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*Academy of Athens  
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Preparatory Meeting  
for the Inter-Balkan Congress:

**BALKAN CAPITALS  
FROM THE 19<sup>th</sup> TO THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY.  
URBAN PLANNING AND THE MODERN  
ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE**

**PROCEEDINGS**



Propylaea Hall, University of Athens  
30 Panepistimiou St., Athens, 12.12.2005

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# **Constructing the capital of Yugoslavism: The Identity of Belgrade Architecture, 1904-1941**

by Aleksandar Ignjatović

In exploring the relations between history and society, the recent interpretative strategies of cultural history confirm the idea that each of these relations can be found in the production, reception and consumption of culture. It may be said that society cannot be perceived outside its representation. The central position in the mechanism of constructing a society, its value systems and its ideology belongs to culture which, in Clifford Geertz's terms, is a pattern of sense and meaning expressed by language and other symbolic means of communication. Each aspect of culture –material, visual and certainly architectural– constructs every perceivable bit of knowledge and ideology. Contrary to traditional theories rooted in positivism, which regard culture as a mere reflection of social reality and intellectual ideas, we believe that neither society nor ideology can exist beyond the realm of culture.

Within the context of the Yugoslav ideology labelled “national oneness” (*narodno jedinstvo*) that dominated the political scene in the western Balkans between 1904 and 1941, architecture was an integral part of the idea of Yugoslavism that emerged within the massive political changes in the region. Considering the idea that every representation of ideology through cultural praxis and communication through symbols is its constitutive discourse, one can trace the ideology of Yugoslavism in its visual, architectural and spatial aspects. More specifically, it is possible to interpret the architectural and urban landscape of interwar Belgrade – the political, financial and cultural centre of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (which became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929)– as the constitutive discourse of the ideology of Yugoslavism. Shaping its imagery without allowing architecture to speak in its name would, however, be an oversimplification.

The most fundamental factors in constructing Yugoslavism as an ethnic, national, racial, cultural and political ideology were its visual and architectural representations. In this regard, the architectural monuments built in Belgrade between 1904 and 1941, together with their urban surroundings, could be understood as major representative entities within the topography of Yugoslavism. Thus, it is essential to comprehend the architecture of Belgrade, its creation, background and imposition, not as the adornment of political ideology, but as the very substance of the Yugoslav identity.

Using an interdisciplinary approach to the problem of Yugoslav ideology, and treating it as a historical discursive object caught in a “historical web”, one can assume that no single, coherent ideology existed that could be called “Yugoslav”. Indeed, there were at least three major paradigms within the general knowledge of the desired structure of the Yugoslav nation, and consequently, three main paradigms of its representation. Each paradigm had a number of functions in the establishment of Yugoslav identity in the social field, but none of them was exclusive or hegemonic; they functioned simultaneously through different aspects of culture.

The first paradigm could be called primordial, because it comprised the concept of the Yugoslav nation as a primeval, authentic and autonomous phenomenon. It denied the national, ethnic and cultural diversities of each South Slavic identity (namely Serbian, Croatian and Slovene) and therefore any cultural difference was considered minor, artificial and imposed by “foreign” influences, whether from the East or West. In this view, the Yugoslav nation was perceived as integral and homogenous, so the main task of ideology was to cast its image in such a way as to confirm these assumptions and make visible the Yugoslav quest for primal origins. In terms of Belgrade architecture, this image was embedded in the contextual settings that alluded to bearers of primordial Yugoslavism — either the royal dynasty of Karadjordjević (which was supposedly

linked to the common people and, contrary to other Balkan royal families, considered as vernacular and “national”), or invented Yugoslav traditions (such as the cult of the unknown national hero). Because the imagined Yugoslav identity was closely connected to the folk culture, and as a rule related to natural surroundings, its architectural construction always connoted vernacular building types and congenial environments. Such constructions were always imagined to resemble the natural settings that were closely related to built structures. In this way, Belgrade was marked by artificial landscapes as a proper ambience for the ideal primordial architecture. One significant example is the complex of palaces built for the Yugoslav royal family in the Belgrade suburb of Dedinje between 1922 and 1934. The main palace, created by several architects, was designed in a style resembling the traditional Balkan mansion that can be found throughout the peninsula. Although it was commonly known as “the Oriental house”, this type was interpreted as originally Yugoslav and had a significant position in the architectural construction of the primordial Yugoslav identity. The “national” character of the new royal settlement was confirmed by its surroundings that were cultivated in order to resemble the forested home of an imagined original Yugoslav.

A similar case was the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Avala Hill, in the immediate vicinity of Belgrade. It was designed by Ivan Meztrović, a famous Croatian sculptor and one of the artists beloved by King Aleksandar Karadjordjević I. The universal architectural semiotics of the Tomb were blurred by caryatids dressed in folk costumes alluding to the different Yugoslav regions, while their bodies and overall appearance represent the typical body norm image of an ideal Yugoslav race, otherwise confirmed by various scientific accounts of the time. The whole complex, which was erected between 1934 and 1938, was artificially wooded as the natural environment of the fallen Serbian soldier who was ritually transformed into the Yugoslav national hero. As in the case of Dedinje, such an environment could have served as a specific Yugoslav ethnoscape, to use Anthony Smith’s term. These green spaces in Belgrade

topography, along with their unique architectural landmarks, were vital backdrops in the ideological map of Yugoslavism.

The second paradigm could be called syncretic, because it was rooted in the need for the reconciliation and unification of the different ethnic, cultural and regional traditions that came under the Yugoslav aegis in 1918. The Yugoslav identity was conceived as a synthesis of “historical” (i.e. Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian) particularities and of different “regional” characters. In any event, the visual culture and architecture were the most significant sources in constructing an image of the Yugoslav nation that was less exclusive and more tolerant of diversity. It is important to note that the main official representations of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia can easily be understood by such a paradigm. There was, for example, the official state coat of arms comprising the three symbols of the Serbian, Croatian and Slovene ethnic communities, the Yugoslav national anthem compiled from three “national” anthems, and even the official state language, which was named “Serbo-Croato-Slovenian”. Therefore, it is not surprising that some of the central state-financed buildings constructed then were designed according to the same formula. Since the architectural historiography of the time had already “nationalised” the historical architectural heritage, which was explained as the “national” Serbian or Croatian style, one could easily merge them, creating the unified, composite Yugoslav architecture. Basically, the architectural formula was made by synthesising diverse elements of Byzantine and Romanesque architecture, regarded as essentially Eastern and Western respectively. Such architectural styles were functional but stereotyped markers of Serbian (Orthodox) and Croatian or Slovenian (Catholic) identities, and their prevalence was more than welcome in the ideology of syncretic Yugoslavism. The most prolific example of such a neo-historicist approach was certainly the bridge dedicated to King Aleksandar I, which spanned the river Sava, connecting historical Serbian and Croatian territories. In this context, the use of such a Byzantine-Romanesque idiom signified both the diversity of Yugoslav culture and the unity of the Yugoslav nation. The bridge, designed by the migrant Russian

architect Nikola Krasnov, was completed in 1934, just a month after the King was assassinated in Marseilles, and stood until 1941 as a key political monument in the centre of the Yugoslav capital. Apart from this example, there were several grand structures in downtown Belgrade that followed the same syncretic logic. The Post Office near the Central Railway Station at Wilson Square (1929) and the Ministry of Post, Telegraph and Telephone (1925-1930) –both works by the prolific architect Momir Korunović– were the most spectacular examples of architectural expression that allude not only to diverse historical sources, but to different vernacular traditions.

Finally, the third paradigm could be called universalist, since it comprises the pan-ethnic ideology, which considers the Yugoslav nation, culture and state as a legitimate part of Western civilization. The central perspective of this ideology was the idea of a solid, stable national culture that superseded local, regional and ethnic traditions. Representing Yugoslav identity as intrinsically European, based on a common Greco-Roman and Christian cultural heritage and rooted in the modern world of the West, it had a twofold aim. On the one hand, it was an attempt to establish a coherent, unifying model of a supranational identity and, on the other, an effort to diminish the stereotypes that marked Yugoslavia as a European newcomer. Architectural representations within this ideological perspective were focused on the formal historicist approach, which was based on neo-Renaissance, neo-Baroque and neo-Classicism and their miscellaneous eclectic combinations. Most of the state administration buildings erected in Belgrade, such as the New Royal Palace in the city centre, the Houses of Parliament, and many head offices, were styled in this manner. What is particularly interesting is the fact that all these grand and monumental edifices were located on the same axis that connected the core of the city to Topcider Hill and the Royal Palaces in Dedinje. This was the main state axis, as well as the central architectural representation of the new Yugoslav order that appeared in 1918. Then Belgrade became the capital of a state that was several times larger than pre-war Serbia. Since rigid, central regime policy needed its symbolic

representation, Western historical styles were the perfect formula for its embodiment, especially appropriate when gathered along one representative axis.

These paradigms were not exclusive, but concurrent with one another. Each was structured as a coherent ideological perspective that expressed Yugoslav identity by different architectural means. All paradigms were perceivable not solely in political terms, but also in the architectural and urban topography of Belgrade, which was crucial for representing the idea of Yugoslavism. In this way, one might assert that symbolism prevailed over utility: architecture was more important as the substance of ideology than as the background for its function.

Finally, these paradigms of Yugoslav identity can be understood as models for constructing the single and multinational, cultural and social identities that correspond to the broader context of the Balkans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were short-lived, but interesting models for imagining abstractions such as a nation, a culture and a state.

**CONSTRUCTING THE CAPITAL OF YUGOSLAVISM:  
THE IDENTITY OF BELGRADE ARCHITECTURE, 1904-1941  
by Aleksandar Ignjatović**

Within the context of the Yugoslav ideology labelled "national oneness" (*narodno jedinstvo*) that dominated the political scene in the Western Balkans between 1904 and 1941, architecture was an integral part of the dynamic processes of representing the idea of Yugoslavism that emerged from the turbulent global political changes in the region. As the centre of political and cultural influences and economic support for the Yugoslav idea, Belgrade was constantly in a state of transition, not only from the capital of the Kingdom of Serbia to the major administrative centre of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, but also to the stronghold of the Yugoslav idea itself. Within that process architecture was established as an essential substance of Yugoslav identity –ethnic, national, racial, cultural and political- whilst its major representative buildings powerfully shaped the visual identity of Belgrade.

Concerning the concept that corresponds to general ideological focus and particular cultural context of the time, the process of constructing and representing the idea of the Yugoslav nation, culture and state can be generally understood through three cultural paradigms, reflecting the three major ideas that shaped Yugoslavism as an ideology. The first one was *primordialism*, which concerns the idea of a primeval, single and integral, authentic and autonomous Yugoslav nation, race, ethnic and culture; the next one was *syncretism*, which is based on the concept of Yugoslavism as a synthesis of tribe and nation, ethnic, cultural, or regional traditions and identities. The third paradigm –*universalism*– indicated the concept of the Yugoslav nation and state as a legitimate and intrinsic member of the European cultural community.

The architectural derivations of these broader cultural paradigms could be seen

in the political, urban and cultural topography of Belgrade, and were important for representing the very idea of Yugoslavism. Moreover, as the models of constructing a single and multi-national, cultural and social identity, these corresponded to the broader context of the Balkan historical and cultural milieu in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a short-lived, but interesting example of casting images of cultural abstractions such as a nation, a culture and a state.

## Belgrade



D. Brašovan, *Royal Air Force Headquarters*, Zemun, 1935.



M. Zloković, *FIAT Office Buildings and Showroom*, now *Jugoauto*, 1940.



N. Dobrović, *Ministry of Defence Headquarters*, 1954-1963.