

# BETWEEN EAST AND WEST – Influences on Belgrade Urban and Architectural Development from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract: If we want to understand modern urban development of Belgrade in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is necessary to understand the importance of its specific geo-strategic and geo-political position between East and West – on the confluence of the Sava and the Danube rivers – having a crucial impact on its urban and architectural development throughout history. Political and cultural influences of the East and West, which were alternating after the Serbian state had been restored, constitute the basic elements of its modern identity, which is also largely expressed in a constant struggle between the traditionalism and modernism, the conservative and the progressive. After the WWI, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and later on the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was formed (1929), which apart from the erstwhile Kingdom of Serbia, consisted of the regions that used to be part of the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman empires. The new Kingdom was a political and cultural symbiosis of the East and the West parts of the Balkans. The Capital, Belgrade, lost its centuries-long border position. In the large scale reconstruction of the, in the war devastated town, the state authorities tried to reconcile the existing historic and cultural differences in the new Kingdom, and in its urbanism and architecture, to reflect a new national, political and cultural identity. After the WWII, Belgrade was the capital of the Democratic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, led by the Communist Party and*

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*Tito. By 1948, the country claimed allegiance to Soviet Union. After 1948, the Yugoslav political elite chose the “third way” between the communist East and capitalist West. In the first post-war years, the old idea of extending the city to the plains, between the Sava and the Danube, was revived. The new area, called New Belgrade, was planned, and two competitions were announced in 1946. In the area of future New Belgrade, stretching from the Old Sava Bridge, as a link with the old town, a broad boulevard was built with the Yugoslav Presidency building (1947–1954) and the Communist Party Central Committee building (1964). These buildings symbolically mark the creation of a new political state centre and the new capital city, outside the old town. The very architecture of the buildings was supposed to reflect the new progressive social and aesthetic trends – the so-called Socialist Realism. The 1960s Belgrade architecture was more liberate and rich. Different Yugoslav versions of the Western International Style and poetical interpretations of the Western mainstream Modernism were expressed on major public buildings. These buildings symbolised the final cultural and artistic turn to the West, and from that time progressive architectural ideas from the developed European countries starting to bee adopted.*

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*Key Words:* traditionalism, communism, soc-realism, modernism, progress

### *Urban and architectural development of Belgrade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century*

If we want to understand modern urban development of Belgrade in the 20th century, it is necessary to understand the importance of its specific geo-strategic and geo-political position between East and West – on the confluence of the Sava and the Danube rivers – having a crucial impact on its urban and architectural development throughout history. Political and cultural influences of the East and West, which were alternating after the Serbian state had been restored, constitute the basic elements of its modern identity, which is also largely expressed in a constant struggle between the traditionalism and modernism, the conservative and the progressive.

We can say that modern political and cultural development of Serbia started  
 124 | in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

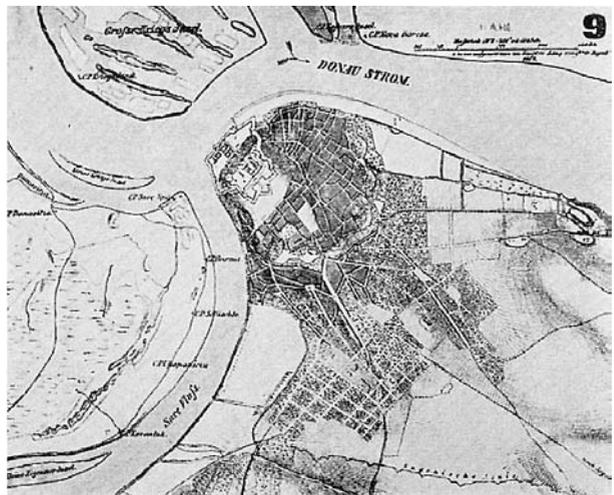
After the First Serbian Uprising in 1804, Belgrade became the Capital of the new Serbian principality. However, in the 1820s, the Turkish army returned to the Fortress and the Moslem population to their homes (Ђурић-Замоло 1977).



*The Belgrade in the mid of XIX century*

Serbian Principality had a partial political autonomy and Prince Miloš Obrenović marked that by building his new Court (1829–30) and the new Church (1837–1840) at the Sava slope where the Christian population lived. (Максимовић 1983, 8–11). They had the façades with elements of Central European Baroque and Classicism and were the symbol of political and cultural break with the Eastern tradition and of an adopting European culture and architecture. (Несторовић 2008).

At that time, the Serbian Principality and Belgrade had specific political and strategic position, between the Austrian Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. In 1834 Prince Miloš Obrenović began preparations for building a new Serbian part of the town – the 19<sup>th</sup> century *New Belgrade* – on the slopes of the west Vračar area. Koenning's Plan (1854) clearly



*The Kenning's Plan of Belgrade, 1854*

shows the contrast between the rational European orthogonal street network on the slopes of the west and east Vračar and the Levantine areas with spontaneously formed streets in the Old Town. (Шкаламера 1997, 181).



*Kralja Petra St. at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century*

stronger ties with Europe, especially with Austria. After the proclamation of Kingdom in 1882, foreign investments started. Numerous plans and photos show a speedy transformation of Belgrade and its growth into a modern, Western town. (Ротер-Благојевић 2006).

Favourable circumstances for an extensive transformation of the Serbian capital came about in 1870s, when Prince Mihailo Obrenović finally managed to accomplish the final withdrawal of the Turkish army and the Moslem population from the Old Town. With the Obrenović Dynasty, Serbia established

### *Modern transformation in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*

The turn of the century was marked by intensive city constructions. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, like in other European countries, Belgrade sees the results of modern architecture: Art Nouveau or the Austrian Secession in combination with the monumental style of Academism. (Kadijević 2005) Some architects combine the Secession with the national Serbian mediaeval style in many public and residential buildings, creating a new authentic approach, a symbiosis of modern and



*Njegoševa 11 St, arch. Branko Tanazević, 1912  
(photo M. Roter Blagojevic)*

traditional national architecture (Kadijević 2004, 53–70). On many buildings, like Njegoševa 11 St., were applied the combination of the Secession elements with the Serbian mediaeval decorations – in the spirit of the Serbian Byzantine style.

For the further political and cultural development of Serbia, a very important issue was a dramatic change of dynasty in 1903, when King Aleksandar Obrenović and his wife Draga were assassinated. The new king was Petar Karadjordjević and he turned away from Austria and established a close connection with the Russian Monarchy.

However, in architecture and urbanism, European influences were still quite strong and the first Belgrade Master Plan was made by a French architect Alban Chambond (1912), in the spirit of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French academic town planning (Милатовић 1980, 221–238). But, the problems of the inherited urban structure and real problems of the town were neglected, and WWI stopped the plan to be carried out.



*The first Master Plan of Belgrade,  
Alban Chambond, 1912*

After the war, the *Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes* and later on the *Kingdom of Yugoslavia* was formed (1929), which apart from the erstwhile Kingdom of Serbia, consisted of the regions that used to be part of the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman empires. The new Kingdom was a political and cultural symbiosis of the East and the West parts of the Balkans, and King Aleksandar Karadjordjević wanted to establish a new national, political and cultural identity of the Kingdom – the idea of a “national unity” was a dominant one in the government politics (Ignjatović 2007). Very important was that the Capital, Belgrade, lost its centuries-long border position. In the large scale reconstruction of the, in the war devastated town, the state authorities tried to reconcile the existing historic and cultural differences in the new Kingdom, and in its urbanism and architecture, to reflect a new national, political and cultural identity – the spirit of the “national unity”.

In 1921, at the Serbian Architects and Engineers Association’s initiative, an international competition for the New Master Plan was organised, showing a desire to establish a dialogue with other European professionals, so as to get some

modern ideas and functional solutions, but most of all, to get free of the closed local frames, burdened with traditionalism. In 1923 a Master Plan draft based upon the proposed ideas was presented. The author of the Plan, Đorđe Pavlović Kovaljevski, was one of the many Russian engineers who after the October Revolution came to Yugoslavia and worked in the state or municipality construction offices. In order to connect Belgrade with Zemun and the conquered new territory on the left bank of the Sava river, the Master Plan proposed construction of two bridges. Cutting a tunnel beneath the historic core of the city was supposed to facilitate a more functional motor and railway traffic, as well as to help clear the river banks (Максимовић 1980). And although numerous quite advanced ideas presented in the Plan were, unfortunately, never realised, the Plan started some progressive initiatives, clearing a path to their partial realisation in the future.

The Chain Bridge across the Sava (1934) connected Belgrade and Zemun, spanning the eastern and western parts of the Kingdom which had been divided for many centuries and developed under different political and cultural influences.



*The Old Fair Grounds and the Chain Bridge  
across the Sava (photo from 1937)*

Across the river, the complex of the *Belgrade Fair Grounds* (1937) was built, becoming a symbol of a modern city prosperity. The Complex had the Italian, Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, Rumanian, German and Yugoslav pavilions. This modern composition, organized in a rational and functional way, with its dominant central tower, was telling a story about ac-

ceptance of an avant-garde concept of architecture (Vukotić Lazar, Đokić 2006, 34–40).

However, a completely opposite approach was in the central core of the old city, with the government and military buildings. Since the 1880s, Kneza Miloša St. and Nemanjina St. have become a representative “state buildings axis”, the grand avenues with major governmental headquarters, monumental academic architecture of historic styles, designed by architects educated in Austria and Germany. Since the 1920s, new government buildings were built – the Ministry of Finance (1926–28), the Ministry of Forestry and Mining and Ministry of Agriculture and Waters (1925–29), the Military Headquarters, the Ministry of Transport (1932).

128 They represented a style imposed by the state and were designed by the Ministry



*The Ministry of Finance, Nemanjina St.  
1926–28*

Tašmajdan, modelled according to the Gračanica Monastery Church in Kosovo, 14<sup>th</sup> century).

The national style was also implemented in public buildings, mostly on schools (the Trade Academy and the Second Women's Grammar School). One of the major eminent architects to follow the national tradition was Momir Korunović, educated in Belgrade, Prague, Rome and Paris. He create an authentic Yugoslav architectural language, based upon the mediaeval and vernacular tradition (the Post Office 2, 1928–29) (Кадијевић 1997).

Also the third, modern architectural language was developing in blocks of flats. In only two decades, almost the eight thousand new multi-storey buildings were constructed in the city centre. Modernism was particular to private houses and villas in new residential areas at the city outskirts (the Professors' and the Traders' Colonies, and in Neimar, Senjak and Dedinje) (Blagojević 2000; Blagojević 2003).

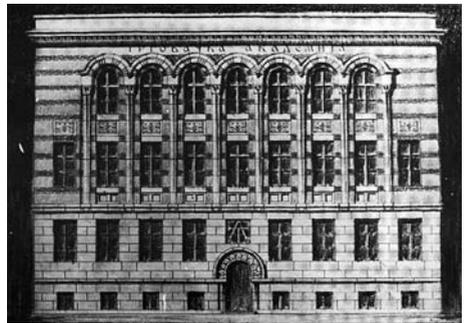
The State Print Shop, a work of architect Dragiša Brašovan (1933–40), is one of the most outstanding examples of Modernism in Serbia. Brašovan studied

of Civil Engineering. Many Russian architects worked there under protection of King Aleksandar (Кадијевић 2002–2003, 131–142).

Apart from the monumental academic style that came about under the influence of European architecture, a national style was being developed, carrying on a tradition of the mediaeval Serbian and Byzantine architecture. It was mostly implemented in church building designs (the St Mark's Church in the



*The St Mark's Church, arch. Branko  
and Petra Krstić, 1930–39*



*The Trade Academy, arch. J. Denić,  
1925*



*The State Print Shop, D. Brašovan, 1933–40. (photo M. Roter Blagojević)*



*The multi-storey building, arch. B. Marinković, 1932*

at the Technical Universes of Budapest and Belgrade, and opened his own practice in Belgrade (Ignjatović 2003).

On April 1941 the capital of Yugoslavia was bombed by the Luftwaffe. The city was heavily destroyed. Unfortunately, Belgrade was also bombed by the Allies in April and May 1944, which also caused significant damage.



*The State Print Shop and Railway bridge after bombarding*

### *Development under the communist regime*

After the Second World War, Belgrade was the capital of the Democratic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, led by the Communist Party and Tito. By 1948, the country claimed allegiance to Soviet Union. After 1948, the Yugoslav political elite chose the “third way” between the communist East and capitalist West. In September 1961, the first Non-Alignment Movement conference was held in Belgrade. The Yugoslavia’s communist regime became one of the leaders of the Non-Alignment Movement and established a close connection with other African and Asian leaders (Nehru, Nasser and Sukarno).

In the first post-war years, the old idea of extending the city to the plains, between the Sava and the Danube, was revived. The new area, called New Belgrade, was planned, and two competitions were announced in 1946 expecting designs for the main government buildings, along with a preliminary plan for the whole New Belgrade. After that, construction of the city was based on the 1948 Belgrade Master plan, under the architect Nikola Dobrović's authority. His idea of a new socialist metropolis – the Great Belgrade – started to be realized. Nikola Dobrović was born in Pecs (Pecuj), the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, educated in Budapest and Prague and had a prosperous practice in Prague and Dubrovnik before the WWII. Since 1944, he was the Head of the Architecture Section of the Yugoslav Ministry of Civil Engineering, the Main architect of Belgrade and the professor at the Faculty of Architecture (since 1948). He has a special place in the history of the capital city urban planning and made a great impact on architecture in the socialist “renewal and construction” period. In addition, he made the first drawing of the New Belgrade construction (Vukotić Lazar 2002).



*The first model of the New Belgrade, 1948, N.Dobrović and collaborator's  
M. Macura and J. Krunić, the Serbian Institute of Urbanism*

In the area of future New Belgrade, stretching from the Old Sava Bridge, as a link with the old town and its centre on Terazije, a broad boulevard was built with the Yugoslav Presidency building (1947–1954) and the Communist Party Central Committee building (1964). These buildings symbolically mark the creation of a new political state centre and the new capital city, outside the old town. The very architecture of the buildings was supposed to reflect the new progressive social and aesthetic trends – the so-called *Socialist Realism* (Vukotić Lazar 2002).

Yet, apart from its political connotation, the New Belgrade urban composition and architecture were primarily based upon the Western influences – the Le Corbusier's ideas on a modern city, integrated in the 1933 Athens Charter. In



*The Yugoslav Presidency building, 1947–1954 and the Communist Party Central Committee building, 1964*

the late 1930s, three Serbian architects worked in Le Corbusier's studio in Paris – Milorad Pantović, Jovan Krunić and Branko Petričić – who after the WWII had successful design and university careers in Belgrade. They were a sort of a conduit for the Western international theory and style to be brought to Yugoslavia. In 1952, there was a great exhibition on Le Corbusier in Belgrade, when an extensive catalogue was printed, which was of a major influence on the city planners and architects in the country (Krunić 1998).

New Belgrade was the place where the mass-production of apartment buildings, home for more than 200,000 people, grouped in 72 area units (named “blocks”), started to be built as early as in 1946. The construction started with voluntary youth actions, arranging the land and covering it with sand. In the area at the end of the representative boulevard, Students Accommodation Pavilions were built for the young people, the future of the state. The New Belgrade was the country's “first socialist city,” and a model for new residential areas all over Yugoslavia (Blagojević 2007).

New satellite suburbs for workers' families started to spring up in new industrial zones, quite distant from the city. The first one was *Železnik*, a new industrial town of 18,000 people. In 1947 and 1948 66 blocks of flats were erected, with about 450 flats, according to a prof. Branko Maksimović project. Although the architects wished to provide humane living conditions for the working class, following modern standards, the housing pavilions were rather modest and uniform in their design, which reflected the hard post-war times when they were built (Генерални урбанистички план 1950).



*The Železnik, a new industrial town*

The period of Social-Realism in Serbian architecture was a dominant one in the major public buildings, continuing the pre-war tradition of merging the elements of academism and modernism, but now adapted to the new communist ideology. Public architecture was totally a reflection of the new age, of the one-party totalitarian establishment taste and ideas. A major example and one of the symbols of the period is the Union Building (1952, arch. D. Petričić) incorporated

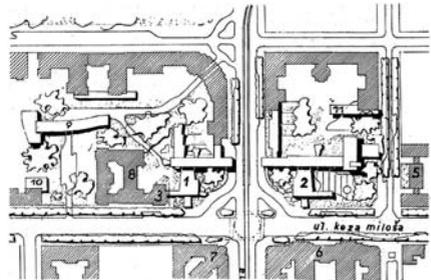
in the old city core of Belgrade, between Terazije and National Assembly building. And in front of the huge building, a new monumental square – symbolically named Marks and Engels Square – was built. The architecture of the square relates to the similar public complexes of communist regimes in the centre of Bucharest, Sofia and Moscow (Krunić 1998).



*The Union Building, arch. D. Petričić, 1952*

As crucial in the post-war architecture was the First Yugoslav Architects and City Planners Conference held in Dubrovnik in 1950. The Conference announced some significant changes and more freedom in architecture, and a unanimous wish of all the participants to break with the so-called social-realism practice. It certainly marked a political break with the Soviet Union and a start of a new state policy. In 1953, the centralised Belgrade Design Bureau was closed, which gave rise to independent studios. For any major projects, public competitions were organised (Referati, 1950).

In the old part of the city, at the intersection of Kneza Miloša St and Nemanjina St, the complex of modern military buildings, known as the „*Dobrović Headquarters*” (1954–1963), were erected. In the exceptionally monumental urban composition, formed by the two buildings, opposite one another, the new Military Headquarter and National Defence Secretariat were housed (Vukotić Lazar, 2002). The main mass of this twin pale red edifice, bent over Nemanjina St, are ascending like a staircase towards the sky. The buildings confirmed that architect Dobrović was one of the key figures in establishing modern architecture not only in Belgrade, but also in the country in general. The 1999 NATO bombardment demolished the complex.



*The project of the new Military Headquarters...*



*... (1) and National Defence Secretariat (2) buildings, arch. Dobrović, 1954–1963*

The National Defence Secretariat building today (photo M. Vukotić Lazar).

The 1960s Belgrade architecture was more liberate and rich. Different Yugoslav versions of the Western International Style and poetical interpretations of the Western mainstream Modernism were expressed on major public buildings – the Museum of Contemporary Art, 1965, arch. I. Raspopović and I. Antić; the Faculty of Philosophy, 1964–74, arch. S. Ličina; and the Belgrade Institute of Urbanism, 1970, arch. B. Jovin (Stojanović, Martinović 1978). These buildings symbolised the final cultural and artistic turn to the West, and from that time progressive architectural ideas from the developed European countries starting to be adopted.



*The Museum of Contemporary Art, arch. I. Raspopović and I. Antić, 1965 (photo M. Roter Blagojević)*

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