspora was often instrumental in raising such suspicions; see, for example, Slobodan M. Draskovich, *Tito, Moscow's Trojan Horse* (Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1957).
13. For example, the 1954 Japanese volume *World's Contemporary Houses* included Yugoslavia as the only socialist country simply because of the 'difficulties in obtaining the material... [from] the Soviet orbit'; see: Shinji Koike, Ryuichi Hamaguchi and Kimimasa Abe, eds, *World's Contemporary Houses* (Tokyo, Shokokusha Publishing Co., 1954), p. 3.
14. Aline B. Loucheim, 'Cultural Diplomacy: An Art We Neglect', *New York Times* (3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1954), SM16.
15. 'Awards at the Sao Paulo Bienal', in: *Architectural Review*, 115 (June, 1954), p. 413.
16. Harrison E. Salisbury, 'Building Pattern Set by Belgrade', *New York Times* (22<sup>nd</sup> August, 1957), p. 8.
17. On the exhibitions of Croatian (and Yugoslav) artists during the 1950s and their reception abroad, see Ljiljana Kolešnik's excellent book, *Između Istoka i Zapada: Hrvatska umjetnost i likovna kritika 50-ih godina* (Zagreb, Institut za povijest umjetnosti, 2006), pp. 339–55, esp. 354.
18. 'Slavs Without Marx', *Newsweek* (7<sup>th</sup> February, 1966), p. 40.
19. Multiple hosts of the Pavilion reported about such reactions: George Sweeney of the Guggenheim

- wrote them down in the Visitors' book; Cassou expressed them in an interview for the French wireless. See: Izveštaji domaćina paviljona, n.p., Archive of Serbia and Montenegro (Belgrade), Fond 56: Generalni komesarijat jugoslovenske sekcije na Međunarodnoj izložbi u Brislu 1958, Fascikla 6: Izveštaji-informacije.
20. 'Six Outstanding Pavilions: Jugoslavia', in: *Architectural Review*, 124, no. 739 (August, 1958), pp. 116–18.
  21. Quoted after George E. Kidder Smith, *The New Architecture of Europe* (Cleveland and New York, The World Publishing Company, 1961), p. 332.
  22. Several of the Pavilion's hosts reported on the generally positive reactions from architects, as well as on the various versions of their surprise; see: 'Izveštaji domaćina paviljona.', *op. cit.*
  23. This lack of obvious communist iconography was also the target of some unpleasant comments from Soviet visitors, who then also took the opportunity to criticise the exhibited modernist art; but the real cause for such criticism was political and lay in the still unstable relations between Yugoslavia and the USSR; see: *ibid.*
  24. A recent volume on the architecture of EXPO includes a text on the unbuilt Polish pavilion; see: Rika Devos and Mil de Kooning, eds, *L'Architecture moderne à l'EXPO 58: 'Pour un monde plus humain'* (Brussels, Fonds Mercator and Dexia Banque, 2006). Richter himself acknowledged his disappointment at the absence of the Polish pavilion; see: Vjenceslav Richter, 'Osvrt na arhitektonske rezultate izložbe u Bruxellesu 1958.', in *Arhitektura* (Zagreb) XII, nos 1–6 (1958), pp. 56–62.
  25. Illustrative of this dissolution of Europe's 'aesthetic borders' was A. Dorgelo's *Modern European Architecture*, which, alongside West European projects, also presented buildings from Yugoslavia, Poland and Czechoslovakia; see: A. Dorgelo, *Modern European Architecture* (Amsterdam, London, New York and Princeton, Elsevier Publishing Company, 1960).
  26. I owe this reference to Professor Danilo Udovički-Selb at the University of Texas at Austin, who has remembered the offence for almost forty years; see: David Binder, 'Those Friendly Beogradjani', *The New York Times* (21<sup>st</sup> November, 1965), pp. 92–104.
  27. The Prague architect Ludjek Kubeš arrived in Skopje, Macedonia, in 1947 and stayed there after the break with the communist bloc, eventually designing the city's first postwar master plan and a number of modernist buildings; see: Kokan Grčev, 'Архитект Јудјек Кубеш (1913–1996)', in: Georgi Stradelov, Krum Tomovski, Mihail Tokarev, eds, *Архитектурата на почвата на Македонија од средината на XIX век до крајот XX на век* (Skopje, Makedonska akademija na naukite i umetnostite, 2006), pp. 107–12. A Czech team also designed the Railway Station in Sarajevo, but in 1948 had to leave the country before construction was complete.
  28. Most prominently, Adolf Ciborowski, the chief planner of the reconstruction of Warsaw, participated in the design of the master-plan for Skopje after the disastrous earthquake of 1963. Besides that, Polish architects designed the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje and the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad.
  29. Владимир Н. Белоусов, *Современная архитектура Югославии* (Moscow, Stroiizdat, 1973; second edition, Moscow, Stroiizdat, 1985).
  30. Белоусов, *Современная архитектура Югославии*, first edition, *op. cit.*, p.112.
  31. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
  32. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
  33. See, for example, Zoran Manević, Žarko Domljan, Nace Šumi, Ivan Štraus, Georgi Konstantinovski and Božidar Milić, *Arhitektura XX vijeka* (Belgrade, Prosveta; Zagreb, Spektar; Mostar, Prva književna komuna, 1986).

34. The best text in this respect is: N. Zlidneva, 'Природа и миф в мемориалах архитектора Б. Богдановича', *Советское славяноведение* (Moscow) 14, vol. 6 (November-December, 1979), pp. 62–74.
35. See: Udo Kultermann, *Zeitgenössische Architektur in Osteuropa* (Cologne, Du Mont Verlag, 1985), pp. 194–229.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
38. The case in point is Zlatko Ugjen's White Mosque in Visoko, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which received broad international attention after it won the second Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1983. While reinterpreting traditional Ottoman architecture, the mosque took obvious lessons from Le Corbusier's later work.
39. During the Austro-Hungarian period, the advocates of a 'Bosnian style' were architects from the North-western regions of the Empire, predominantly Austrians and Czechs. After World War I, chief proponents of a Bosnian regionalism were again newcomers from the North-West; native architects were, as a rule, more interested in international functionalism.
40. Particularly contrary to the alleged 'Oriental' character of Macedonia is the fact that the most promising Macedonian architects were educated at American universities as part of US aid after the earthquake. If a certain 'regionalism' emerged in Macedonia in the 1980s, it did in other parts of Yugoslavia as well and very much because of the postmodernist interest in tradition.
41. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, new edition (London and New York, Routledge, 2002), pp. 46–50.