

REBUILD: THE ELEMENTS

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If there is anything that captures the experimental nature of Yugoslav socialism, it is the ever-evolving name of the building constructed to house the main governing body of the country that ceased to exist in 1991, which also becomes the location for Jasmina Cibic's film *Tear Down and Rebuild*. Originally called the Palace of Federation, it was renamed the Federal Executive Council (Savezno izvršno veće or SIV), and in 2006, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, it was renamed again as the Palace of Serbia, capturing not only the ethos of nationalist identity that was established as the norm after the war, but also the revisionist politics that followed, seeking to re-inscribe the building into the canon of Serbian nationalism. The same building is known under various names even today, each of them providing a snapshot of the prevailing tendencies in the society at the moment when they were coined. It is almost as if the building itself is not just a mere container representing the constant search for the best organisational form of society, but the protagonist of the film as well.

The competition for this building, which was to house the Presidency of Yugoslavia, was organised in 1947, at the moment when the modernist plan for the construction of New Belgrade, where the structure was to be built, was still in the early stages. The selection of the winning entry, proposed by Vladimir Potočnjak in collaboration with Anton Ulrich, Zlatko Neumann and Dragica Perak, and the start of the construction works in 1948 played a key role in grounding the urban planning project and defining some of the major traits which led to the development of the urban plan as we know it, and more importantly, experience it

today. The beginning of the construction coincided with one of the most turbulent periods of Yugoslav history (that is, before its break up and the wars of the 1990s), a period that would fundamentally change the course the new socialist country was taking. Soon after the ground was broken and the construction started, Yugoslavia broke free from the tightening grip of the Soviet Union and embarked on the articulation of its own socialist path, different from the state socialism prevalent in the countries under the influence of Moscow. The political crisis triggered an economic one, and the construction of the building was put on hold in 1949, by which time only the construction of the basic volume had been set.

Contemporary reports on the winning entry remarked how the building still observed the classical laws of architecture, despite incorporating elements from the modern registry. The building was praised for achieving "quiet beauty".¹ The project was continued in 1955, but by that time Potočnjak had passed away and it was updated and completed under the supervision of the Stadion design office and the architect Mihailo Janković. His core contribution to the original project was the addition of the representative part: the central plenary room with an oval-shaped seating arrangement, and the six salons—each dedicated to one of the constituent republics of socialist Yugoslavia.² Most of the artworks in the salons are integral to the original authors' conception, and their designs also include furniture, carpets, fabrics and lighting fixtures, with the aim of capturing the uniqueness of each republic. However, that is not the only function served by these spaces, for they as a whole carry a message more powerful than the sum of

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Blagojević, Ljiljana, *Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam*, Belgrade: Zavod za izdavanje udžbenika, 2008, pp 72–83.

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See Una Popović's introduction, pp 192.

its parts, one about the common project of creating an egalitarian society for the future. Charged with the impossible assignment of capturing the principles of participation and equality in official representative form, the building expresses both the benefits and the pitfalls of such a task. Since its inception, problems have erupted on a large scale, with the prospects for a different type of society fading into oblivion, yet the SIV building itself continues to hold the building blocks for the models of society that could be relevant in the future.

While the exterior of the building has for decades been a prominent point of reference in space, the interiors remained largely unknown and subject to speculation until relatively recently, when public tours became a more common practice. The initial encounter with the building is similar to encounters with other modernist buildings from the 1960s, and what strikes the viewer as odd is not the trope of design, but how little, or nothing at all, has been changed, not even in order to adhere to contemporary building standards. After spending some time within these spaces, one's attention is drawn from the original elements of the design to out-of-place additions, mostly paintings hanging on odd walls, copies of locally well-known, nationally specific motifs, including the depiction of a landmark orthodox monastery and a photograph of the physicist Nikola Tesla. Further inquiry reveals that the author of these paintings and the owner of the added artefacts was the curator himself. His actions can be read as a way of dealing with his own discomfort, provoked by what he perceived as the emptiness of the walls. This peculiar intervention, which seems to be aimed at taming and silencing the original architecture, only acts as a booming reminder of the emancipation implicit in the principles of equality introduced into the Yugoslav society, which still emanate from the building in stern silence. The actions of the curator can be seen

as a performative response that interprets the building as more than a mere monument to what the current power constellations see as a failed political and social project. It is also a repository of knowledge about a different type of society, in which equality and community are goals to aspire to.

It is not by chance that Cibic chooses the interiors of this building as the setting for *Tear Down and Rebuild*. Designed to encapsulate the social idiosyncrasies Yugoslavia aimed to achieve as a project, this piece of architecture suggests itself as the perfect stage for a film that is ultimately a debate on the disruptive markers that can be glimpsed through the sediments of previous ideologies, in the representational strategies used in their art and architecture. These markers are perceived as threatening by the subsequent national power structures, even after the demise of the ideologies and beliefs they originally stood for. The film almost actively asks the following question: what disturbing markers can be identified in this building, such that compel the authority of its gatekeeper—personified by the curator—to act on personal initiative and introduce new additions as symbols of the new ideology that the building is meant to represent? I would suggest that those markers are perceived as disturbing because they evoke the beliefs which challenge the dogmata of today, by favouring social over private property, by viewing housing as a right rather than a commodity, and by fostering international solidarity instead of nationalism.

Yugoslav socialist self-management was the first major rupture in the international workers' movement and emerged as a critique of the Soviet bureaucratic type of socialism, triggered by the attempt of Moscow to subject Yugoslavia to its direct control in 1948. Despite being introduced top-down, by official ideologues and functionaries of the League of Communist Parties, it started

with the decentralisation and dispersion of political power into smaller self-management units, where in the last instance it was formally possible for workers to be involved in the decision-making. State/public property was transformed into social property—the property of the entire society—and many new political institutions were formed, mediating between the different levels of the state, with the aim of accelerating the withering away of the state as conceived by Lenin. It was a social formation, which combined elements of both communism (domination of labour over capital, strict limitation and abolishment of private land property, establishment of basic health, social and educational infrastructure) and capitalism (introduction of market elements). At the core of this principle was an individual who was free to express, connect and harmonise her interests with the general interests and goals of the community.

In Yugoslav socialist self-management, the right to resources was derived from work and participation, rather than ownership, emphasising use-value as opposed to exchange-value. The main building block of this society (which the self-managed socialist enterprise was in theory) was derived from the ideas of participation and social property, with the possibility of scaling up by organising into a 'federation of self-governing communes'. Additionally, citizens had the opportunity to self-organise into interest communities, as a tool to pursue interests that were not solely production-related. The self-managed socialist enterprise was also the main force behind the physical process of building the society. Workers'

councils of socially owned self-managed companies determined where the surplus would be invested, usually allocating it to the construction of housing and infrastructure for everyday life, such as cultural centres, holiday resorts and other amenities. The Yugoslav experience is valuable because it undermines the false binary between socialism as a regime based on state-ownership and capitalism as a regime based on private property. It is this third, elusive category of social property that Yugoslav socialism was based upon. It is what laid the foundations for today, and is the source of anxiety that the SIV building produces. Social property comes close to contemporary discussions on the concept of commons, which, for the most part, are at the centre of the current debate about potential new forms of social organisation that would overcome the impasses of current capitalist society. One of the key theorists of self-management, Branko Horvat, stressed how social property should not be reduced to the language of ownership, but understood as

a foundation on which the right of every member of society to work and compete for any position in line with her skills and capabilities, and the right of every member to participate in management on equal terms, can be realized³

akin to Elinor Ostrom's exploration of commons as the collective management of common-pool resources.

When the construction of the SIV building started in 1948, New Belgrade was still being

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Horvat, B, "Ogled o Jugoslavenskom društvu" ("Essay on the Yugoslav society"), Zagreb: Mladost, 1969, p 237, quoted in Dolenc, Danijela, and Mislav Žitko, "Exploring Commons Theory for Principles of a Socialist Governmentality", *Review of Radical Political Economics*, vol 48, issue 1, March 2016, pp 66–80.

envisioned mostly as a bureaucratic city that would serve the large state apparatus. When it was completed in 1961, New Belgrade was the largest housing development in the country. The bureaucracy, at least initially, withdrew to make room for ordinary everyday life. Based on the idea that housing is not a commodity, the right to housing became a “basic legal institution, providing one of the most important means of life to the working classes”.⁴ The financing of housing, regulated by the Law on the Financing of Housing Construction, was “based on solidarity and reciprocity”, and the idea that

organisations of Associated Labour, and other self-managed organisations and communities, as well as society at large, must take action and create opportunities for every individual to realise their need for housing, as well as the fundamental requirements for social security.⁵

While workers, and in Yugoslavia everyone was considered a ‘worker’ (it was not a term reserved just for those working on the shop floor), had a say in how the housing units would be distributed (as the right to housing was exercised through affiliation with one’s place of employment), they had little input in the social and organisational structuring of the housing itself. It was only after the housing blocks were finished, and people started moving in and transgressing the structural divisions between management, maintenance and production staff (as all would end up living in the same building),

that the spontaneous process of self-organisation regarding the use of collective spaces started to unfold.

The SIV building was completed and opened to the public in September 1961. Its opening was one of the events at the Belgrade Conference; it was the foundational moment of the Non-Aligned Movement. While the “third world was not a place”, “it was a project”, it still needed a physical space that would come into being as the articulation of the movement and its political goals.⁶ The solidarity between the wretched of the earth had to be performed in space and not only in rhetoric. After all, non-alignment

does not mean passivity of mind or action, lack of faith or conviction. It does not mean submission to what we consider evil. It is a positive and dynamic approach to such problems that confront us. We believe that each country has not only the right to freedom but also to decide its own policy and way of life. Only thus can true freedom flourish and a people grow according to their own genius.⁷

The dominant idea in the 1960s was that it was possible to strive for ways of living together in the world, both within a single community and between different communities, without competition for dominance, hierarchies or exploitation. Rather soon, the idea was forgotten, and from the vantage point of today’s proliferating borders and walls erected

around countries, cities and communities, the greatest source of discomfort the SIV building projects is the sincere belief in the possibility of the project of international solidarity. A project based on the non-hegemonic relations of equality and not on the property relations of debt, it consequently seems the most unattainable yet the most urgent one to capture for the future.

Although I have been treating the SIV building as an active participant in Cibic’s work, one can arguably shift focus onto the verbal discussion featured in *Tear Down and Rebuild* and see the SIV building, where the film was shot in its entirety, as a mere backdrop to the tense debate between the film’s protagonists. However, as the film’s storyline progresses and the discussion between the four characters stays unresolved, the building itself amplifies the dilemma voiced in the dialogue and emerges as the fifth character, an active interlocutor in the debate. Formally, the conversation between the characters presents four ideologically contrived positions and the four figures act as placeholders for specific political stances. I would suggest that their positions can be read as attributes of diverse typologies of space production, and their dialogue as an illustration of how conscious and unconscious ideology gears a society. Furthermore, the positions of Nation-Builder, Pragmatist, Conservationist and Artist-Architect arguably circumscribe the (disciplinary) fallacy of thinking that it is possible to remain outside the ideological framework of art and architecture

production. Indeed, it is the very act of producing space that benefits both its recipient and the one who is involved in the production itself. And the question that crystallises this sentiment seems perfectly voiced in Claude Schnaidt’s text:

... which way will you go, architect?
... will you march into battle to fight for a different society?
Progress—what is that to you?
Beautification through decoration?
Perfection of details?
Cutting of cost?
To whose benefit?
You have to decide.⁸

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“Zaključci Prvog opštejugoslovenskog savetovanja o stambenoj izgradnji i stanovanju” (“Conclusions of the First Yugoslav Forum on Housing”) *Komuna* [Belgrade], no 3, 1956.

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Law on the Financing of Housing Construction, Official Gazette of the Socialist Republic of Serbia 4 / 1986, Article 1.

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Prashad, Vijay, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World*, New York and London: New Press, 2008.

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Nehru, Jawaharlal, speech in Washington, DC, 18 December 1956, “Visit of Prime Minister Nehru of India”, *Department of State Bulletin*, 14 January 1957, p 50.

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Schnaidt, Claude, “Hannes Meyer”, *Anders gesagt: Schriften 1950–2001*, Gerd Zimmermann and Norbert Korrek eds, Weimar: Verlag der Bauhaus – Universität Weimar, 2009, p 302, quoted in Schneider, Tatjana, “The Paradox of Social Architectures”, *Use Matters: An Alternative History of Architecture*, Kenny Cupers ed, London and New York: Routledge, 2013, pp 249–263.