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## Thick Descriptions: Socialist Yugoslavia in Construction

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After being denigrated, neglected, or actively destroyed for two decades, the architecture and monumental public art of socialist Yugoslavia have recently drawn an unusual degree of international attention. That attention has manifested itself most obviously through the fascination with massive ‘brutalist’ structures, which have been endlessly displayed across the digital media. Their most famous subset are the Yugoslav antifascist memorials identified as large abstract sculptures, which have become a media phenomenon in their own right, in large part due to the hegemonic agency of Western media. While this kind of attention afforded the once vilified structures unprecedented global visibility, it also filtered their interpretations through the received wisdoms of neoliberal ideology, resulting in what we may call a radical ‘thinning out’ of their meaning, accompanied by a healthy dose of ‘westsplaining.’<sup>1</sup> Throughout the same period, however, a growing amount of scholarship has documented, mapped, and analyzed the spaces and buildings of socialism, assessing them from more

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique of such semantic emptying, see: Vladimir Kulić, “Orientalizing Socialism: Architecture, Media, and the Representations of Eastern Europe,” *Architectural Histories* 6, no. 1 (2018): 7. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.273>. For ‘Yugoslaining’ as a countermovement to ‘westsplaining,’ see: Una di Gallo, Žana Kozomora, Saša Rajšić, Bojana Videkanić, Tamara Vukov, and Sonja Zlatanova, “Thinking and doing in-between,” *The Disorder of Things*, published July 8, 2020, <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2020/07/08/thinking-and-doing-in-between/>, accessed July 18, 2020.



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deeply informed and ideologically self-aware perspectives. The 2018 exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948-1980* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which to some degree reconciled scholarly knowledge and popular visibility, ultimately consecrated socialist Yugoslavia as an important episode in the history of modern architecture.

When we wrote the call for papers for this special issue of *Histories of Postwar Architecture* over a year ago, we started from the premise that the initial inventorying and mapping of the Yugoslav architectural and artistic heritage has been mostly completed. We proposed that the time has come for a more focused scrutiny that would disentangle the evolving webs of meaning woven around the material practices, objects, and spaces. We invited submissions that would engage in what anthropologist Clifford Geertz almost fifty years ago famously termed 'thick descriptions,' i.e., interdisciplinary contextual interpretation aimed at understanding the meaning of social actions, especially where they include interactions between multiple groups with different interests and cultural codes.<sup>2</sup> The method is commonplace in social sciences, but in architectural and art history it is less commonly practiced in a methodologically self-conscious way, even though the production of the built environment unavoidably invites precisely the kind of complex layered interpretations that Geertz proposed. In postwar Yugoslavia, the multiplicity of agencies was especially pronounced, as the country sought to reconcile the fundamental contradictions of modernity all at the same time. Founded upon a socialist revolution, it set out to modernize a predominantly agrarian society without enforcing the extreme class inequalities associated with capitalist development, but also without the extreme top-down centralization of Soviet-style socialism. An intensely multi-ethnic state, it was federalized to give voice to its constituent ethnicities, thus seeking to resolve the 'national question' that had previously provoked fratricidal bloodshed. Finally, as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, it resisted dependence on either of the two global empires of the Cold War, siding instead in solidarity with Africa, Asia, and Latin America in their efforts against neocolonialism. These different axes of emancipation were not pursued in isolation from each other, but they intersected often and at many points, involving numerous social agencies and vectors. To further complicate the matter, during its short life of less than half a century, the Yugoslav socialist system underwent continuous evolution, which means that the metaphorical grounds for the construction of architecture were not only structurally challenging, but also in constant shift. Parsing such complexity is unavoidably demanding, even more so when taking into account the interpretative chasm that opened up in the 1990s with the destruction of the common state and its triple emancipatory project. In that sense, our invitation to scrutinize Yugoslav architecture and art through the lens of thick descriptions was not only ambitious, but also ideologically deeply charged.

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2 See "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

More or less explicitly, ideological connotations hover over all four articles published in this issue of *Histories of Postwar Architecture*, not only because they deal with the material remnants of a defunct political system that from today's perspective seems patently alien. They also manifest themselves in more structural terms, as both positive stimulants that motivate the research—for example the need to understand the reasons for the enduring success of the socialist city amidst pervasive neoliberal orthodoxy—and as impediments, such as the difficulties in piecing the story together caused by the extensive destruction of archives in the post-socialist period. Although sometimes more implicit than we hoped for, the 'thickness' of the resulting case-studies rests precisely on such ideologically driven discrepancies, which help lay bare the material, symbolic, and affective layers accumulated in and around the analyzed physical spaces.

The essays gathered here, however, also reveal that the need to map the relevant large-scale phenomena is far from exhausted. In that respect, Jelica Jovanović opens an important new topic that has hitherto barely registered on the radar of architectural history: the extensive architectural exports from Yugoslavia to Czechoslovakia. Scholars have already established the general contours of the architectural exchanges between the so-called Second and Third Worlds, including Yugoslavia's own engagement in that respect.<sup>3</sup> However, the architectural exchanges within the socialist world itself, especially those that circumvented Moscow, remain only marginally explored. Jovanović charts one such route, haunted by its own discrepancies: despite the shared adherence to state socialism and the Pan-Slavic affiliation, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia were differently aligned in geopolitical terms, the former belonging to the Non-Aligned Movement and the latter to the Soviet sphere. Jovanović's article draws attention to the constantly shifting balance of power between the two countries, but it also begins to uncover a vast network of transnational exchanges that so far have escaped scholarly attention, in part due to the post-socialist destruction of archives in both former Yugoslavia and former Czechoslovakia.

Continuing in a similar direction, Mojca Smode Cvitanović focuses on one particular instance of transnational cooperation, the involvement of a group of Yugoslav architects from Croatia led by Miro Marasović in the development of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology campus in Kumasi, Ghana, in the 1960s. The article draws attention to the intricate interplay between architecture's embeddedness in the socio-political conditions and its claims to professional 'autonomy' by pointing out how non-aligned cooperation resulted in the conceptual and aesthetic continuities between Marasović's work in Yugoslavia and Ghana. The effects of such transfer of architectural knowledge and culture are obvious through the contrast with the previous phases in the development of the KNUST campus, which had been designed by British architects in the mode of 'tropical modernism.' Another important

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<sup>3</sup> Łukasz Stanek's work in that respect is ground-breaking; see his book *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). See also, among others, Dubravka Sekulić, "Energoprojekt in Nigeria," in *Southeastern Europe* 41, no. 2 (2017): 200-229, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04102005>.

contribution of the paper is to consider the ‘technical cooperation’ between Yugoslavia and Ghana as a part of the larger affective category of ‘friendship’ established between the two non-aligned countries, the lingering effects of which were obvious even when the author visited the site fifty years later. The intersection of practical effects and the lived experience of transnational cooperation that Smode Cvitanović reveals contradicts the recent attempts to recast the Yugoslav involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement as empty posturing motivated purely by status-seeking on the international stage.<sup>4</sup>

Lea Horvat shifts our attention to housing, focusing on a large residential neighborhood in Podgorica known as the Blok 5. In her article, Horvat makes an important connection between the Yugoslav self-management, the built space, social relationships, the role of the architect, and the complicated question of financing large-scale building projects. The text’s key lines of inquiry are the ways in which the system of self-management, enacted on the local and national level, attempted to include future residents of housing estates in the design of the living space, and secondly, the complex financing system in which the economic burden of building an apartment building was shared across the social body. In short, the text points to the importance of social, emotional, and financial entanglements when building residential neighborhoods. Finally, Horvat also reveals the core of the relationship between self-managed socialism and architecture, in which the latter was to serve as a device to diminish rather than perpetuate class differences. As lived space, architecture thus sought to transform the affective and ideological structure of everyday life.

Finally, Aleksa Korolija and Cristina Pallini expand the focus to the scale of the entire country, analyzing the iconic Highway of Brotherhood and Unity as a nation-building tool that unified Yugoslavia in concrete and symbolic terms. Traversing four of Yugoslavia’s six constituent republics, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Macedonia, and all but touching the border of a fifth, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the highway was intended not only as a piece of physical infrastructure to stimulate economic growth, but also as social infrastructure that would promote bonds among the different nationalities. It operated on multiple scales, from geographical, to urban and architectural. At the same time, its construction involved highly diverse groups of agents, from volunteer youth brigades, the army, and construction companies, to various professionals, all brought together in a project of pan-national solidarity. In turn, the highway initiated discussions across different disciplines, including planning, architecture, design and art, and it even played an important role in the emergence of the discipline of landscape architecture in Yugoslavia. Amongst the project’s many scales and layers of meaning, the authors especially focus on its ‘poleogenetic’ use, or the generative role it played in the urban development of Yugoslavia’s largest cities, including Belgrade, Zagreb, and Skopje, serving as the backbone for new urban structures, as much as the backbone for the entire country.

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<sup>4</sup> See Jelena Subotić and Srđan Vučetić, “Performing Solidarity: Whiteness and Status-Seeking in the Non-Aligned World,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22 (2019): 722-743.