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The Belgrade Spring

Many congratulations to the Salon of Architecture on its thirty-first spring! Staying on course for so long, in this part of the world and in such turbulent times, has not been an easy task.

Over the years the Salon has grown in stature to become one of the prominent institutions on Serbia's cultural scene. Both its commitment and longevity are exemplary. The Salon has become a stage through which the architectural profession communicates within itself as well as with the society it serves. At the outset, its role was to inform professionals about 'architecture in progress'. The Salon's longevity, however, made it an invaluable record keeping tool. Also worthy of mention is its role as one of the few vehicles for promoting young architects.

No seismic changes take place in the Salon's work; the quality of exhibits varies from one year to the next (reflecting reality); the Jury's decisions are criticised; new generations announce their arrival... And this is a good thing – changes are not essential for institutions of this kind. The essence is in endurance. Opening up to the world should also be welcomed as it will certainly, if nothing else, add more interest to the exhibition. Measured in scale of human life-time, the Salon is only now reaching maturity. Let us hope the best is yet to come.

Unfortunately, another test of stamina is coming our way; the crisis sweeping over the West is spreading to this region threatening to reverse positive trends in architecture we've been witnessing in the past few years.

Architecture and Fashion

Quite an interesting exhibition under the title *Skin + Bones - Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture* was held a few months ago in London. Parallel analysis of trends in haute couture and avant-garde architecture's envelopes led to a conclusion that the two are closer to each other than ever before. Architecture is rarely perceived in this context among professional, here and anywhere else. Architects are not keen on being placed in the same group with 'inferior types' of creativity. Comparisons with fashion seem inappropriate, even humiliating. Isn't architecture as a discipline infinitely superior to fashion? Maybe... But, perhaps it's not as simple as that...

A view is gradually taking hold in the West that the role of an architect has been reduced to a façade designer. The ultimate aim of the constantly growing population of *Design&Build* oriented clients and contractors are to build identical buildings – that would yield by far the best return. To their regret, that is not (yet) acceptable on the open market. The market still demands cosmetic changes. What is happening *inside* the buildings however, appears to be a *fait accompli*. Apartment layouts have not changed much in the past half a century, and neither have those of schools or office buildings. I can say from my personal experience that the major commercial investors have their own 'typical' apartment layouts which their architects are obliged to use. These apartments are currently selling well, why experiment? Construction systems and building technology do not change overnight either. The only element of the building still open to change seems to be the façade!

Viewed from this angle, I cannot but conclude from my frequent visits to Belgrade that after a number of years architectural production is once again becoming similar to that in the West. The upward trends are noticeable in both numbers and scale of new buildings. Increasingly sophisticated materiality and detailing are also apparent. There are virtually no materials or cladding systems used in the West that have not been utilized here.

New forms and uses are becoming part of our reality. Massive shopping centres fill entire city blocks, apartment buildings are growing too big for their plots, projections and cantilevers are gradually consuming the sky in central Belgrade...

I am not trying to be sentimental here, just observing. In my view, it is better to have buildings that are outgrowing their plots than to be surrounded by shanties. It is better to have hyper stores *and* the flea market, than just the flea market. It is better to have a parking space in your apartment building than to park your car two streets away.

Novelty was never received with open arms in this part of the world. At best it was received with caution. Wise men preach that no inspiration should be sought elsewhere. One should stick to tried and tested 'home brewed' values. I have to confess, I always had difficulties in defining these. If it meant applying traditional ornamentation to modern buildings, I think it should best be avoided. All the major achievements – in architecture, urban planning as well

as in all other fields – occurred in periods of intense interaction with ‘the world’. Our civilisation slowly drifts towards global, with a certain amount of local fleur, of course. Bear the worldwide catastrophe; it would be difficult to imagine that trend reversing.

In considering the quality of new architectural production, the 90:10 formula can be applied in Serbia just as well as in England, or Japan. The ‘grey,’ mediocre, output represents 90%, and the remaining 10% can be called *architecture with aspiration*.

‘Grey’ architecture, a direct product of the cultural and economic present, is responsible for our first impression of a city or a country. In my view our reality at this point in time can be defined as; ‘A former socialist country at an early stage of capitalism, developing a dysfunctional urban planning system syndrome. But, below the surface, visible only for those in the know, a whole host of positive things are happening. As a member of ‘in the know’ club I am noticing significant improvements when compared to a disastrous decline in the 1990s. Generally, the picture in the ‘grey’ group is becoming brighter. It is evident that there is more investment in the infrastructure too. Things are definitely getting better.

The aspiring group is also quite interesting. A number of projects have been built that show little heed for frugality. Nevertheless, the general situation here is also improving. Slowly but surely, once again, new buildings fully on a par with those in much more developed countries are springing up. Unfortunately, aspiration easily slips into pretence. Talking in fashion terms: one should not wear in the street all that was shown on the catwalks.

Interestingly, a major problem for new architecture is the ubiquitous dilapidation of buildings, streets, sidewalks, green areas, playgrounds, infrastructure... Epitome of gloom. Whatever one builds in such a milieu appears unbearably egocentric, arrogant, some times even shocking.

Good architecture is universally a rare occurrence. It would be unrealistic for hundreds of good designs to emerge at the current volume of output. Ten good buildings a year should be counted as a success. In the past few years we had much more than that!

Also encouraging is that a ‘young’ generation of architects has become very active at the time when the ‘middle-aged’ one is reaching its maturity. As far as the ‘older’ generations - things are more or less constant. Those who worked well continue to do so. There is definitely ample of potential in our profession at the moment and I really look forward to seeing it turned into reality.