

Walking a fine line

Jelena Bogdanović, Lilien Filipovitch Robinson, Igor Marianović (editors)

On the Very Edge.

Modernism and Modernity in the Arts and Architecture of Interwar Serbia (1918-1941)

Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014, 349 pages, 121 illustrations, ISBN 978-905-867-993-2

Kázmér Kovács

Associate Professor, PhD, "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism, Bucharest
kazmerkovacs@yahoo.com

The authors and editors of this recent collection of studies in art and architecture assume the risky and tempting task of exploring the often disorienting world of interwar Serbia, in order to understand how and to what extent Modernism has shaped Serbian modernity and, the other way around, how Serbian Modernism in arts and architecture responded by influencing developments in "the centre". For, inevitably, the position coming into question with each of these enterprises is the cultural relationship between the West (a conveniently decentred centre) and the rest. All of our Eastern countries suffer and at the same time bask in the sunlight of a fatal marginality, which bounds us to eternal longing for prominence and stimulates us to come up with achievements of beaming originality.

Yet the last sentence merely reflects a well established cliché. It has been said and demonstrated that, while acquiring consistency and recognition in Paris, Rome, Vienna or London, modernist ideas and artists very often come from the East, bringing with them each time the germs of proto-modernist elements born there, even more often under the influence of foreigners – architects or visual artists seeking to find room for their work and a society to build a career within.

We are of course dealing with European matters. The topic is the more up-to-date, as the concepts of centre and periphery turn every now and again in unexpected circumstances; at times they do so in bloody conflicts, far away from the rarefied realms of academic discourse. Even if the talking is about interwar Serbia – inevitably involving Yugoslavia, a heterogeneous nation reborn following the collapse of all but one European empires –, the shadow of the very recent war in the Balkans is everywhere to be noticed. For instance, when at the very beginning of her introduction, Jelena Bogdanović quotes the description of Belgrade by Lena Jovičić mentioning "turbulent times and the bombarding of Belgrade", one cannot avoid remembering the lasting crisis that accompanied some twenty years ago the final dissolution of what has once upon a time been the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

Bogdanović then goes on talking in turn of all the various contributions to the book, summing up what turns out to be a mosaic-like assemblage of approaches. She does an excellent job, thus saving us the trouble of doing it again. We see parading the greatest diversity of themes, ranging from the analysis of the work of a singular artist – or of groups of artists – to gender matters or from the influence of Expressionism to stadium architecture. Due to her presentation, what at first sight is a loose succession of articles turns indeed into a coherent picture of the artistic and architectural universe of Belgrade, the "peripheral centre", and of Serbia, a fresh and powerful terrain for experiment and innovation.

Some of the "unity in diversity" of the new country emerging in the aftermath of the First World War is reflected in the horizontal composition of the topics gathered in the book. However, while in time the political entity centred on Belgrade proved to be largely a matter of wishful thinking, the coherence of the book is gradually unveiled while one progresses with the reading. The major

virtue of all the contributions is to position each of the respective themes in the political and social context of their time, both the local and the wider one, identifying influences – whether they come from the Bauhaus in Dessau (p. 159), Italian Futurism (p. 85), Russian Constructivism (p. 68) or elsewhere. Such an approach is both necessary and daring. Necessary, because one cannot pretend to shed light on any local artistic movement without establishing links or affiliations, and without marking differences. Daring, because by relying on morphological as well as ideological associations, on established stereotypes or on their subversion, comparisons will always be disputable.

Likewise, the outcome lives up to the challenge of mapping an intricate and unsettled territory. We are successively taken to witness the emergence of artists questioning traditions, then the aggregation of artistic groups animated by unique personalities and progressive ideologies; magazines, such as *Zenit*, propagate the new ideas and engender movements – “Zenitism” – endeavouring among other things to find an enduring expression in architecture. The place of women in the epoch is under scrutiny.

And this is perhaps the most revealing layer of the book. Certainly, careful and thoroughly documented research of various artistic phenomena in the epoch evoking the complex cobweb of mutual influences are illuminating for one or the other particular aspect of Serbian Modernism. Yet, while necessary and appropriate, at least because they complete the overall picture of the formidable artistic, philosophical and architectural revolution that has been the “historical avant-garde”, with its all-encompassing universalist vocation, reaching out to politics and social standards, in the end these scholarly remarkable accounts confirm with their particular cases what one has quite known before: namely that when it comes to the invention of twentieth century art, as well as to the complicated movements of artists and ideas during the feverish decades preceding and following the Great War there is the same gigantic cultural tide carrying artists and thinkers of all nationalities “from the Baltic to the Balkans”¹ in their universalist striving towards a new spirituality.

The feminist movement was by no means an East-European invention. The movement emerged in the West, alongside the diverse social projects structured around the critique of the industrial city that preceded the creation of the new discipline of urban planning² and grounded on the same kind of values and understanding. The idea that women could and should have the same rights as men would hardly have come from elsewhere – it could certainly not have appeared in the deeply patriarchal, traditionalist societies of the Balkans. And this is precisely the reason why this aspect of Serbian interwar society works as a reference system for the measure of its modernity.

This seems also to be in the mind of the editors; hinted at more than once in the introduction by Jelena Bogdanović (p. 5, 6 and 7, for instance when speaking about the status of women in connection with the disregard of the applied arts), the idea is even more obvious in the overall conception of the book. The chapters dealing with women’s place in Yugoslav (Southern-Slavic) societies³ occupy the central position (chapters 5 to 8, of the total number of 14). They stand between the chapters devoted to general topics of Serbian Modernism and its artistic movements and the more substantial last part, concentrating on architecture and urban planning. Thus, the feminist series of chapters becomes the core and axis of the ensemble; it is surely not by chance that the illustration chosen by the editors for the cover is a rather androgynous photographic portrait of Milena Pavlović-Barilli.

1 With reference to the ground-breaking book of Steven Mansbach who, among the first, pointed out the indissoluble ties that link together East and West: *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

2 This discursive period preceding actual urban planning is called “pre-urbanism” by Françoise Choay, *L’Urbanisme, utopies et réalités* (Paris: Seuil, 1965). The term itself – urbanism – was not coined before the publication of Ildefonso Cerdà’s seminal *Teoría general de la urbanización* (Barcelona, 1862).

3 In the area of the former Yugoslavia it would be inappropriate to talk about society instead of societies – constituted by Eastern Orthodox Christian, Roman Catholic and Muslim Slavs gathered in more or less clearly marked political entities and loosely tied together by shared history and territory.

Pavlović-Barilli was a remarkable figure of the artistic world of interwar Serbia. We learn from the chapter dedicated to her work by Ljubomir Milanović that her painting is as much indebted to academic tradition as it assumes a subversive mission. This duality can be taken as a metaphor designating the whole mixture of rigid, quasi mediaeval social fabric and sparkingly daring intellectual avant-garde that seems to have been the dominant feature of society there and then. Indeed, the same ambivalence is followed by the painter interested in expressing her topic through self-portraits in disguise,⁴ accompanied by symbolic objects (the lamp, the veil) – so that, as a result of the composition and the *recherché* stiffness of the figures, the genre itself acquires a disguise, often resembling a still life. Milanović compares her paintings with the portrait of hers – the same one is put on the book cover – made by Carl van Vechten (p. 140). This artist photographer of the rich and famous interposed a veil between the face of Milena Pavlović-Barilli and the lens in such a way, as Milanović puts it, as to make it uncertain whether it is the face of the model or the face of the spectator that is concealed by the intricate lace motif. At a different reading, the lace may look like a tattoo or even like a beard on a youthful face, dominated by the inquisitive and intriguing gaze of the artist; the other features would be obliterated by the ornament – the mouth being sealed by a black rose.

Such powerful symbolism is not uncommon, according to the authors of the book. Even if one expects the procession of characters appearing along the roughly three hundred pages of the book to be composed of outstanding, singular individuals, these female heroes still appear as exceptional. They could not help being so. In order to prevail over the suffocating stereotypes of their societies, these women had to take on nearly everything and everyone. The inaugural figure of this struggle is the novelist Draga Gavrilović, who never managed to publish her book, but created a role model for the later and more successful Jelena J. Dimitrijević. We learn about these two early Serbian women-writers from the chapter dedicated by Svetlana Tomić to the travel writings of the latter. She was of course better placed to achieve literary success. However, even if favoured by birth and education, Dimitrijević also needed the chance of marrying an open minded man (p. 116). Thus, she could go her own ways and at the same time comply with the society's expectations towards women. Yet, all the lucky auspices were not enough to ensure an easy success. Moreover, while she became, in time, the first celebrated Serbian woman author, her work was considered marginal in her time and is largely hushed up even today.

The condition of outstanding female intellectuals and artists in interwar Serbia and their struggle for recognition is a very efficient tester for where Southern Slavs – and indeed South-east European societies stand within early twentieth century modernisation. The other way around, women who succeed to acquire recognition and success in any “masculine” domain – that is, in every important domain – become perhaps the most active agents of modernity in these societies. Their partial approval seldom goes beyond receiving an indulgent, condescending look from their male counterparts. Such is the testimony provided by the chapter where Bojana Popović is dealing with the state of applied arts in Belgrade and Serbia. One of the many illuminating things one learns from this study is that, because weaving was considered the female industry par excellence, the presence of women in this particular branch of the applied arts was integrated more easily, thus creating a bridge for female professionals towards all the major fields of interior arrangements and design.

If interior architecture seemed suitable for women, the fate of female architects in Belgrade had to be somewhat different. The first Serbian women architects, Jelisaveta Načić and Milica Krstić – this we learn from Anna Novakov in chapter 8 on the education of girls – share the fate of others in the region⁵ by being rare exceptions to the rule, or rather to the cliché qualifying architecture as a masculine trade.⁶ The overall attitude was beginning to change in the years following the

4 Her art is thus a forerunner of the photographic masterpieces of Cindy Sherman.

5 As a term for comparison, at about the same time, Virginia Andreescu-Haret (1894-1962) was the first woman architect in Romania and the only one in her age-group.

6 On the status of women architects in Romania, see the recently defended thesis by Raluca Niculae, “Paradigma feminină în arhitectura din România, 1989-2014” [The Feminine Paradigm in Architecture. Romania, 1989-2014] (Bucharest: “Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urbanism, 2014).

Great War (p. 168). If the two pioneers of female architecture built a number of public schools in the interwar period, following the Second World War they had to cede the place, to a younger generation. Yet the ground had been broken and the process of feminisation of architecture had begun.

The fourth and last “feminist chapter” of the book acts as an introduction to the six following studies, which, in turn, explore different aspects of Serbian architecture during the relatively short but flamboyant time span between the two world wars. They provide a sequential, yet sufficient overview of the eclectic phenomenon where, like at any time, architecture gives a lasting representation of those times, their people, custom and culture.

It is by now obvious that with *On the Very Edge* we do not have a scholarly attempt to draw a monograph of the epoch, claiming to put forward an exhaustive survey. Instead, the authors and editors of the book manage to put together an imaginative and inspiring patchwork of accounts and analyses centred on the female presence in the artistic and intellectual life of interwar Serbian society. It had to be a scarce presence; therefore the editorial project proves to be as ingenious as it is effective: it achieves the suggestive and comprehensive evocation of those times by referring it to a particularly emphatic phenomenon.

A special flavour of the reading of this book comes from its “vernacular English”. Surely, the language is mastered flawlessly and carries all the nuances and expressivity required when dealing with such complex matters. Nevertheless, there is a slight air of foreignness about it, which suits quite well the purpose and core of the very enterprise: an endeavour to establish the situation of Serbian Modernism in arts and architecture within the wider scenery of European and universal modernity.