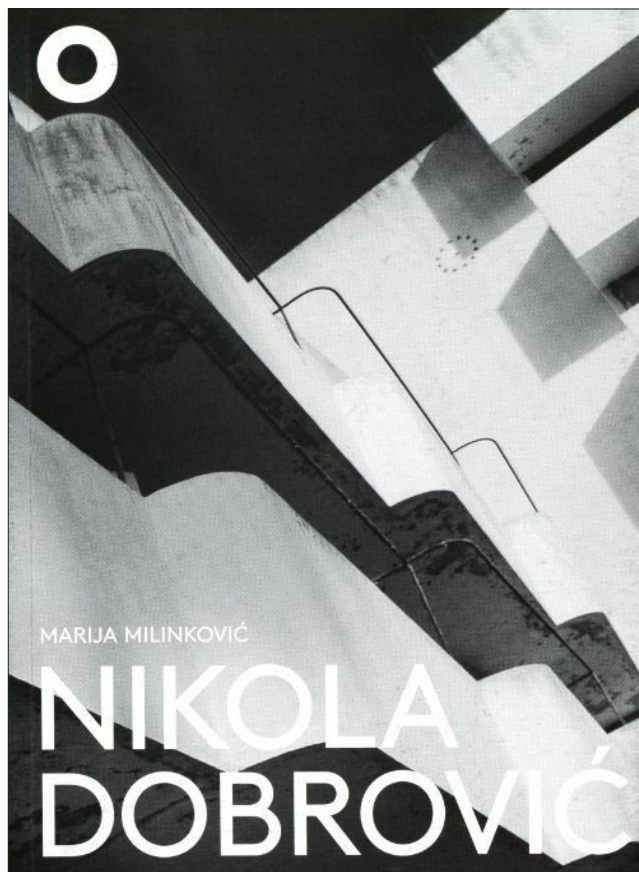


“Nikola Dobrović: The Shifting Modes of Critical Practice in Architecture”

Juljan Beqiri

POLIS University



Author: Marija Milinković
Publisher: The Architecture Observer
Pages: 248
Year: 2022
ISBN: 9789081920773

Few historical eras other than the 20th century have experienced such an inextricable connection between architecture and politics. This celebrated coexistence constantly pushed the architects towards producing an abundance of monumental buildings adding pressure on those who wanted to resist the blending of their work with the zeitgeist of political discourse. In the case of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the emergence of late modernism from the end of the Second World War to the mid-1980s aimed at resisting the dominating forces from the Eastern and Western blocs. Primarily, this was achieved while trying to build a parallel form of socialism. After the 1980s, Yugoslavia's modernist architecture got entangled in a vortex of national and regional narratives, but, however, by then the international currents of 20th century architecture had already penetrated the domain of design. This book elucidates this belle époque of Yugoslavia's architecture by displaying the contribution of Nikola Dobrović, one of the most important figures of modernism in Yugoslavia. Dobrović stood up as a great influencer of the country's post-war architectural identity, and his architecture demonstrated an unambiguous capability to sustain itself in an ever-changing socio-political context.

In “Nikola Dobrović: The Shifting Modes of Critical Practice in Architecture“, Marija Milinković tries to reveal the rationale between architectural design in Yugoslavia and the political settlement that was brought about by 20th century utopianism. By splitting the content into three main chapters, she exposes a theoretical treatise yet historical while laying down an immense number of possibilities of how, through the lenses of Nikola Dobrović, Yugoslavian modernism could have otherwise been. Through the analysis of his work, this mono-

graph sheds light on the importance of maintaining a critical acknowledgement towards modernity, and reveals the necessity to see polemics and reflectivity as leitmotifs of this ongoing confrontation. Finding traces of this 'anti modernity' in the Balkans is rather hard and exceptional given the turbulent history of its 20th century.

As Nikola Dobrović passed through all the phases of purification his artistic language departed from the Euclidean representation of form leading to various expressive choices and experimental approaches used to creating architecture. As Marija Milinković clearly explains it, through an anti-modern response Dobrović refuses to carry on as if nothing has changed, while constantly rejecting the notion of modernity as a set of fixed and unchanging values. Rather, "Dobrović's modernity" appears in an ongoing process of negotiation between nature and society. While the former penetrates through the city landscapes, the latter carefully blends in the context of an evolving political environment. The urbanization, as well as the cultural and geopolitical shifts that post-war modernism put forward were highly influential, but, however, Nikola Dobrović succeeded in proposing a different conception of modern urban planning. Being radically contradictory at base and also by challenging the unquestioned embracing of modernism in Yugoslavia, Dobrović demanded constant progression and vivid transformation. His overall attitude towards modernity exclusively condemned the option of getting rid of modern commodities, in order to get rid of modern conflicts. As a pioneering figure of architecture he does not rest on assuming that society and nature are two separate entities. On the contrary, Nikola Dobrović sees them as distinct things that can be combined towards inevitable transformations, precisely what Bruno Latour later would have called "hybrids".

From the point of view of Milinković, Nikola Dobrović's critique of the Modern Movement advocates the existence of another modernism constantly redefining the order of things. Recognized among the European intellectual avant-garde, his design for New Belgrade radically challenges the Baroque legacy of city planning in Europe, and decisively sees urban and architectural aspects closely related. However, the movement system which connects the critical components of the city is preserved and endorsed, making the building a supporter and accelerator of that movement and in a constant process of "setting space in motion".

As the author clearly emphasized it, Nikola Dobrović proudly maintains the desire to resist the influence of the traditional by exploring the multiplicity of post-war modernist identities and challenges the conventional division between politics and society. Attempts to reconnect them to the natural world through city landscapes react as these distinctions had never existed. His artistic language benefits from the social and natural experimentation of modernism and the problem of repre-

sentation that he encounters derives precisely from his refusal to transcribe Yugoslavian politics through architecture. Eventually, making the case in the Ministry of Defense Headquarters, Nikola Dobrović embraced paradoxes as a way of criticizing modernism.

What Marija Milinković appealingly conveys in this monograph is the fact that Dobrović's objection towards modernism does not necessarily lead him to postmodernism. The analogical reference he uses in Ministry of Defense Headquarters absorbs only the formal aspects of it and the building elegantly succeeds in unveiling the post-war universal emancipatory values. While in the Eastern bloc the embrace of postmodernism was inevitably charged with political meaning, Dobrović's application of postmodern principles took the form of the critical engagement with ideas originating in the West.

In this book, regardless of the highly condensed political context, Nikola Dobrović work appears as neither an architecture of the proletariat nor an architecture for the poor. His consistency towards avoiding the representation of politics through architecture shows that even less was he interested in embracing the easy task of social realism. Clear evidence of democratic urbanism speaks for an idealism genuinely preserved, which also continues to perceive the socialist city freed from ideological meaning but proudly egalitarian and densely collective.

Conceived as a synthesis of the entire Dobrović's portfolio, this monograph showcases the circumstances and conditions in which this work was created. Under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito Yugoslavia aimed at inserting the nonalignment movement also in art and institutional practices, but, however, Nikola Dobrović continued to maintain his originality and kept his work distanced from the ongoing political influences. As Theo van Doesburg also stressed it, Dobrović and Plečnik alike developed their styles precisely thanks to conflicting influences mainly arriving from the West. This process of learning from western sociopolitical aspects made his work highly respectable yet avant-garde for a socialist state.