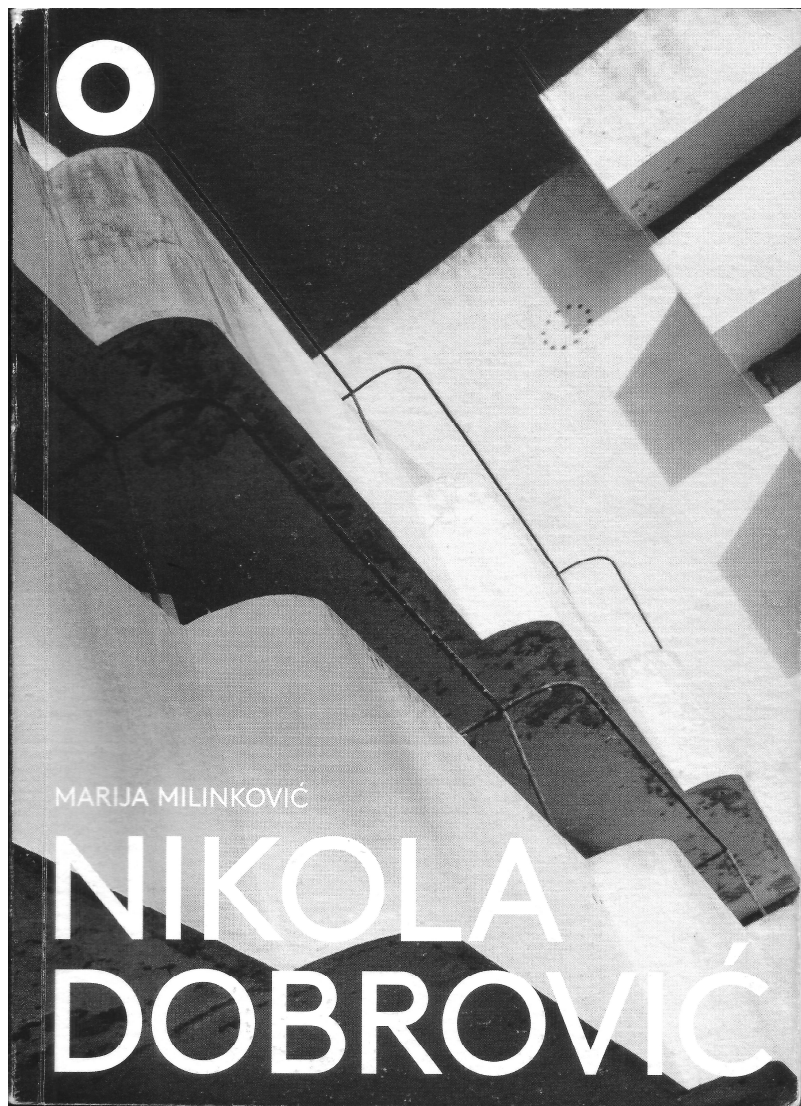


Review: Marija Milinković, *Nikola Dobrović- The shifting modes of critical practice in architecture*

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Marija Milinković, *Nikola Dobrović- The shifting modes of critical practice in architecture*, Montreal/Amsterdam: The Architecture Observer; Beograd: Arhitektonski Fakultet, 2022, 248 pp., paperback, b/w pictures, EAN:978-90-81920-77-3

The critical re-evaluation of 20th-century Yugoslav architectural figures such as Nikola Dobrović (Pécs, 1987-Belgrade 1967), rewriting the traditional geography of contemporary architectural history, may be considered as an operation of the utmost interest in the current historiographical panorama. This is even more true if the author of the volume, in an elegant pocket size 20x14.5 and illustrated with a rich endowment of recent photographs, archival documents and reproductions from Serbian periodicals, is Marija Milinković, a scholar and pupil of the great Ljiljana Blagojević and lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade. The volume represents the reworking of the author's degree thesis (2007), in the light of the acquisitions and updates made in the last fifteen years, following the growing interest, even from outside the Balkan peninsula, in the work of Dobrović, the architect of the ill-fated building of the Ministry of Defence in Belgrade (1954-63), partially destroyed by NATO bombing in 1999.

Although several papers on Dobrović have been published in the years between Milinković's thesis discussion and its reworking as a book, such as Vladimir Kulić's renowned essay on the Generalštab (2011), awarded with the Bruno Zevi prize, and two monographic works, one of which by Ljiljana Blagojević, this is a totally original research product.

On the basis of a careful reconstruction of the sources, including Yugoslav, Czech and Western European periodicals, the private letters and documents from archival fund at Belgrade Technical Museum and the direct study of the works, the author's goal was not so much to give an exhaustive picture of the architect, highlighting new acquisitions and documentary elements, than shaping a cultural and intellectual biography. This emerges from the division of the work into three sections, each comprising three chapters, which are dedicated respectively to the moments and towns that characterized the architect's creative evolution: *Prague: the dreamer*; *Dubrovnik: the lover*; *Belgrade: the developer*. Milinković re-reads Dobrović's biography as a Faustian myth, relying on the reading of Marshall Berman's *All that is solid melts into air*. The architect appears as a character well-grounded in the cultural movements of his time, since his beginnings in Prague in the 1920s, where he carried out professional practice in the studio of Bohumil Hübschmann. His works from that period (Masaryk houses, Krč, Avion Palác, Prague) showed a strong adherence to functionalism, then embodied in Prague by masters like Bohuslav Fuchs, Ludvík Kysela and by Karel Teige's criticism. However, the author also pays attention to the unresolved contradictions of the Prague works, with Dobrović's willingness to use rationalism as a language, sometimes even as an ostentatious form, reminding us Thorstein Veblen's theory of the leisure class. Milinković analyzes the compositional and formal sides of the works, the ties with the stylistic tradition issued from the Wiener *Sezession* and from Peter Behrens (Bulirž house) and even the attempts to convey an "avant-garde" image through photographic reproduction (Jindrak house): for example, some passages from an essay by Theo van Doesburg, which disseminated this radical reading of Dobrović's architecture, are discussed.

Dobrović's work is studied through its cultural influences, which involve the knowledge of German Modernism: this is evident in his first urban planning projects, like the famous competition entry for Terazije square in Belgrade (1929-30), whose buildings are compared by Milinković to Ludwig Hilberseimer's urban visions on Berlin (*Groszstadt Architektur*). It seems, however, that the architect showed at the same time, the bias towards a modern monumentality, which he would have later developed in his project for the Generalštab in Belgrade.

Great prominence is also given to the projects and works for Dalmatia and the Dubrovnik area from the 1930s, where we can see the architect's flair in managing the relationship between

building, context and green areas (Grand Hotel, Lopud, 1931 -36) or in reinventing historical environments for a contemporary use (restoration of the courtyard of Palazzo Sponza, Dubrovnik), or again, in creating variations on the theme of the rationalist villa (Rusalka, Vesna, Adonis villas), even with surrealist features (villa Wolff). In analyzing these works, Milinković takes the cue from the method of her mentor Blagojević, placing the emphasis on formal and compositional investigation as a tool to reveal the ideological side. This explains the attention paid in retracing Nikola Dobrović's interest in modularity and proportion, themes that are also often present in the work of other Serbian architects, such as Milan Zloković.

Finally, the author represents Dobrović's Faustian drama, recalling his commitment as chief architect in charge of planning Belgrade since 1946, reconstructing his work for the new urbanism of the Yugoslav capital, the project for Novi Beograd and some architectural projects strongly tied to the peculiar phase of the Yugoslav post-war period, ideologically still close to Soviet communism, such as the one for the Radio building in Topčider. The preliminary plan for Novi Beograd, with its synthesis between Le Corbusier's models and the search for a monumental form of the new political and administrative centre, would have marked the subsequent arrangement of that part of the city in the twentieth century, until its theoretical refutation implemented in the 1980s by Miloš Perović, himself a former student of Dobrović. However, the author does not fail to observe how, already in 1948, the architect was then removed from the position of chief architect, merging into the role of university professor, following the downsizing of Belgrade as an institutional seat, after the new reformist political trend. On this precise aspect, the text perhaps fails to underline how a similar fate was experienced by other outstanding architects in the same years in Yugoslavia, for example by Edvard Ravnikar, in Slovenia, who had to be soon underestimated in Nova Gorica, the town he had dreamt of as a perfect realization of the ideology of the new Yugoslav state. He too was forced to abandon the project, which was left only to a partial and episodic implementation; a comparative reflection on these dynamics would therefore also have been desirable.

The volume goes on with an examination of the project for the headquarters of the Ministry of Defence in Belgrade, seen not however as an isolated "object", but contextualized within the production of the early 1960s: in that period, Dobrović displayed an experimentalism inspired by constructivism and Yugoslav avant-gardes of the 1920s, which was evident in the project for the Faculty of Electronic Engineering in Novi Beograd. This kind of research on the relationship between building and space may be observed also in the audacious project for the Igalo Institute of Physiotherapy Medicine. The realized version of the same building, on the other hand, placed emphasis on the material and tactile aspects of the architecture, with a stone cladding, which also highlighted the relationship with the local context. From this point of view, the book provides the foreign scholar with precious elements to maturely evaluate and contextualize Dobrović's "magnum opus", the Generalštab, explaining its real background with the architect's decade-long research on monumentality, on the third dimension and on regionalism. This new reading goes beyond Kulić's dualistic interpretation of the project as a tender between the vision of the buildings as a metaphor of Sutjeska valley or as an experiment on the third dimension.

A chapter is devoted to Dobrović as a writer and author of educational texts: writing theoretical and academic papers and booklets was an important and little-known (at least outside the former Yugoslavia) feature of the architect, who was the author of five volumes on contemporary architecture and a richly illustrated essay on the palaces of Dubrovnik.

The appendix contains the English translation of the text by the critic Kosta Strajnić originally published in Flemish on the occasion of the exhibition on the works of Nikola and Petar Dobrović, the painter brother, held in The Hague in February 1931.

The volume provides both a precious state of the art on ongoing research on Dobrović and an acute intellectual biography of the architect, full of acquisitions and elements of new reflection. One may only underline that some points, such as the author's delicate political transition from monarchist Yugoslavia to Titoist Yugoslavia should have been more highlighted, as well as a broader look further to other Yugoslav authors and contexts would have been useful in several parts of the book, in order to focus the biographical and ideological similarities of the architects of the period.

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