

ARCHITECTURE HR

New Protagonists

It is almost impossible and even improper to talk about a young, emerging scene in terms of an imputed common denominator. In fact, such a systematic approach could inhibit the scene or lead to wrong conclusions. It seems more appropriate to describe the circumstances that caused the current state of affairs, to indicate the sources that shaped the scene by accepting and adopting past achievements, rebelling against authority or mastering a wider social context.



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There is a recent thesis about an archetypal constant in the history of Croatian architecture: the "megaron clarity"¹. Croatian architecture never lacked the ability to use meager building assets to create complex urban forms, indicating a particular vitality and adaptability that has not disappeared. During its fruitful modern period, architecture managed to reconcile idea with ideology and did not hesitate to rework and relocate basically the same architectural discourse from a capitalist social and political context into a socialist one. With uncanny speed and ability, the Zagreb architectural school took the model of the cubist composition of modernist villas from the late 1920s and developed it into successful CIAM urban ensembles and in to the ambitious and big architecture of the late 1950s. It seems that the traumatic shift from one social system to another, with Croatia being on the geopolitical margin of both East and West, gave birth to new authenticity.

At the same time, the artistic scene also developed, in belated but fully-fledged stages, from avant-garde through post-avant-garde to neo-avant-garde, with a strong feedback to architecture. Influential protagonists promoted the idea of artistic synthesis and founded mixed groups of painters, architects, designers and theoreticians. Artistic practices were fused within circles of dedicated kindred souls who had to confront academism and regressive, non-modern forces. The EXAT-51 group, supporting the idea of geometric abstraction, carved a cultural

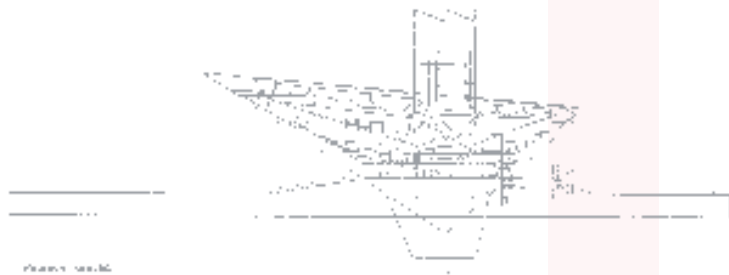
niche for themselves, while its historical successor, *Nove Tendencije2*, grew into a more precise ideological platform of an international movement, turning Zagreb into one of several global cultural junctions of neo-Constructivism, Concrete Art and attempts to reconcile and balance science and art. Developing in parallel with that rational vein was the group of Gorgona, an early and authentic precursor of conceptualism, founded in a subtle and intelligent collective relationship of sophisticated individuals who went through a phase of ritual mountaineering, publishing magazines and engaging in artistic correspondences. In both movements, artistic expression wavered on the edge of "zero form" and intellectual saturation, opening the way to the next generation to explore the themes of non-objective art and of counter-culture after 1968. The architectural scene often followed in the footsteps of these artistic avant-gardes with a feeling of ethical and aesthetic kinship.

Because of the curious mix of social conditions, the period of high modernism should be seen as a parade of extraordinary architectural breakthroughs. The interesting convergence, where advanced architecture went hand in hand with the proclaimed political and ideological program of building a new socialist society, resulted in buildings and urban systems that were ahead of the actual modernization of Croatian society as a whole. The architects and urban planners who were active in the '50s and '60s enjoyed a creative and authoritative (but not absolute) freedom of using means of production; an enviable position, which could be interpreted as a peculiarity of a society on the fringe. The set of given social conditions and a relatively big accumulation of older architectural intelligence brought about valuable results, a kind of Socialist Surrealism opposing notorious Socialist Realism.

The attention in the late '70s and '80s focused on continuity, smaller scale and theoretical investigations. Intelligent partisans of postmodern thought started out from an existentialist interpretation, a keen sensibility for historical

→ Tom Gotovac

Performance „Lying naked on the asphalt”, kissing the asphalt (Zagreb, I love you!), Homage to Howard Hawks and his film Hatari, Zagreb, Friday 13th of November 1981



→ Vladimir Turina, Boris Magaš

Zenica Theatre, competition project, section, 1964

and local contexts. By that time, an impressive “virtual” collection of Croatian non-built “paper architecture” had accumulated; its influence was as great in its own peculiar way as that of executed projects. In the 1980s, Zagreb and some other cities like Rijeka were interesting places with a lively scene: increasing quality and influence of student papers and comics, a flowering of New Wave Music, events like the Festival of New Theater (EUROKAZ), the Contemporary Dance Week, and the Music Biennial. Graphic design was flirting with both “new image” and “mixed media”. In a period with few interesting new buildings, future architects gleaned knowledge and informed their sensibility in other media and art forms. As opposed to the post-war period, culture spread from elite enclaves to street pavements; it became more popular, accessible, urban, in an almost decadent atmosphere heralding the demise of softened Socialism.

Today’s architectural thinking is particularly influenced by the idea, strongly expressed in education, that a logical and appropriate solution of a project task is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for creation. The “appropriate solution” has become a fetish, but it is also an operating model in Croatian conditions. It is desirable for designers to be aware that their design in the realization phase could be attacked from all sides, “rationalized”, simplified, and degraded. Artistic and operational conditions of contemporary Croatian architects are markedly different from those used as educational role models. The Croatian scene of the last decade has been characterized by a creative and financial constellation that created numerous new architectural offices without entailing many successful projects. One important catalyst in such a context is a large number of open competitions, which give young architects a chance to prove themselves in democratic competition. While most competition projects won by young architects are yet to be realized, the subsidized social housing program called POS, directed by state institutions, has resulted in many exciting buildings, which are released from aesthetic and conceptual pressures of investors, providing

that they meet very precise conditions. In fact, it was POS that put the “new protagonists” in the limelight: provided with a set budget and left to their own devices, they had to wage pitched battles on site with usually inarticulate contractors. This constellation forced young and active architects to act like “leopards of transition”³ and to muster managerial skills they had never been taught at school. Also, the scene is marked by direct experiences abroad; knowledge is imported from different sources. The reverse applies too: several Croatian architects have had notable careers abroad, showing their readiness and competence to cope with new environments.

After the trauma of war, the establishment of a new social order and a period of transition, the social context has gradually strengthened, which made for clearer rules of the building game. In that sense, the young generation of architects is being shaped in an economic and political situation that is slowly emerging in parallel with their own maturing. They are the “new protagonists” of new conditions in the overall building process. They are burdened with the unfinished modern project and the passed-down ethical/elitist habits that clash with the cruel post-transitional liberal capitalism and the collapse of the technical quality of construction. Direct commissions are infrequent, there is not much freedom of action, even interior design is rarely interesting. What is the course of action in such conditions? How can the accumulated knowledge and passion be translated into a concrete edifice?

When seen from the inside, the scene is dynamic, with planners gathering in groups for competitive tenders, moving on from one office to the next, trying out various aspects of cooperation like jazz players. So the spirit of the scene leans towards the collective and often avoids signature styles as marks of personal authorship. Architectural practices are usually not named after partners, but have abstract names indicating specific attitudes and the fact that offices are moving on from artistic to organizational issues. If one considers the “new protagonists” as individuals, they are a relatively heterogeneous group, with individ-

ual beliefs originating from different areas of interest, designing methods, and finally divergent ambitions. They all have personal methods of questioning inherited architectural notions; a cross-section of the contemporary scene gives reason for some satisfaction: it includes artistic visions as well as purely operative practices. Architecture in Croatia displays an unprecedented simultaneous application of wildly different views, roughly divided into efficiently organized, prestigious and financially stable offices on one hand, and NGO activism or experimental practices on the other. Such creative tension between ideologically opposed beliefs could be the main provider of fertile ground for discussions on contemporary Croatian architectural culture, while architectural activities are gradually, but still almost imperceptibly, spilling from the traditional planning/designing tasks into other forms of cultural activity.

The “new protagonists” are authentic, first and foremost because of the effect of the contemporary social reality. While the modernist movement exploited the leap from a capitalist to a socialist system and turned the latter’s faults into advantages, the other leap – from late socialism to liberalism – has hitherto mostly its rough side, as creative architecture has been dominated by either the typical of transition periods, or by impersonal capital. Architects in Croatia are fighting for their place in society against social and cultural marginalization. Their ability to cope with this context and to produce elements in the built landscape which come up to the criteria of architectural intelligence will be an important indicator of the degree and method of Croatia’s general hold on the present.

–Maroje Mrduljaš

¹ The thesis of “megaron clarity” was introduced by Prof. Tonči Žarnić in an interview entitled **Architecture Should Be Useful Again**, published in Oris no. 30.

² Direct or indirect participants in the movement of Nove Tendencije (New Tendencies) were Getulio Alviani, Enzo Mari, François Morellet, Abraham Moles, and many others. ³ I have borrowed this phrase from Ante Nikša Bilić.