

THEORY AND PRACTICE OF CRITICAL REGIONALISM IN THE YUGOSLAV REGIONS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY: *ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN PLACE, CULTURE AND FORM*

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ABSTRACT

The paper represents a theoretical contribution to the aesthetic reading and understanding of architecture as a semiotic and sign system of elements within the architectural cultural space of Yugoslavia (1950–1980), as well as its role in shaping the identity of place and community through the comparative analysis of two structures whose architecture reflects the Yugoslav ideological code. The study will analyze the National Library building in Priština, designed by architect Andrija Mutnjaković and the National Library building in Belgrade, designed by architect Ivo Kurtović.

One of the aims of this paper is to highlight the direct connection between architectural form, place, and culture, as well as their mutual interdependence. Additionally, the paper will identify and explain in detail the sign elements of postmodern theories that were applied in the architecture of that period, with the clear aim of forming a new identity. The study examines the development and influence of a new architectural language, which, despite the newly-formed and existing cultural-geographical context and ideological influence, seeks to create multiculturalism by balancing elements of tradition and modernity.

KEYWORDS _ *Aesthetic reading, semiology, identity and place, architectural language, Yugoslavism*

INTRODUCTION

This work represents a theoretical contribution to the study of aesthetic means of communication in architecture, with an emphasis on the design process and the use of a sign system of elements that were employed in cultural buildings across Yugoslavia during a time of strong ideological influence. By pointing to the use and reinterpretation of traditional symbols and elements of the Balkan region, one of the goals is to identify a new architectural language that emerges within a new socio-political context, guided by a clear vision of creating, and affirming, a Yugoslav identity characterized by multiculturalism, supranationality, and humanism. In this light, the work contributes to a better understanding of the prevailing phenomena, theories, and approaches of the time, such as critical regionalism and poststructuralism - two fundamentally different approaches, both of which found application in architectural and artistic practice during the second half of the 20th century. The study examines the influences and context that shaped architectural positioning and experimental design, ranging from general concepts like the phenomenon of critical regionalism to specific cultural-historical determinants on a micro scale. In such a context, Yugoslav artists and architects, by employing elements of a semiological and symbolic system, attempted to overcome newly inherited problems of political, cultural, and geographical nature - all with the aim of creating better cultural integration within the community, a new identity, and a more humane environment. The research focuses on the period between the 1950s and 1980s, a time when artists and architects were most actively creating under the influence of various ideas. The main objective of the research is to detect the system of symbolic elements observable in cultural buildings and to explain the origins of these elements as well as their connection to the semiotics of modern architectural expression and Yugoslav ideology. Additionally, the semiotics of architectural expression emerging under the influence of new ideas of regionalism and postmodernism will be explained. This objective is carried out through the analysis of two selected works by Yugoslav architects: Andrija Mutnjaković and Ivo Kurtović. The expected result of the research is to present and explain the detected sign systems, their position between tradition and modernity, the roles and ideas behind their use, and their influence on the creation of place and community identity.

IDEOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL-CULTURAL-POLITICAL CONTEXT IN YUGOSLAVIA

Yugoslav ideology is a complex phenomenon that was shaped over time by statesmen, politicians, artists, and others. While certain meanings and forms of this ideology evolved through different historical periods, some characteristics remained constant. By comparing two distinct historical-political moments and two different state systems - one during the Kingdom period and the other during the post-war socialist era - we can observe how ideology was put into practice, highlighting both differences and those consistent elements. A shared ideological component across both systems was the supranational idea - that is, the awareness of the need for unification. Due to the turbulent circumstances of the 20th century, both internal and external, the Yugoslav idea often found itself in crisis. The structure of the socio-political system was always a pressing topic, and throughout Yugoslavia's existence, it was given great importance, along with several interrelated issues such as ethnic tensions, the rise of nationalism and separatism, socio-economic factors, and the influence of external forces on the country's internal affairs.

Within this context, art and architecture were used - and can be viewed - as powerful tools for promoting the dominant ideology, in this case the ideology of unity and togetherness. Although the idea of Yugoslav art and architecture evolved alongside changes in the state apparatus, it followed the rise, endurance, and eventual fall of the country. And while it did achieve its supranational vision in the cultural sense, it never reached that same level in addressing the national question - something that ultimately contributed to the collapse of the state idea itself.

THEA IDEA OF CRITICAL REGIONALISM IN THE YUGOSLAVIA

Critical regionalism is a phenomenon in architecture that refers to an authorial approach aimed at resisting universality, uniformity, and a lack of meaning - traits typically associated with the period of modern architecture. This approach involves the use and application of elements and influences drawn from the surrounding context and tradition - ways in which the spirit of a place (*genius loci*) is expressed and a more humane environment is created. The term "critical regionalism" was first defined in theory by Kenneth Frampton in 1981, although the idea of rethinking design approaches had already begun to emerge among certain authors a few years earlier. The phenomenon of universalization, often equated with human progress, simultaneously causes a subtle erosion not only of traditional cultures, but also of what is now referred to as the creative core of great civilizations and great culture. This core represents the foundation through which we interpret life - a core marked as the mythical and ethical nucleus of humanity. (Frampton, 2004) In the 1930s, proponents of the International Style in architecture defined broadly accepted characteristics and universal principles of modern architecture - regular geometric forms, clean and clear surfaces, and an absence of ornamentation - which they believed could be applied anywhere, regardless of the unique context of each culture or the distinct regional and historical characteristics of each place. (Sadiki, 2019) As a reaction to these dominant narratives, certain architects began to question their methodological approach and turned to vernacular building traditions, reinterpreting such practices within modern architecture. This shift in paradigm also marked the beginning of a new direction in architecture known as postmodernism. However, there are key differences between critical regionalism and postmodernism, where the latter is leaning more toward historicism.

In Yugoslavia, as early as the 1960s, authors began to explore different approaches and identities linked to the regional characteristics of specific places. This method of thinking was also related to the then-current political ideology of the Non-Aligned Movement and decentralization - both of which allowed architects more freedom to design in accordance with the local context.

AESTHETIC READING OF ARCHITECTURE AS A SEMIOTIC AND SYGN SYSTEM OF ELEMENTS

The state regime has always worked to find mechanisms within the state apparatus to promote specific political ideas, and one of the most frequently used tools has been art and architecture. In this particular case, public cultural buildings clearly show how they served as recognizable models of Yugoslavia's cultural performance. These public cultural institutions were used not only as means for the spatial manifestation of ideology but also as mediums for symbolic and aesthetic communication between architecture and its environment. The sign system of elements and symbols used in these projects forms the basis of the creative process and the communication between users and their surroundings. A cultural building, through its form and abstracted elements, is intended to communicate both the author's message and the ideological statement - a universal idea of culture and freedom. An architectural work, through all of its details and components, often conveys meaning through the specific form of its visual representation. Such buildings require an interpretation that includes their semiotic content; otherwise, they remain incomplete and ambiguous. In this sense, communication in architecture must be understood as a set of semantic operations, in order to fully grasp the relationship between architecture, the whole, and the user. The sign and symbolic structure of architectural detail guides the formation of specific spatial structures and types in line with functional requirements. In this context, the primary spatial type is a product of an onto-psychological impulse, which - through the process of further shaping - establishes a connection with its intended function and the socio-culturally conditioned form. (Mako, 2009) The form that gives the symbol its expressive power is fundamentally linked to the aesthetic manifestation of the work. In this case, aesthetics primarily refers to the power of form and its ability to support sensually defined meaning through artistic expression. Even though modern 20th-century architecture stripped of metaphysical meaning from the symbol and the sign, they still remain at the core of communication between humans and

their environment. The use of symbols in this context draws all of its strength and meaning from the human need for identification and connection with the surrounding world. (Mako, 2009)

CHOICE OF CASE STUDY

The aim of this research is to highlight the potential connection between the idea of regionalism and the continuity in the use of identified signs and symbols rooted in Balkan tradition within the context of 20th-century Yugoslavia. Andrija Mutnjaković and Ivo Kurtović are the selected authors who will be examined through case studies. These architects were chosen for their significant role in representing Yugoslav ideology in different ways and within diverse geographical and cultural-political contexts. Each, in their own way and through different approaches, managed to interpret a central idea - the idea of stronger cultural and social integration, and of human identification with the environment.

Case study: Andrija Mutnjaković

Andrija Mutnjaković (1929–) is a Croatian and Yugoslav architect whose collection of works represents a unique presence in the architectural landscape of the former Yugoslavia. He graduated from the Faculty of Architecture in Zagreb and continued his professional development across various cities and cultural contexts within the former Yugoslav territory. One of the key characteristics of his architecture is its strong connection to local identity and cultural heritage. He was also one of the pioneers of so-called kinetic and bio-architecture in Yugoslavia. Mutnjaković was a critic of the universalism of the modernist movement and the idea that architecture should transcend cultural context. Instead, he advocated for architecture that emerges from a place - from its climate, history, and collective memory. (Mutnjakovic, 1988) His 'endemic architecture' refers to a renewed study of regional architecture expressed in a contemporary architectural language. Another distinct aspect of Mutnjaković's work lies in its conceptual and research-driven nature, based on transforming local elements into a modern expression rather than mimetically reproducing familiar forms.

National library in Prishtina

The National and University Library in Pristina was built and opened in 1982, based on a project by Andrija Mutnjaković. Due to its structure and form, the library building is one of the most recognizable architectural works in the former Yugoslavia - an object that continues to provoke professional debate and public attention. One of the reasons for this lies in the role the building plays and what it represents - not just as a cultural and educational institution, but as a symbol of the complex political, ethnic, ideological, and cultural tensions that characterize the territory on which it was built. This case study will be approached from several angles, starting with the formal architectural expression of the library, and continuing through its cultural, ideological, and symbolic significance, along with all the interpretations and meanings attributed to it over time. Special attention will be given to the system of sign-elements used in this building, where each sign functions as a super-sign. With a semiological approach and the introduction of the idea of the *super-sign*, Mutnjaković distances himself from the formalist method, and his work can be understood as structuralist - where structure is not observed separately from content, but rather the entire programmatic content is viewed within a logical organization that conveys a specific message. For the author, the sign is the primary element of communication; therefore, the sign should become the paradigm of the architectural language so that architecture, through its appearance, becomes part of broader semiological systems. (Mutnjakovic, 1987) The concept underlying Mutnjaković's formulations, positions, and buildings is what he calls "endemic architecture" - an architecture rooted in the characteristics and specificities of the region or locality in which it is designed. According to him, these qualities inherently contain "the idea of our regional architecture as the incarnation of the national spirit within a spatial event." (Stojiljkovic, 2017)

In researching the particularities of the “Kosovo region,” Mutnjaković studied original architectural forms characteristic of the wider Balkan area. As a result of distilling regional architecture, he arrived at the basic sign of the square with a circle - that is, the cube with a dome - a form whose origins date back to Byzantine architecture. This motif is found in Orthodox architecture (in endowments and monasteries), Catholic chapels, Oriental hammams, covered markets, and mosques alike. In support of this thesis about the universality of such symbols, he compares buildings such as the Sultan Pasha and Sultan Fatih Mosques with the Patriarchate of Peć and Gračanica Monastery - all of which share an identically structured central space: a square floor plan covered with a dome. (Sadiki, 2019) Thus, the adopted sign system - square and circle in plan, cube and dome in volume - forms ninety-nine such units of varying dimensions, arranged in a dynamic composition that generates a modular grid and a symbiotic whole that can be interrupted at any point and just as easily extended infinitely. (Sadiki, 2019) The composition of the building, with its emphasized volumetric elements of the cube and dome, is meant to represent, on a metaphysical level, an imaginary silhouette of a city - each cube symbolizing a Prizren house, while the domes represent the silhouettes of sacred structures. The hexagonal metal structures - the skin of the building's façade - not only serve to protect against sunlight and respond to interior functional needs, but were also used as another traditional architectural element, originating from the Kosovo filigree craft, which had been practiced in workshops throughout the region for centuries.

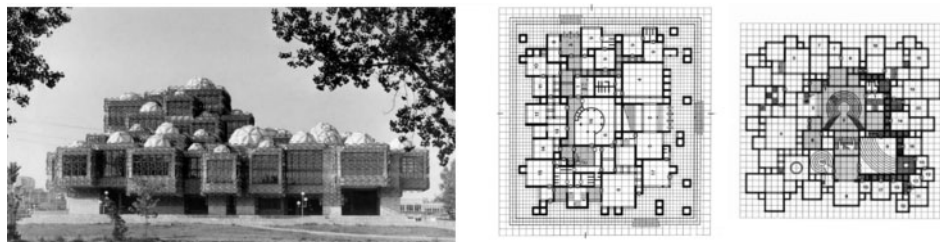


Figure 1 and 2: National Library in Prishtina, Source: Oris 99. Accessed: April, 2025.

Case study: Ivo Kurtović

Ivo Kurtović (1910–1972) was an architect, painter, and professor at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade, and one of the notable representatives of Serbian and Yugoslav post-war modernist architecture. His professional architectural work includes a variety of buildings, ranging from residential and commercial architecture to cultural and transportation facilities. Kurtović's architectural approach is based on several key ideas, one of which is the acceptance of modernist currents - but always through contextual adaptation and respect for traditional building practices, as well as integration with the urban environment.

Throughout his career, Kurtović navigated between international functionalism, brutalism, and even the idea of the vernacular house, yet in all these phases, the local, cultural, and spatial context played a significant role. Because most of his projects are in some way deeply rooted in ambient values, his work can also be seen as a kind of endemic architecture.

National library in Belgrade

The National Library in Belgrade was built in 1972 and is the final and possibly most mature work of architect Ivo Kurtović - a project that, through its structure, form, function, and location, opens up a wide semantic field that still today provokes exchanges of differing opinions and value judgments. With the architecture of the National Library, the author condenses into a single synthesis several

thousand years of architectural history - but also the history of a people. Through this building, Kurtović sought to reach timeless and universal ideas and values of a culture, aiming for his work to rise above the immediate level of the building's function. Like many other canonical buildings, this one relies on a dialectical interplay of ideas and positions, of wholes and elements, weaving together the general and the regional, the traditional and the modern, the public and the private. (Brdar, 2009) The most important characteristic and idea behind Kurtović's architecture is contextualism - a multilayered, conscious relationship toward the existing built environment, toward buildings from different epochs, and the existing urban situation. This philosophy was very close to his personality and his vision of architecture, but was also driven by the nature and sensitivity of the tasks he undertook. One of the recurring motifs in this building - and perhaps the one with the strongest aesthetic quality - is the roof, which spans wide surfaces and evokes numerous associations. One of them is the broad overhanging roof above low volumes, typical of the Prairie Style houses that were prominent in early 20th-century America. There are also clear associations with Japanese architecture, which during that time was reemerging and returning to its vernacular traditions - an architecture that adopted the logic of the folk house. (Brdar, 2009)

However, it is difficult to definitively say that Japanese architecture had such a strong influence on Kurtović, given that it did not hold great sway in Yugoslavia at the time. On the other hand, the roof - harmoniously ordered and organically covering the structure with its overhangs - undeniably recalls the architecture of the Balkan region. (Brdar, 2009) The traditional Balkan house, in addition to its pronounced horizontal gesture in space, typically features a high ground floor with broad wall surfaces and an additional upper story, while its external form is marked by a low roof with a deep eave. In various cultures across many continents, traditional houses, on a meta-level, share a common code and characteristics—features that are also legible in the architecture of the National Library. Architecture is connected with nature and its environment, and the interior is more important than exterior decoration. These restrained and harmonious roofs symbolize home and a place of gathering - a meeting point of worlds, a space dedicated to ancestors, beliefs, and different deities - thus architecture assumes the responsibility of preserving certain answers about the meaning of life. (Radovic, 1991) It can be concluded that two aesthetic ideals from the late 1950s converge in this building: the new humanism and the new regionalism, which demanded consideration of architectural heritage, socio-cultural context, spatial setting, and local climate.

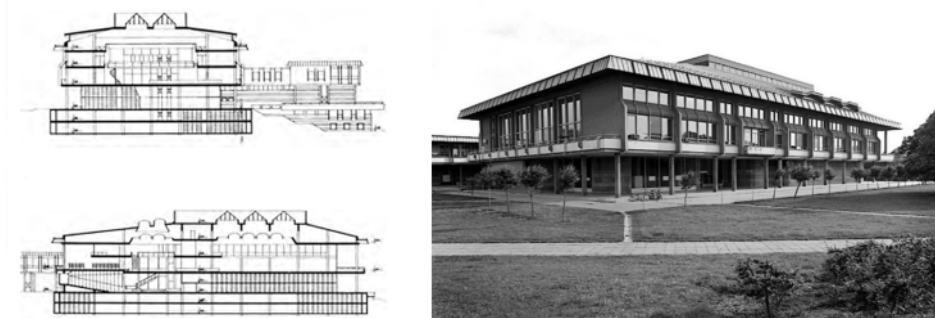


Figure 3 and 4: National Library of Serbia, cross section, 1957–1972. Source: National Library, Accessed: April, 2025.

CONSLUSION

The two examples analyzed in this work represent two powerful, authentic, yet distinct responses to the question of architectural authenticity within the spirit of critical regionalism in the Yugoslav context during the second half of the 20th century. Both buildings seek to articulate cultural and spatial identity

with an affirmative approach toward heritage, yet they use different semiotic tools in the process. In the case of the library in Priština, Andrija Mutnjaković uses a more radical and expressive architectural language, where traditional elements are transformed into visual symbols of collective memory. The building's sign system consists of oriental and sacred motifs and formal expressions that become elements of cultural recognition. In the National Library in Belgrade, Kurtović's architectural language is calmer and more subtle. He employs the abstraction of traditional forms and transforms them into the logic of modern architecture. The semiotic systems in this building are more layered and nuanced - from the roof as a reflection of the Balkan house to the horizontal gesture as a spatial symbol of openness toward the community. In both cases, architecture serves as a means of constructing new identities - not through imitation, but through a critical engagement with traditional cultural patterns. These examples demonstrate how the theory and practice of critical regionalism can be understood precisely as a decision to perceive the local and the traditional not as a stylistic category but as an evolving process, allowing architecture to find its place between culture and form. For future research on the topic of semiology and the application of sign systems in architecture, it is recommended to explore contemporary digital tools that can assist in identifying signs, decoding them, and applying them in the construction of place and community identity.

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