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SESSION: Philosophy and Aesthetics of Architecture

TITLE: The National Bank building in Cetinje versus self vanishing modernism.

Promotion or maintenance.

This paper provides an examination of aesthetics and theory conceived for the National Bank building in Cetinje, whose author is the Yugoslav architect Petar Vulović. It explains how this important monument of Montenegrin modernism was changed during the period of transition from socialism to neoliberalism to, paradoxically, become a space for exhibiting and promoting art rather than maintaining it. Through an analysis of the building's elements such as roof and pillars, areas of comparative interest such as Yugoslav economic model of SDK (*Služba društvenog knjigovodstva*) and self-managing socialism, my goal is to demonstrate the importance of social value and organic reciprocity between aesthetics, art, architecture, environment and society, and how in socialist Yugoslavia this reciprocity had served society and reflected the role of institutional function despite the already ongoing institutional transition. The paper offers a critical examination of strategic uses of the public space in socialist Yugoslavia versus the interest-based uses of the same in capitalist societies even when they, paradoxically, might serve culture and art. As the paper's principal result, the issue of what we can call a self vanished modernism becomes visible since the National Bank is not the only object that has permanently changed in our geography.

Index terms: art, aesthetics, architecture, devastation, economy, social value, public space.

In our everyday consumerist life approaching the end of the 2nd decade of the 21st century there are not so many elements that are making the relation between economy and art, or culture and economy in a broader sense, perceivable. At least in post-socialist countries, for an ordinary citizen, art is still something exclusive and deprived of any tangible relation when it comes to influencing real life. These two sectors of reality construction, economy and culture, are perceived as distant and unconnectable. But if we look more attentively in the past of both, we can find traces of a time and of thought when the opposite was taking place, i.e. the times of socialist progress and thought in the case of the Yugoslav state, whose unused potentials are still being scrutinized for development and understanding of our present day in terms of both culture and economy.

Building of the National Bank in Cetinje was conceived and designed by the architect Petar Vulović (figure 1(a), figure 1(b), figure 1(c)). It was constructed between 1960 and 1964, partly in parallel with development of the architect's project of a bank in Makarska, in Croatia between 1960-62 with which we can trace aesthetical parallels (figure 2). Being a National Bank employee from 1959 until 1965 at their Architectural Bureau, and then SDK architectural studio employee, he got the opportunity to construct some of his key achievements such as SDK in Belgrade in 1969 (figure 3(a), figure 3(b)), SDK branch office in Kraljevo in 1973 (figure 4) and SDK in New Belgrade in 1987. But the perception that he was an architect interested in creation of bank buildings and in economic sector only, is rather wrong. His interests and sensibility for spatial issues in the case of the National Bank in Cetinje span between issues of theory of proportions, harmony, golden ratio, local urban specificities and those of the ambient. In the interview given to Borislav Vukićević, the Montenegrin architecture writer, the architect explained that he thought of his Cetinje building as an homage to Njegoš's poetry:

My pillars that descend down to the ground are my first homage to Njegoš, not only to his Gorski vijenac.¹ (figure 5)

Architectural theorist and philosopher John Rajchman explains how the way we reside on the ground is poetic and that poetry explains that process.

That is why the Earth matters not only in the origin of the work of art but in the origin of its very concept, and hence in the concept as well as the work of architecture.²

To follow the trace of development of Vulović's interdisciplinary thought, it is important to notice that in the same interview the architect states that in case of the SDK building in Kraljevo his research is a devotion to the issue of pillar and that the building is an ode to the pillar i.e. that he did not conceive the

¹ From the Borislav Vukićević's private archive. The interview with Petar Vulović by Borislav Vukićević was made in 2012 on the occasion of renovation of Vulović's original building which was carried out without consulting him.

² John Rajchman, *Constructions* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998), 45.

building starting from prefabrication as a process. There is also a third relevant point in the same interview explaining his poetic, lyric and alternative approach to architecture when the architect narrates how he admired the observation of a Croatian critic who wrote about his SDK building in Belgrade stating how the building deeply stared into the Pannonian Plain; or yet another one, when he agrees with analysis by Ivan Kucina that the same building, seen in the context of Belgrade, can be thought of as a clear and fine white canvas (figure 6(a)). Unfortunately, we allow for canvas to change too (figure 6(b)). Departing from Vulović's relational and historical approach to aesthetics, we might argue that his Cetinje edition of the National Bank with its western and horizontally oriented main facade is gazed towards Mount Lovćen on top of which the poet Njegoš was buried (figure 7(a), figure 7(b)). The preparatory works for erecting the Mausoleum on top of Lovćen had already begun when he was conceiving his approach to constructing in Cetinje.³ We may argue that aesthetics of the Cetinje National bank is aesthetics of reflections and relations. If we observe its frontal main façade or lateral sides, we will notice modules that are multiplied and reflected. Sometimes that reflection is not immediate, but like in the case of the roof and its triangles it can even be distant or diagonal (figure 8(a), figure 8(b), figure 8(c)).

In all this lies, above all, Pythagoras and the philosopher Plato and, of course, lies Euclid. I am a student of professor Milan Zloković⁴, and he was a great mathematician and geometrician, and geometry is the essence of the whole world... I accepted that geometry is the essence, but only after I studied the subject well... The law of the square root of three, in the whole building, is valid here. And not only the law of the square root of three, one other dimension is complemented. Even someone who does not know the theory of proportions feels it very quickly...⁵

Richard Padovan writes that a number must be experienced in a concrete way in order to be architecturally expressive, what now we understand as close to Vulović's conception.⁶ But what is that other dimension that should have been felt while we were observing the building? We might argue that the incorporation of the golden ratio is present in building's conception. With its light and

³ „The stone works were completed in 1958, but a formal "Decision on Raising Njegoš's Mausoleum ...", adopted by the Municipal Assembly of Cetinje, took another 10 years. The final technical preparations were completed in 1970 and the construction began next year. Mausoleum was inaugurated in 1974." <http://www.mnmuseum.org/NJMZmn.htm> accessed on 25.02.2019. 12:50

⁴ *His work is the very substance of Serbian modernism, and his buildings form the most coherent testimony to the ethos of the epoch.* See: Ljiljana Blagojević, *Modernism in Serbia, The Elusive Margins of Belgrade Architecture 1919-1941* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 191.

⁵ From the oral interview with Petar Vulović © private archive of Borislav Vukićević.

⁶ Richard Padovan, *Proportion. Science, Philosophy, Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 48.

harmonious disposition of modules, the building gives to an observer an impression of stability and protection. When one stands at the ground floor next to the base of the colonnade (figure 9) and under its three floors that then become the roof i.e. a cantilever space, one also feels and relates its own presence to the economic function the building was originally given. One establishes the connection and “sees” that an individual is a pillar of society. There is a presence of belonging and protection that could be felt.

The pragmatics of Yugoslav *soft* socialism gives foundations to such friendly-yet-authoritative architecture vis-à-vis ideology.⁷

If for Le Corbusier, the man in the Modulor – derived from the golden ratio – represents the essence of harmony,⁸ then for Vulović’s conception of the bank the man and his time, history and built environment is the substance of its economy and culture. That is why he would not start the project without first studying Montenegrin history, poetry, and the environment in which Cetinje valley is situated, which confirmed relational aspect of his work. Apart from that, we should research if Vulović’s modules, which he multiplied to achieve the volume of the bank were each, as the Modulor was, also based on golden ratio as well as the whole building as such (figure 10).⁹ The originality and specificity of the roof solution, the rhythm and repetition of modules along the façade, in a time of developing industrialization, shows that Vulović was not only reflecting the past, history and existing urban specificities of the town and its natural mountain environment but that he was already thinking of the future and how to go beyond the present and demands of modernism in terms of international style, use of the glass and prefabricated elements. While remaining modern (figure 11), he reached the specificity and integrity in proportions¹⁰, uniqueness and rarity that might defend his authorial approach in the conception of this building what according to Elisabeth Grosz is referred to as the *architecture of invention*. She argues that

⁷ Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss, with a series of photographs by Armin Linke, *Socialist Architecture, The Reappearing Act* (Berlin: The green box, Kunst Editionen, 2017), 9.

⁸ Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1959), 119.

⁹ During the period of writing this paper, I was analyzing the external façade of the object with mathematicians and researchers from the field and the conclusion was that the possession of exact measures might lead us to discover the implementation of the law of the square root of three and of golden ratios which, visually, can be presupposed.

¹⁰ In the interview, Vulović speaks about his interest in the system of proportions in Pythagora's, Plato's and Euclid's thoughts, and that he integrated the Pythagorean-Platonic proportional system in the building. For closer understanding see Richard Padovan, *Proportion. Science, Philosophy, Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

architecture has tended to conceive itself as an art, a science, or a mechanics for the manipulation of space, indeed probably the largest, most systemic and most powerful mode for a spatial organization and modification.¹¹

And for Vulović as well, architecture is the first of all arts,¹² that relates to music and poetry and where the light is an important element of form.

In self-governing Yugoslav *soft* socialism where the SIZ – a *self-governing interest community* – was functioning and controlling the area of health, social protection, culture and sports, working class was not seen as an object for exploitation like in neoliberal times. On the contrary, between 1946 and 1963, proletariat as the new class becomes, for the first time, involved in political, economic and cultural decision-making and as a new force it initiates creation of the political system according to its position, new economy and new cultural politics.¹³

This cultural politics wanted to educate the masses and create educational and cultural development for its wide society. Architecture, with its immediacy, presence and availability in public space was respected and esteemed. And this kind of belief in the power of art and culture coincides precisely with the finissage of Vulović's bank building in Cetinje, with its scientific, theoretical and above all aesthetical qualities. Šuvaković's statement about complexities in architecture and culture can be useful if this context. He writes that

architecture as the consequence of the practice of producing habitats etc. is an effect endowed with the function of, first and foremost, articulating and rearticulating human life and its visibility. However, articulations or rearticulations of human life are not the expressions of simple functions but of the complexities imposed by the type of culture and its specific historical and geographical organisation.¹⁴

In 2012, the Vulović's building, so organically connected with its environment and history, was renovated and turned into the Montenegrin Gallery of Art (figure 12). The 4th floor was added and the roof was removed - facts that permanently changed the character of the object. A close reading of the Montenegrin Law on Protection of Cultural Goods provides some interesting elements. If a

¹¹ Elisabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside, Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press 2001), 109.

¹² From the oral interview with Petar Vulović © private archive of Borislav Vukićević.

¹³ Branka Doknić, *Kulturna politika Jugoslavije 1946-1963* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2013), 315.

¹⁴ Miodrag Šuvaković, *Fundamental Issues And Indices – Aesthetics Of Architecture*, SAJ 2019, 9. p. 107. <http://saj.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/SAJ-2017-02-M-Suvakovic.pdf> accessed on 27.02.2019.

cultural-historical object is a single immovable object of architectural, archaeological, artistic, technical, paleontological significance or other social significance¹⁵

then with Vulović's implementation of golden ratios, antique theory of proportions, authentic relation to environment, poetry and urban specificities of Cetinje, it is obvious that the object, if it was preserved in its original edition, could have been a potential candidate to achieve the status of a cultural-historical object. But in George Kubler's words, we often encounter a delay between discovery and application and that is found in almost every field of knowledge. Kubler explains that

our ability at any moment to accept new knowledge is narrowly delimited by the existing state of knowledge.¹⁶ (figure 13)

Cultural value of the Vulović's building is historical also due to the fact that after its use as the National Bank it was serving to an economic model of SDK (*Služba društvenog knjigovodstva*) – the Financial Controller for the Lawful use of Social Assets – which had an important role in the development and responsibility of and for the economy. It was an extraordinary regulatory and controlling institution that enabled the further development of self-managing socialism in the FNRJ and the SFRJ. The SDK Law states that SDK is a social book keeper, a registrar and a controller of the legality of the use of social assets. Therefore, financial resources and all other assets could not have been owned, but they were social and they were managed directly or indirectly by the working people and other self-governing and socialist associations to the benefit of each individual and all people together.¹⁷ Another important observation in this regard comes from Rudolf Arheim who states that we see as much as we know.¹⁸

Therefore, this text stands for the critical defence of art, architecture and culture in those cases when there is evidence supporting artistic, historical, technical, archaeological, and scientific spheres as stated in the Law for Protection of Cultural Goods (figure 14 (a), figure 14(b)). If it was originally a structure serving the state and public institutions dealing with economic affairs, while at the same time it was an object whose conception could aesthetically and theoretically be seen as an art itself, then today, in these globalized times we have to wonder what are the factors that made us fail in giving it the cultural recognition, especially during the process in which we were given the chance for conceiving it as a space devoted to presentation of art.

¹⁵ Act 13 of a state Law on Protection of Cultural Goods "Sl. list Crne Gore", br. 49/10 of 13.08.2010.

¹⁶ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time, Remarks on the History of Things* (Clinton: Yale University Press, 1962), 65.

¹⁷ Law of the SDK: "... an independent organization that carries out the activities of social bookkeeping, payment transactions in the country for legal entities and other activities determined by law and regulations based on the law." https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1991_05_21_651.html Accessed on 09.10.2018.

¹⁸ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception. A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 139.

Consequently, this brings us to the question whether today's art, architecture and culture should serve for their maintenance or just promotion. If architecture is art, (figure 15 (a), figure 15(b)), then the original Vulović's bank building with its function and history was a perfect prelude for art maintenance via planned art institution and its aesthetics should have been preserved as a cultural monument of modernism. Only then, we could have spoken about maintenance and not mere promotion in art and culture, a phenomenon that can also be named as self vanished modernism due to the fact that Vulović's creation is not the only one that is not present any longer in its original form in Montenegro. Before such lost heritage, we are left with a sensational wonder why have we renounced a treasure that could have become another jewel in a continuum of historical objects in the town of Cetinje. In comparison with our present time when banks, audit companies or corporations can be located anywhere, which is often decided based on the price of the rent, we cannot help but wonder how was the impression of a passer-by in the socialist era when each of those institutions had its own aesthetics. What impact on a citizen has the architecture of today's economy institutions in comparison with the same impact in the post-war WW2 period? The importance of economy in our lives has not changed, but the place of aesthetics did. Now that Vulović's building has witnessed both: a rapid Yugoslav modernization and its even more faster failure – the question is who is a bigger loser, economy or art? And who has more rights, politics or culture – now that they still want to work apart?

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Biography:

Irena Lagator Pejovic was born in Cetinje, Montenegro. She completed her PhD studies in Visual Arts at the University of the Arts in Belgrade, at the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies. As a visual artist, she has exhibited internationally since 2000 at venues such as 4. and 5. Cetinje Biennial; 12. Istanbul Biennial of Contemporary Art; Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen; MAXXI, Rome; FRAC Marseille; National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavik; Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Rijeka, Croatia; Austrian Cultural Forum New York... A book about her work was edited at Neue Galerie Graz and published by Buchhandlung Walther König in 2012. She represented Montenegro with a solo show *Image Think* at the 55th La Biennale di Venezia, in 2013. Her works are in collections of public institutions such as: FRAC Marseille, France; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade; and the Museum of Money, Belgrade.

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Figures:

[Figure 1\(a\): National Bank in Cetinje, Montenegro 1960-1964. architect Petar Vulović © private archive of Vesko Pejović, Cetinje](#)



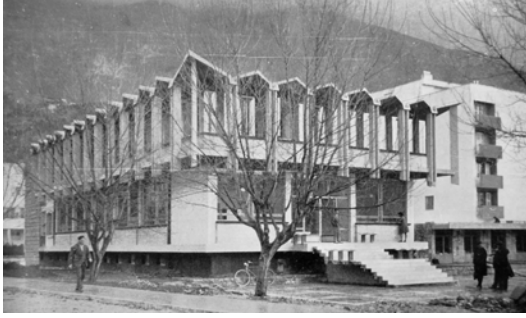
[Figure 1\(b\): National Bank in Cetinje, Montenegro 1960-1964. architect Petar Vulović © private archive of Vesko Pejović, Cetinje](#)



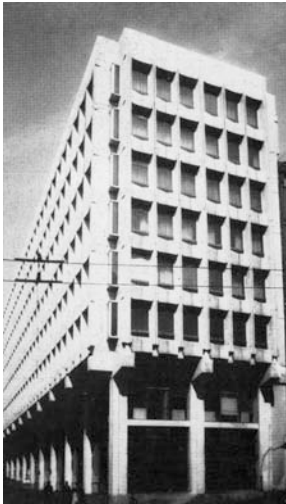
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[Figure 2: National Bank in Makarska, Croatia, 1962, \[architect\]\(#\) Petar Vulović © Arhitektura urbanizam, 19, Beograd, 1963, p. 19](#)



[Figure 3\(a\): Administrative building, Filial SDK, Belgrade, Serbia, 1969, architect Petar Vulović](#) © Arhitektura urbanizam, 59, Beograd, 1969, p. 20



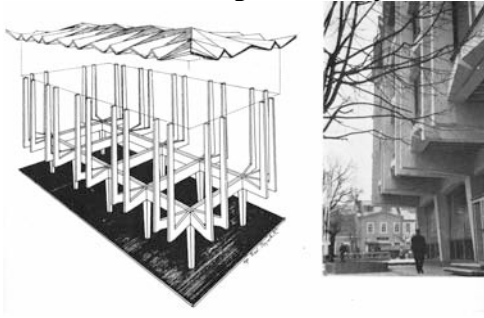
[Figure 3\(b\): Filial SDK, Belgrade, Serbia, 1969, architect Petar Vulović](#) © Arhitektura urbanizam, 59, Beograd, 1969, p. 20



[Figure 4: Filial SDK in Kraljevo, Serbia 1969-1973. architect Petar Vulović](#) © private archive of Djordje Alfrević, source Đorđe Alfrević, Sanja Simonović Alfrević *Brutalism in Serbian Architecture: Style or Necessity?* FACTA UNIVERSITATIS Series: Architecture and Civil Engineering Vol. 15, No 3, 2017, pp. 317 – 331 <https://doi.org/10.2298/FUACE160805028A>



[Figure 5: National Bank in Cetinje, Montenegro 1960-1964. architect Petar Vulović © Arhitektura urbanizam, 59, Beograd, 1969, p. 23](#)



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[Figure 7\(b\): National Bank in Cetinje, Montenegro 1960-1964, architect Petar Vulović © Arhitektura urbanizam, 59, Beograd, 1969, p. 21](#)



Figure 8(a): [National Bank in Cetinje, Montenegro 1960-1964. architect Petar Vulović](#) © Arhitektura urbanizam, 59, Beograd, 1969, p. 22, 23



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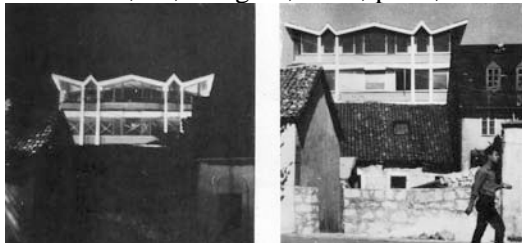


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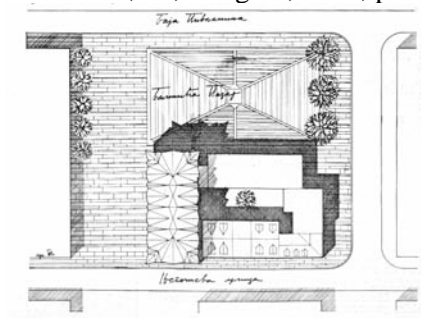


Figure 9: [National Bank in Cetinje, Montenegro 1960-1964. architect Petar Vulović](#) © Arhitektura urbanizam, 59, Beograd, 1969, p. 23



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Figure 12: View of the renovated object © archive of Plan B architects, Slovenia, photos by Lazar Pejović



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Figure 14(a): [National Bank in Cetinje, Montenegro 1960-1964. architect Petar Vulović © private archive of Borislav Vukićević](#)



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