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… Yugoslavia

Vladimir Kulić

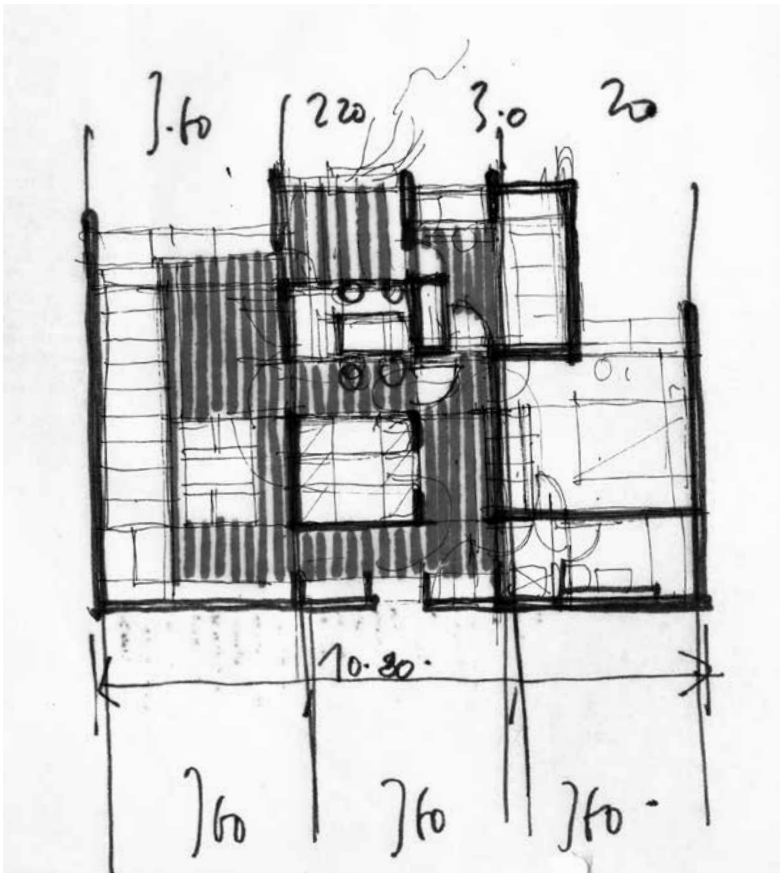
Brutalism and sophistication

I am quite aware that the title of this text will raise eyebrows: there is no Yugoslavia today, and the country has not existed for almost thirty years. For that reason, this letter should be understood not as a message from a particular place, but rather from a particular moment in the past, a moment that resonated with an area much larger than the former state of South Slavs. In the period after the Second World War, welfare systems established both in the socialist East and the capitalist West promised economic prosperity, upward mobility, and greater equality and social security for all. As a result, architecture acquired an outsized role in society as an instrument for the betterment of human life. In the rearview mirror, the era appears like a golden age of the profession's social purpose. The nostalgia that it inspires is a logical effect of the widespread perception that architecture has lost its soul, reduced as it is to the production of commodities defined purely through their exchange value. Even if the connection often remains subconscious, the resurgent taste for brutalism is an aesthetic symptom of such longing for a better past: for a time when architecture was not just ruggedly honest, but also socially responsible, when its extravagant



1 Detail of the prefabricated façade for Block 23, New Belgrade, Serbia, 1968–74.

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2 Sketch for the plan of a Block 23 apartment by Aleksandar Stjepanović.

forms could be imbued with communal meaning, and when societies headed towards a brighter future, rather than teetering on the brink of global disaster.

No matter how we define it – as an ethic or an aesthetic, as a style, as architectural rhetoric, or simply as an uncritical love of *béton brut* – it is clear that brutalism is back, at least as a media phenomenon. The once condemned 'concrete monsters' (as the subtitle of the recent show at Deutsches Architekturmuseum put it) are now the subject of myriad new coffee table books, exhibitions, blogs, and social media groups, which reveal that the species has populated the entire planet. Iconic buildings are still threatened and demolished, as was recently the case with the Robin Hood Gardens, but that destruction no longer goes by quietly, inspiring instead worldwide reactions. If this new fascination should teach us anything, it is that brutalism united the divided world of its time: it belonged equally to the welfare states of Western Europe (which named it), East European state socialism, postcolonial Africa, the rising industrial might of Japan, and virtually all of Latin America.

In the emerging canon of global brutalism, Yugoslavia plays a prominent role, highlighting the convergence of the aesthetic of reinforced concrete and social purpose; images of its seemingly outlandish antifascist memorials, megastructural mass housing, and seaside resorts are thus frequently circulated among aficionados. Last year's exhibition 'Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980' at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which I helped curate with Martino Stierli and a large group of colleagues, only gave a seal of legitimacy to interests that had already been there for a while.

I believe that I speak for the entire curatorial team when I say that, for us, the exhibition was never really about brutalism in the purely aesthetic sense, but rather about architecture's wider social mission. For me personally, the Blochian connotation of the title's double entendre – concrete utopia not as a fixed blueprint, but as a hopeful project that needs to be worked through in real life – always outweighed the more literal material reference. Indeed, many of the exhibited buildings did not qualify as brutalist at all, either because they utilised incongruous materials or because they eschewed the aesthetic bombast of the label. And yet, against my own resistance to stylistic labels, I have to admit that some of the most memorable images on display – certainly those that circulated in the media with the greatest frequency – communicated an unabashedly brutalist aesthetic. Judging by the public perception, 'Toward a Concrete Utopia' was surely a show about brutalism.

This letter, however, is not meant to be about ontology – whether and to what degree Yugoslav architecture was brutalist – but about epistemology: What kind of knowledge can this term reveal? From that perspective, I am increasingly convinced that brutalism's value as an analytical category is reaching the point of exhaustion. For the past decade, the label has been instrumental in validating an important segment of the global architectural heritage that was almost universally under threat. But now that the process of re-evaluation is under way, I am afraid that such labelling is becoming a hindrance that covers up more than it reveals. A focus on what Reyner Banham called 'brutality' and 'bloody-mindedness' – the superhuman expressiveness that the photographic medium captures so effectively – threatens to flatten out what in reality is a highly diverse body of architecture.[1] In turn, it also conceals a great deal of spatial, functional, and experiential complexity that does not lend itself to a camera's lens, not to mention the specifics of the social context and purpose. Between the single-minded enthusiasm of aficionados and the sensationalism of the media, I argue, it is now time for architectural historians to rescue brutalism's own sophistication in order to properly understand, historicise, and protect a vast body of recent architectural heritage.

As an illustration of the increasingly dubious analytical value of the brutalist banner, let us briefly focus on one of the projects that were on display at MoMA: New Belgrade's neighbourhood known as Block 23. With its massive scale, expressive joints in exposed concrete, and a weathered appearance that inspires a mix of awe and dystopian unease, the complex is regularly featured in the digital media dedicated to brutalism. Such association is by no means incorrect: Block 23 does match key ideas about the movement, including Banham's famous definition that posited three main points: '1, Memorability as an Image; 2, Clear exhibition of Structure; and 3, Valuation of Materials "as found".' The design

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especially dramatises the second point: structure is not just clearly exhibited, but highly exaggerated through expressive structural rhetoric, its prefabricated system comprised of numerous small pieces that intersect to generate intricately patterned, highly tectonic façades *[1]*. The resulting permeability belies the solidity typical of prefabricated mass housing, hinting instead at the logic of traditional wood construction. But that kind of sophistication is not foreign to brutalism: a parallel can be easily drawn with Kenzō Tange's work, which was well known in Yugoslavia at the time through his engagement in the post-earthquake reconstruction of Skopje. Block 23 thus may be seen as belonging to a very particular branch in the genealogy of brutalism, which testifies to the movement's complex paths of global dissemination.

The above conclusion is, no doubt, interesting in itself, but it is about as far as the brutalist lens can take us. What is arguably most innovative and most socially relevant about the project thus remains completely invisible, to wit, its apartment plans *[2]*. The neighbourhood was designed by four young architects, Aleksandar Stjepanović, Božidar Janković, Branislav Karadžić, and Milutin Glavički, who won an open competition in 1968. However, they participated in a thriving architectural culture in Belgrade, which at the time dedicated an unusual degree of attention to apartment design. It involved several academic and research institutions and numerous individual architects, engineers, sociologists, and other professionals, who collectively devised what came to be known as the 'Belgrade apartment': not a standardised type, but rather a set of design principles that could be organised into many different layouts. Architectural competitions were an important vehicle in its evolution, as were the conditions of the peculiar socialist housing market. The latter involved negotiations (including a degree of competition) among many different economic, institutional, and professional actors, which were all embedded in a system of social ownership, rather than the privately owned, speculative real estate.

A serious history of the Belgrade apartment is yet to be written, but for now suffice it to say that it achieved the unusual feat of applying the modernist concept of open plan to the relatively modest spatial standards of prefabricated social housing. In the process, a great deal of variety was achieved through experimentation with apartment layouts, which became one of the main professional preoccupations for many architects. Certain concepts emerged as characteristic, most importantly the so-called 'expanded circulation' (a zone that often included the dining table as the symbolic and functional centre from which other spaces branched out) and the 'roundabout circulation' (which allowed circular movement through several different spaces). As a result, apartments gained considerable spatial complexity, and they often appeared much larger than one would expect from their modest sizes. In comparison, apartment plans in other socialist countries were standardised and typified to a much greater degree, and they were generally compartmentalised into conventional boxy rooms.[2] Block 23 constituted an important stage in the evolution of the Belgrade apartment. But while it shared the main principles of apartment layout with other new neighbourhoods in Belgrade and elsewhere, in terms of its external articulation it differed from many of its siblings, which often espoused a softer, less 'brutal' appearance. Block 19a across the street or the Cerak-Vinogradi neighbourhood on the other side of the river Sava are closely related to Block 23, and they are equally important examples of the Belgrade apartment, but neither is conventionally understood as brutalist, featuring picturesque buildings with pitched roofs, traditional windows, and painted or brick-clad façades. The sophistication that they share with Block 23 is entirely internal and it is no wonder that it completely escaped the attention of photographers in search of impressive images.

Brutalism as we conventionally define it, then, intersects only in passing with the most original contribution of Block 23: socially owned apartments that are at the same time highly functional and spatially rich. Considering the movement's much-touted social mission, it is especially ironic that the single-minded focus on the label ends up ignoring precisely the most socially relevant achievement of the complex. But that is perhaps the price of every successful label: the moment it becomes widely adopted, it is rendered (almost) meaningless in describing its referent. Consider what happened to classicism: as a result of its centuries-long dissemination, it has splintered into countless subcategories that add specificity to the overly broad blanket term. In contrast, brutalism conquered the planet in a much shorter time, which is likely why we still see it in singular. Perhaps it is time we start pluralising it, too, as a way of illuminating the sophistication that arises from its multiple origins, genealogies, missions, and forms. After all, that could only prove its own success.

Notes

1. Reyner Banham, 'The New Brutalism', *The Architectural Review*, 118 (December 1955), 354–61.
2. Kimberly Elman Zarecor, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2011); Phillipp Meuser and Dimitrij Zadorin, *Towards a Typology of Soviet Mass Housing: The Prefabrication in the USSR 1955–1991* (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2016).

Illustration credits

arq gratefully acknowledges: Aleksandar Stjepanović, 1, 2

Author's biography

Vladimir Kulić is an architectural historian, curator, and Associate Professor of Architecture at Iowa State University. He specialises in the history of architecture in the former socialist world. His exhibitions include 'Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980' at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (co-curated with Martino Stierli, 2018), and 'Unfinished Modernisations – Between Utopia and Pragmatism' (co-curated with Maroje Mrduljaš, 2012). He is the author and editor of several books, most recently the edited volume *Second World Postmodernisms: Architecture and Society under Late Socialism* (2019).

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