RETURN TO *SMALL URBANISM:* A DISCUSSION ON CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE IN THE LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the need for *small urbanism* in contemporary architectural discourse and its potential models of application, drawing on the ideas and principles of the literary work of Bogdan Bogdanović, a prominent Yugoslav architect, writer and philosopher. Bogdanović's theory of *small urbanism*, formulated in the mid-20th century as a response to the dominant rationalist approach to urbanization in Yugoslavia, emphasizes the emotional potentials of the city and the discovery of urban space meanings based on human scale, creativity, and a harmonious relationship with nature. These concepts, which include sustainability and community participation, illuminate a new role for architecture in serving society through small yet meaningful changes in urban spaces. The aim of the paper is to analyse case studies of specific urban locations in Belgrade in order to examine how Bogdanović's theory of *small urbanism*, grounded in *poetic rebellion,* can provide answers to the key challenges of the contemporary architectural landscape and urban life.

KEYWORDS _ *Urban design, Landscape, Contemporary architecture, Small urbanism, Bogdan Bogdanović*

INTRODUCTION / ON CITY THROUGH THE EYES OF BOGDAN BOGDANOVIĆ

This work represents a theoretical contribution to the study of the complex, primarily cultural and semiotic relationship between humans and the city, returning to the contemporary focus of small urbanism, which was advocated by the architect and professor Bogdan Bogdanović in the mid-1950s. Although his name is most often associated with the work of Yugoslav memorial architecture, for a comprehensive understanding of Bogdanović's work, the theme of the city is almost equally important, and it also makes up the largest part of his literary work. Bogdanović's view of the city was clearly opposed to the then dominant rationalism of modernist urbanism - Bogdanović understood the city as a broader and layered cultural phenomenon and as a living scenography of the chronicle of human existence in a certain space, and in this sense, the key place of the city is as an essential place of human identification and its spatial inscription in the chronicle of civilization.

Bogdanović's attitude towards urbanism can be classified between strongly anti-modernist and deeply humanistic. For him, an exclusively rational, engineering approach to shaping cities was unacceptable and as such represented a risk for, in his opinion, the preservation of the essential essence of the city. He believed that an architect must possess diverse knowledge in the field of humanities, that he must be a philosopher and an *anthropologist of space* (Kulić, 2024) - someone who thinks about how people live in the city, how they experience it, preserve and defend it. In this light, Bogdanović does not see the city as a functional creation, but first of all as a place of identification and emotional inscription. The concept of *small urbanism*, which he developed as a critique of the then growing "modernist megalomania", relies on Bogdanović's characteristic poetic and deeply romanticized view of architecture and the city.

Belgrade, especially New Belgrade, was under the attack of the growing rationalism of the urbanization of Yugoslavia in the 1950s, with the construction of large-scale blocks with the aspiration that Belgrade, at any cost, would grow into a city that would have all the characteristics of a modern metropolis. In contrast to modern metropolises where pedestrians have been replaced by cars and huge areas filled with buildings, Bogdanović argued for a city on a human scale. Bogdanović especially emphasized the importance of the example of the vision of urbanism of Gordon Cullen, the famous British architect, who wrote that the human being needs something more from the outer space than just a gallery of pictures, he is looking for drama that could be released all around him from the ground, sky, houses, trees, all through the art of arrangement. (Cullen, 2007)

This research seeks to affirm and compare the importance of Bogdanović's theory of *small urbanism* in contemporary architectural and urban discourse. The focus is on the analysis of the fundamental postulates of his opinion, with special reference to his texts about the city through the reflection of the contemporary context. The paper examines the possibilities of applying this approach in the modern context - at a time when the physical, sensory, and even spiritual connection between man and the city is seriously damaged.

Through the reinterpretation of Bogdanović's poetics of the city, the question remains: is everything that Bogdanović wrote and warned about more than half a century ago exactly what happened to the modern city and what it still lacks today?

THE MODERN CITY AND THE "CIVILIZATION OF GLOSSOLALIA"

In his lecture to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, a full decade before the fall of the Berlin Wall, which he later published as part of a chapter with the poetic title *For the City or Against the City*, Bogdanović almost prophetically points out the problems of the modern city and the mass migration of the poor population to Western metropolises and expresses the very essence of his vision of the future city: "*I do not at all reject the possibility that the generation of tomorrow will somehow have to live outside the traditional framework of the urban environment as we still understand it today. But how*

what will that life look like in the murky horizons of a concreted lost city, and even in conditions of less energy wealth, or even in conditions of energy poverty, and how that way of life will be reflected in the sensitive inner mirror of man, for that, I confess, I have no other scenario in my head than what I have already said about the "civilization of glossolalia". (Bogdanović, 2008)

Today, almost half a century later, in a completely different system, Bogdanović's quip "civilization of glossolalia" can be used equally topically. In a semiotic sense, *glossolalia* means speech without meaning — it sounds like language but is not understandable; it produces the impression of expression, but without content. This is exactly the speech pattern of contemporary global architecture: rich in recognizable aesthetic signals of the "global city" and overly stylized renderings, but devoid of real spatial, historical and cultural rootedness.

It is a city that "talks" but doesn't say nor mean anything. Instead of communicating with the context, it projects an *architectural glossolalia*. Its symbols are mere ordered slogans of modernity, which do not originate from the memory of space, but from the algorithmically plastic language of the global market.

SMALL URBANISM OF BOGDAN BOGDANOVIĆ

During the fifties of the 20th century, Bogdanović intensively wrote for the Yugoslav press. As a logical product of writing those articles, in 1958, he published his first book, "Mali urbanizam", created as a collection of published essays. Most of the collected essays were published in the newspaper "Borba" as part of a permanent weekly column under the title with the same name - Small Urbanism. In those articles, Bogdanović openly criticized the heartlessness and engineering formalism in city planning, warning that the humane experience of space is lost in the network of grids, blocks and standardized functional zones. Along with them, the book also contains several articles written in "Politika", "NIN", "Književne novine" and "Delo" which correspond to the theme and character of initial *small urbanism*.

The book reacts to specific everyday situations and urban problems mainly dealing with places that are often neglected in the urban discourse of that time. *Small urbanism* thus becomes a philosophy of urban life that places human in the centre as a thinking, sensory and symbolic being. The continued relevance of the book is further evidenced by the fact that, at the time of writing (2025), it has undergone its first reprint and is back in bookstores.

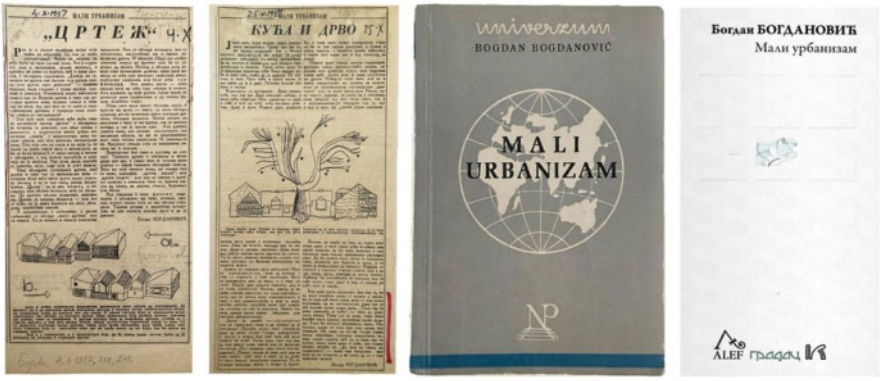

Figure 1: From left to right: Small Urbanism articles (in Borba, Nr. 273 and 294, 1957), and Bogdanović's first published book – Small Urbanism (Narodna Prosvjeta, 1958), republished Small Urbanism book (Gradac, 2025) – Private archive of the author.

Bogdan Bogdanović points out that the term small urbanism itself is a kind of ironic response to the dominant *"big urbanism"* of that time, a massive, schematized urban plans that ignored the local context and culture of the space. It originated from the Italian term architettura minore, which, as

Bogdanović emphasizes, represents a specific type of architecture that is minor and unrecognized. (Bogdanović, 1958) It must be understood that "small" in this context does not mean something insignificant or inferior, but above all something close, humane, immediate and sensitive. In this sense, "small" is Bogdanović's ethical and aesthetic attitude. It opposes megalomania, ideological monumentality and the loss of man in space, rejects the prevailing modernist narrative of rationality, uniform universality in urbanism, instead advocating the need for human moderation, spatial intimacy and the strengthening of intimate and almost invisible cultural-historical and symbolic values of the city. In the period when he writes this book, Bogdanović publicly opposes the then dominant modernist urban planning practice in Yugoslavia, considering that such an approach not only ignores the symbolism and cultural continuity of the place, but also threatens the possibility of the survival of the true spiritual life of the city. Speaking of the city, he writes in language rich in metaphors, alluding to the city as a spiritual and mythological construct. It is clear that for Bogdanović, urban planning is not only a technical but, above all, a cultural discipline.

ARCHITECTURE IN THE LANDSCAPE AS THE ESSENCE OF SMALL URBANISM

In the book "Mali urbanizam", one of the key chapters for understanding Bogdanović's approach to the city concerns the relationship between architecture and landscape and that it is by no means only the outer framework of architecture, but its essential part. (Bogdanović, 1958) Elements that were often considered peripheral in the architectural design - roofs, chimneys, fountains, trees, fences and even advertisements - stand out. However, in Bogdanović's reading, they are singled out as key points in which the drama of the city unfolds and already become a kind of dictionary of the urban landscape. Bogdanović's landscape is not neutral, on the contrary, it is the bearer of the narrative. In this sense, *architecture in the landscape* should act as a storyteller: to talk about the layers of time, about places and people, about their lives and everyday life. Thus, small urbanism can be said to be the art of storytelling through space, which establishes the rule that any further architectural intervention must respect, confirm and build on the existing narrative of the place. Bogdanović writes about the need to place *the new* in the city in dialogue with *the old*, not in conflict. As a particularly absurd situation, Bogdanović sees the fact that architects are only inclined to preserve selected historically particularly important buildings by elevating them to the pedestal of a museum exhibit and thus denying them the right to be understood and seen as living things and an inseparable part of the city as a whole. (Bogdanović, 1958)

Through reading the landscape, Bogdanović enters deep into the sphere of collective memory. He does not advocate for conservation as passive preservation, but for active memory of space through symbols, signs, meeting places, the city must create conditions for emotional identification. For Bogdanović, meaning was neither fixed nor inherent in urban space, but ultimately socially constructed. (Kulić, 2024) This is precisely where the human power of small urbanism is reflected.

BELGRADE AND SMALL URBANISM TODAY

In the very foundations of the poetic reflection of Bogdanović's small urbanism, a deep, almost obsessive fascination with Belgrade can be found.

It can be said that this fascination is characteristic for the largest part of Bogdanović's literary work. The circle of Belgrade surrealists, led by Marko Ristić, a poet and theoretician, with whom Bogdanović maintained close contacts, had a particularly significant influence on his writing, daydreaming about the city and the beauties of urban life. Speaking about Belgrade, Ristić says: *"The beauty of Belgrade is the beauty of a living being"*. (Ristić, 1985, pg. 68) It seems that the essence of Bogdanović's vision and dreams about Belgrade is contained in that sentence. Surrealist vision of Belgrade, present especially in his early texts, remains the permanent basis of his entire approach to the city: Belgrade

is not a rationally structured body, but a living organism of entangled myths, dreams and deep spatial-semiotic layers. As Bogdanović himself used to say: *"I never left Belgrade in my dreams... Wherever I went and wherever a dream found me, I always return to well-known and dear shores at night, climb high and steep slopes, jump over creaky walls and look forward to newly discovered storefronts while hurrying somewhere along roughly paved and winding streets... There are people so obsessed with their city. Or it would be better to say that there are such cities that are obsessed with its residents."* (Bogdanović, 1976)

Throughout modern Serbian history, Belgrade has been shaped as a kind of *national polis* (Dogo & Pitasio, 2024, pg. 63) - a space of political representation and symbolic dominance, as it ironically turns out, of a historically changing national identity. However, the contemporary challenges of urban development constantly open up the need for a new reading of the city. In this context, Belgrade today and Belgrade in the 1950s can serve as a relevant comparative training ground for examining the potential of actuality, application, possible success, and, in general, the presence of the theory of small urbanism. In today's Belgrade, although the city has gone through a series of waves of "rebuilding" to the last neoliberal one, the memory of the space can still be read in fragments. Therefore, potential interventions of *small urbanism* would not imply significant transformations, but rather consider careful "treatment" of the existing. When we talk about the further development of the city and "new" cities in the modern moment in relation to the "old" ones, we must understand that by this we mean precisely the possibilities of hybridization of cities and city elements and the possibility of symbiosis and coexistence of its old and new assets with depreciation and slowing down of the transition process itself. In this sense, the appropriateness of the city's tradition should not be sought in the consistency of historical, stylistic or architectural belonging to the regional or traditional architecture, but only as a possible contribution to the strengthening of authentic values and the affirmation of the existing character, atmosphere and identity. To design in the *spirit of small urbanism* would therefore imply that the combination of old and new in the design approach can survive only if it is gradually combined in a *new way*, and this means that it is necessary to modernize and adapt the architectural language to *the moment*, so long as certain key meanings don't lose their strength and authenticity. Tradition should affirm and encourage what is new in the city, but only in the way that tradition is understood precisely as a link between cultures and styles. In this way, tradition should be seen as a living force, giving new life to a given space. This whole process, understood as a dialectical interplay, the interweaving of the imaginative, surreal and avant-garde with the contemporary and traditional, becomes a condition for architecture itself and its role in the city to survive.

By reading and interpreting the selected locations that Bogdanović writes about and which he perceived as areas of special urban sensitivity, from micro-locations such as the fountain between Old and New Palace (Stari and Novi Dvor), the courtyard of the Rectorate, the arrangement of the gate and elevation of the Student Park, small interventions on Belgrade's fences and facades of the periphery, the installation of neon signs, over the topic of positioning monuments in the city, all the way to the still extremely topical issues of the arrangement of Nikola Pašić Square (the former Marx and Engels Square) and the solution of bringing Belgrade to its shores, continuities and discontinuities in Belgrade's urban consciousness can be examined. In the way Bogdanović writes about the need for active participation of citizens in solving these urban issues and the attention that is paid to their way and the need for the perception of space, a clear and for that time extremely advanced idea about the affirmation of citizens as participants in urban development can be seen.

It is particularly impressive that the largest number of locations that Bogdanović singles out in his essays remain "unsolved" to this day. Such is the case with the space between the buildings of the Old and New Palaces, which, by removing the previous building destroyed by bombs in the Second World War, is intended to be enriched with a fountain. Bogdanović himself describes that space as "rather undefined" and notes that by building a fountain with this very simple solution, the fountain would "become the central motif" and sufficiently obscure the view of the Assembly building, which from that angle, due to the unevenness of the terrain, looks completely buried in the ground. (Bogdanović, 1958)

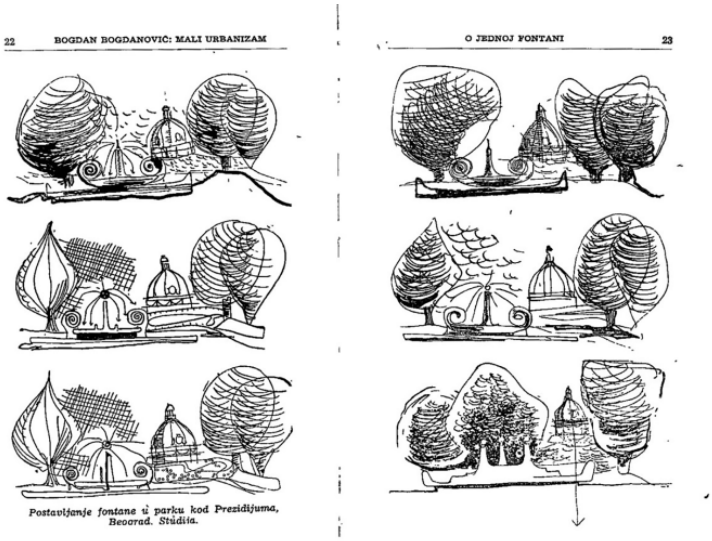

Figure 2: Bogdanović's sketches showing fountain concepts in Pionirski Park of Belgrade, published in Small Urbanism (Narodna Prosvjeta, 1958; pg. 22-23) – Private archive of the author.

One of the most important topics for Bogdanović is the area of Belgrade's river banks and the arrangement of the city quay. He promotes the idea of green promenades along both Belgrade banks of the Sava, as well as the idea of using rivers for city transport. (Bogdanović, 1958) Such almost romantic concept of a "river-boulevard" that would connect all of Belgrade's coasts and thereby solve traffic jams is particularly interesting. In each of the series of ideas related to water that Bogdanović comments on, the essence is clear - the Belgrade river banks belong to the citizens of Belgrade. Spatially speaking, the city would slowly descend to its shores through green zones and cultural facilities. In this context, today's megalomaniac intentions through projects like "Belgrade Waterfront", which are conceived as symbols of "modernization and global recognition", represent nothing more than a discursive and physical break with the organic development of the city. "Belgrade Waterfront", inauthentic and imposed, imported from another - "non-Belgrade" culture, without any sensibility for the rhythms of the city and the needs of the existing urban structure, does not lower the city to the river, but essentially isolates it. The river here becomes just a backdrop in which the city does not "listen" to the landscape, but imposes itself on it and tries to subdue it, creating exactly the *architectural glassolalia* that Bogdanović warned against.

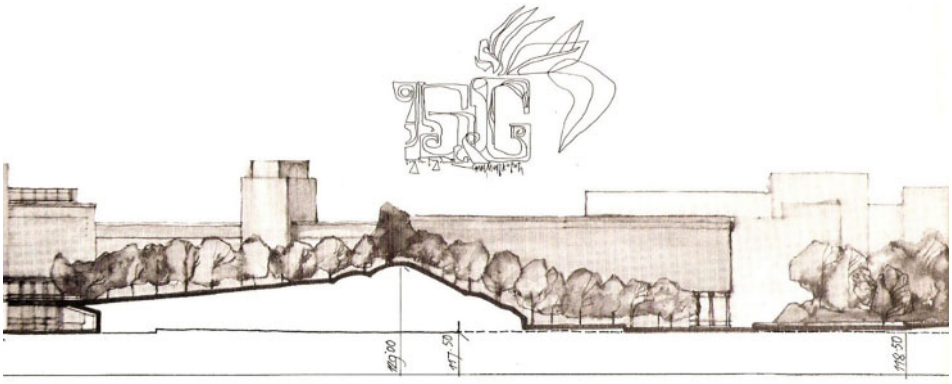

Figure 3: Bogdanović's sketch showing his concept for Nikola Pašić square (then called Marx and Engels square) – (source: Arhitektonska enciklopedija Beograda)

Figure 4: The transformation of Nikola Pašić square throughout history – (source: spomenikdatabase.org)

CONCLUSION

In the modern context, an architect, urban planner, and even an ordinary citizen, often finds himself in the role of "the defender of space". It is no longer just a professional or aesthetic struggle, but a defence against oblivion, against commercial exploitation and symbolic violence against places that are carriers of the city's collective memory. Bogdanović already hinted at this in the middle of the last century, writing about the city as a sacred space that must be protected and not colonized by modern cheap "aestheticism". According to architect and architectural historian Vladimir Kulić, Bogdanović's attempt to rehumanize urbanism offered an original vision that first of all emphasized the importance of the socially constructed meaning of urban space. Without it, the city becomes formless and meaningless, undermining the bonds of community, which ultimately leads to its downfall. (Kulić, 2024)

Today, when the city is undoubtedly threatened by the appearance of *architectural glossolalia*, the concept of *small urbanism* can serve as an essential educational and pedagogical tool for the involvement of architects and the participation of citizens in the active defence of the city's ambient, cultural and historical values, which Bogdanović cited as the key. That defence implies careful listening, understanding the layers and quietly inserting the new into the already existing ones, with the awareness that every move in space leaves a mark - spatial, cultural, ethical and aesthetical. *Small urbanism* thus goes beyond the framework of theory into a clear attitude of resistance and the discipline of urban empathy in today's time when the architect is almost exclusively called upon to "defend space".

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