

Lorenzo Pignatti
Early modernism in Zagreb. Novakova street

Abstract

Architectural modernism appeared in cities of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia during the end of the twenties and beginning of the thirties of the XXth century with different manifestations but within a quite coherent cultural scenario. In those years, most of the Yugoslavian cities were transforming themselves and they were all searching for a new identity, where a new architectural “style” had a substantial importance. The cultural life in these cities was extremely rich and open to external influences, also due to the presence of young architects and academics that had studied abroad and were eager to bring in their own towns their personal experiences. Zagreb was certainly one of the most active cities from an economic, social and cultural point, a city where urban transformations and architectural innovation were reinforcing each other. The unique example of the residential development along Novakova street must be seen as a very early attempt of creating a modern identity, also in relationship to other important European experiences, first with the Weissenhof in Stuttgart.

Keywords

Zagreb — Modernization — Le Corbusier

Not much is known about the beginning and development of architectural modernism in cities of the western Balkan region. For a long while this region was considered an “in-between” area, a region that was not able to express its own identity since it was characterized by a diversity of social, religious, political and ethnical tensions. This essay intends to prove the opposite and claim that somehow there was a very interesting development of modern ideas related to architecture and urbanism in most of the cities of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia during the early part of the XXth century. Belgrade, certainly the largest and most influential city of the region, went through a process of transformation from a an Ottoman city into a European capital, following, first, Beaux Arts models and then, modernists ones; Ljubljana, much closer to Austria and central Europe, went through an amazing period with the architecture and urban projects by Plečnik; Zagreb saw a very interesting urban expansion with new developments in the Lower City that integrated experimental strategic architectural interventions of great value; Sarajevo transformed itself from an Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian city into a modernist city with significant projects that proposed a reinterpretation of vernacular models. Then there was the important but later case of Skopje, destroyed by a major earthquake in 1963 and reconstructed in the following years with a master plan by Kenzo Tange. Somehow all these cities followed their own path towards modernity, each of them with their own specificity given by local political and cultural conditions or by the presence of significant individuals, but eventually always open to absorb fresh ideas that were coming from other parts of Europe.

This essay intends to analyze the development of modern architecture in Zagreb, not the largest city in former Yugoslavia but one that could offer a completer and more layered picture of the development of modern architecture due both to a sophisticated internal cultural scene and to its openness to external influences.

There were some anticipations in Zagreb of a new vision with the presence of Viktor Kovacić and Drago Ibler. Kovacić, a pupil of Otto Wagner, was the author of the headquarters of the Central Bank of Croatia (1923-27), still a neo-classical building but certainly one that presented a simple and austere revision of classicity and one that certainly created a rupture with the predominant previous eclectic trend, a position not very different from Plečnik's work in Ljubljana. Ibler was an architect, theoretician and academic of a distinguished value in Zagreb in the early Twenties; he had studied in Dresden, was part of the architects that were in contact with Le Corbusier and then worked with Poelzig in Berlin. He founded the second Faculty of Architecture in Zagreb at the Academy of Fine Arts, an active school inspired to the ideals of modernism that created a consistent number of new graduates and gave origin to what will be called "the school of Zagreb". He also was a founding member of the group (and magazine) *Zemlja* (Earth) that operated in Zagreb from 1925 to 1935 as a progressive movement composed by architects, artists and sculptors that were proposing a shift towards modernity, advocating that «it is necessary to live in the spirit of our own time and create accordingly with it». These architects were not following a specific "style" and their work was not at all consistent; however, their architecture was certainly original and simple, anticipating a "purism" that will then generate the development of modernity.

General cultural context

Across Europe the Modern Movement was in fact already a reality during the late Twenties and the early Thirties of the XXth century, with different manifestations of a new architectural vision that was certainly influencing the different cities of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, including Zagreb.

After the First World War the National University Library in Zagreb received continuously journals and publications in major foreign languages, but mostly from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. Because of the proximity with Vienna and Prague, the work of Adolf Loos with the Steiner house in Vienna (1910) or Muller house in Prague (1930) was certainly well known, mostly because several architects studied in those cities. The De Stijl movement had already developed in the Nederland and Stjepan Planić asked Theo Van Doesburg to write an article for the journal *The Croatian Review* and Planić himself wrote a unique monograph on the modern trends in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia entitled *Problems of Modern Architecture* where a large number of architects from Croatia and Serbia published their own work. The Croatian architect Ernest Weissmann, who collaborated with Adolf Loos (1926-27) and Le Corbusier (1927-28) and was part of the group *Zemlja*, was an active member of CIAM that had its first congress in 1928 in Switzerland.

Major references across Eastern Europe were the work of Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus in Dresden, the work of Mies van der Rohe with his villa Tugendhat (1929-30) in Brno and, finally, the work of Le Corbusier, with projects such as villa Stein 1927 and Ville Savoye 1929, considered all landmarks of the new modernity.

Main influences were coming also from other cities in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In Belgrade Milan Zloković, who studied in Graz and in the early Twenties, had followed some courses in Paris, has built for himself a villa in 1927-28 very similar to the work of Loos and other early modernists. The photographs of this villa were showed in 1929 in one of the first exhibition on modern architecture and received immediate interest. Zloković was also the author of another house in Belgrade, villa Šterić (1932), where the main volume is decomposed in several smaller parts all painted in different colors, recalling the work of the De Stijl movement. In Belgrade in 1929 a group of four architects, including Zloković, founded GAMM, that had as a primary scope the development of modern architecture in the current practice and, at the same time, the dismiss of the prevailing eclecticism of the time.

Certainly, the international exhibition of the Weissenhof in Stuttgart in 1927 organized by the Werkbund and coordinated by Mies van der Rohe, became the main international window on the social and architectural innovations proposed by the Modern Movement, where Behrens, Poelzig, Hilberseimer, Oud, Le Corbusier, Gropius and van der Rohe himself participated with original projects, main reference for all the countries in Europe, including Croatia.

At the same time, besides the major role played by important figures like Viktor Kovacić in Zagreb and Joze Plečnik in Ljubljana, there was a consistent number of other architects in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia that started their own careers with projects and buildings of a clear innovative character, showing a shift towards modernity or, at least, towards an early purism that anticipated the Modern Movement. These architects were I. Vurnik, V. Subić, M. Fabiani in Slovenia; M. Zloković, B. Kojić, M. Belobrč and N. Dobrović in Serbia; D. Ibler, S. Planić, S. Löwy, J. Pičman, A. Albin and V. Antolić in Croatia and, finally, the Kadić brothers and a bit later D. Grabrijan and Neidhardt in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some of these architects had studied abroad in Austria, Czechoslovakia or Hungary, had visited major international events such as the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris in 1925 that contained the *Esprit Nouveau Pavilion* by Le Corbusier and had worked in prestigious offices in Europe.

Zagreb

During the Thirties Zagreb went through an interesting period of urban planning that originated from the necessity of mediating between the Master Plan of 1923 and the development of the Lower City. One of the issues that needed to be resolved was the conciliation between the existing rural structure and the new layout of regular streets that had been already extended in the same years. The solution was innovative and consisted in the creation of large urban blocks that had external compact perimeters with new buildings aligned to the new street, enclosing internal areas that incorporated the rural network of paths as well as the existing agricultural buildings. This solution had the effect of creating almost two superimposed cities, one large with a regular layout that was following the modern needs of movement and a second one, internal to the urban blocks, that maintained its agricultural character.

In the office for the Master Plan, that was created for the realization of the new urban layout, there were young architects, many of which had returned from their studies in Berlin, Vienna or Prague and were eager to bring to

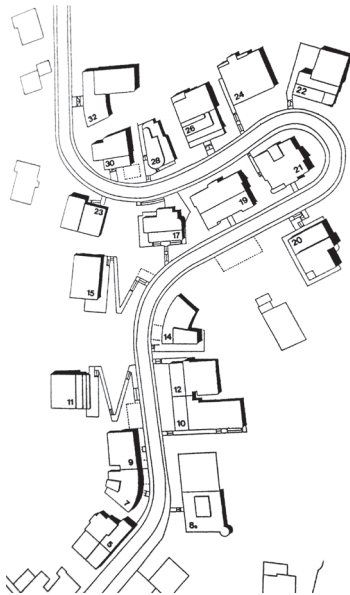


Fig. 1
Plan of Novakova street, Zagreb.

Fig. 2
Views of the buildings along Novakova street, Zagreb 1939 (from *Project Zagreb. Transition as Condition, Strategy, Practice*, Barcelona 2007).



their own city what they had learned abroad. Moreover, the city promoted a series of competitions for specific urban lots, trying to put together the needs of the private ownerships with the desire of creating innovative solutions coherent with the master plan. The result was that several architects proposed strategic interventions to reinforce this master plan either by connecting the new network of streets with the inner part of these blocks or by resolving specific urban conditions, such as urban corners. Among these we could list the ones designed by Drago Ibler (Wellisch Block, 1930), by Stephan Planić (Nepradak building, 1935), by S. Löwy (Radovan block, 1934), and the large and central Endowment Block (1930).

Novakova Street

However, this paper intends to present more in detail a similar example of a coherent urban intervention of the early Thirties represented by a residential development built on a hill just beside the cathedral, along Novakova street, connecting the lower town with Šalata Hill.

Novakova street consists of a series of projects done by different architects in Zagreb that included originally independent buildings of small dimensions aliened along the curvilinear and ascending path of Novakova street. Differently from the Weissenhof, Novakova was not conceived as a work-

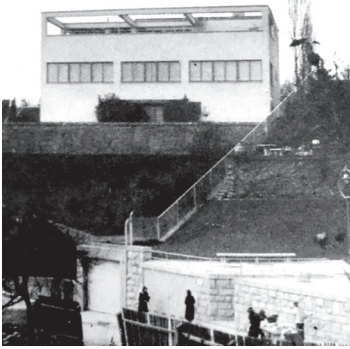


Fig. 3
S. Gomboš and M. Kauzlaric ,
Spitzer House Novakova street
n. 15, Zagreb 1931-1932.



Fig. 4
S. Gomboš and M. Kauzlaric ,
Spitzer House Novakova street
n. 15, present view, Zagreb
1931-1932.

ing-class district, but was rather for a higher and richer social class. It was neither state – nor city – sponsored, nor did it have any sort of official support. Given the critical economic crisis of the late Twenties/early Thirties in Croatia, people were reluctant to deposit their money in banks and preferred investments in the residential construction that could provide a steady income in rent money. Thus, private capital assumed the dominant role where private investors became the main clients who commissioned architectural designs. Most of them were architects, lawyers, doctors, industrials and merchants and their position in the society can be illustrated by the presence of a maid's room in most of the villas. Thus, in Zagreb the shift occurred from the construction of complex estates to small residential buildings and family houses. The owners of the parcels could choose their own architect and very often the same architects were owners, designers, structural engineers, and contractors. All the buildings had to follow specific regulations about density, height, and depth of construction and the only bureaucratic step was the approval from the Facade Commission that granted the homogeneous character to Novakova Street, insisting on the elimination of any sort of ornament in order to maintain a consistent formal vocabulary and control of the massing to ensure views between houses. Following the renewed cultural conditions above mentioned and the general demands, the built projects abandoned any sort of reference to the art nouveau decoration or neo-classical details and rather searched for simple compositions of volumes and regular solutions with simple and plane facades. Most of the buildings were constructed in reinforced concrete, following what had already been done by Loos, Le Corbusier, and others, had simple stereometric forms, had windows and openings without any sort of frames or moldings, had open balconies projecting out of the volumes, had flat roofs or open terraces at the top levels and most of them were painted in white color. All the villas followed the morphology of the site and adapted themselves to the changes in the level of the street, integrating themselves into the landscape.

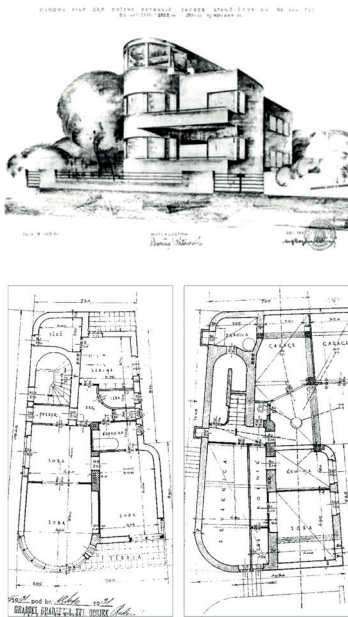


Fig. 5

B. Petrović, Novakova street n. 28 perspective, 1932 (from *Bešlić T. Urban Villas in Novakova street in Zagreb by architect Bogdan Petrović*, Zagreb 2010).

Fig. 6

B. Petrović, Novakova street n. 28 plan, 1932 (from *Bešlić T. Urban Villas in Novakova street in Zagreb by architect Bogdan Petrović*, Zagreb 2010).

Fig. 7

B. Petrović, Novakova street n. 28, present view, Zagreb 1932.



Between 1931 and 1941 twenty villas were constructed, most of them, in the early period, single-family houses and later 3-4 storeys apartment buildings. There were fifteen Croatian architects that built the villas; among the total of twenty, three were designed by S. Gomboš and M. Kauzlarić and six were designed by Bogdan Petrović.

Villa Spitzer (Novakova 15), designed by S. Gomboš and M. Kauzlarić, is probably the most well-known of this beautiful street. Kauzlarić was a student of Drago Ibler and a member of *Zemlja* and, in the early twenties, the two started their own office with work both in Zagreb and Dubrovnik. Villa Spitzer is a single-family house built on three levels and composed by a very simple volume, built at a higher level in relation to the street and with open views towards the cathedral of Zagreb in the back. A family house with rooms for servants, an elevator that connected the kitchen to the dining room on the first floor, a strip of horizontal windows that allowed connection with the outside space.

The plan is a simple rectangle with a very simple organization of the internal spaces, where the last floor is primarily an open terrace with a concrete structure that creates a canopy. The main façade is simply articulated with strip horizontal windows on the second floor and an open loggia at the last level. The villa embodies the famous “five points” of modern architecture established by Le Corbusier in 1926, having a free plan and free façade, strip windows and a roof garden, all features that create a direct parallel to the early work of the Swiss master.

Even if the villa went through significant changes that ruined its own original design, Villa Spitzer, for its own simplicity, its year of construction (1931) and for its evident references to the work of the big masters of the Modern Movement, must be recognized as a landmark of modern architecture in Zagreb and in the entire Croatia.

As mentioned, Bogdan Petrović was another of the main architects of the development of Novakova street, building six houses (Novakova 10, 11, 23, 26, 28 and 32), considering that House 28 was his own house. The projects by Petrović are simple and articulated; there is often the desire of combining simple rectangular volumes with circular projecting ones that offer to the building a strong dynamic quality. In House 28, the intersection between a three levels cylindrical volume and a series of smaller rectangu-



Fig. 8
Ante Grgic , Novakova street n. 20 present view, Zagreb.

Fig. 9
Ivo Kulišek and Ivan Senk, Novakov street n. 17 present view, Zagreb 1932.

Fig. 10
B. Petrovic , Novakova street n. 32 present view, Zagreb 1938.

lar ones on the side becomes the main feature of the house, remembering projects done by Eric Mendelsohn or Alberto Sartoris.

The same happens to a lesser degree in House 10 where the building ends in one corner with a cantilevered circular volume with strip windows and a terrace on top. The overall composition is very effective and the final result indicates a very mature ability of combining different volumes and geometries and offering a dynamic quality. House 32 is purely a volume with a continuous curvilinear façade that follows the bend of the street. The different levels have linear balconies that offer a space of mediation between the interior and the exterior, offering open views given the high location of the house on the top of the hill. All Petrović's projects show consistent research towards modern models, somehow different from Villa Spitzer, thus showing a diversity in the architectural vocabulary in the buildings along Novakova street but a rather a strong consistency in dealing with modernism.

Conclusions

Besides the Weissenhof in Stuttgart or eventually the much larger White City built in Tel Aviv in the Thirties by German-Jews architects that returned to Israel, we are not aware of such a coherent urban development done in the early Thirties like Novakova street. In fact, it stands as a little-known example in architectural literature that originates in Zagreb from single individuals and investors that followed the culture of the moment and understood the economical and cultural benefits given by a shift towards modernism, both in architectural typology, language, technology as well as in entrepreneurship.



Fig. 11
Moses Lorber, Novakova street
n. 21 present view, Zagreb 1935.



Fig. 12
S. Gomboš and M. Kauzlaric ,
Novakova street n. 24 present
view, Zagreb 1935-36.

Fig. 13
S. Gomboš and M. Kauzlaric ,
Novakova street n. 24 present
view, Zagreb 1935-36.



Bibliography

BEŠLIĆ T. (2010) – *Urban Villas in Novakova street in Zagreb by architect Bogdan Petrović*, Prostor, Zagreb.

BLAGOJEVIĆ L. (2003) – *Modernism in Serbia. The elusive margins of Belgrade Architecture 1919-1941*, Cambridge and London MIT Press, Cambridge.

DOKIĆ, DEJAN (2007) – *Elusive Compromise: The Inevitable Specificity of Interwar Yugoslavia*, Columbia University Press, New York.

GRIMMER V., MARDULJAS M. e RUSAN A. (edited by) (2010) – *Continuity and Modernity: Fragments of Croatian Architecture from Modernism to 2010*, Arhitektst, Zagreb.

KULIĆ V., MARDULJAS M. e THALER W. (edited by) (2012) – *Modernism in-between. The mediatory architecture of socialist Yugoslavia*, Jovis Verlag, Berlin.

LASLO A. (2010) – *Architectural Guide, Zagreb 1898-2010*, Arhitektst and Društvo arhitekata, Zagreb.

PIGNATTI L. e GRUOSSO S. (edited by) (2017) – *Crossing Sightlines. Traguardare l'Adriatico*, Aracne, Roma.

PIGNATTI L. (2019) – *Modernità nei Balcani, da Le Corbusier a Tito*, LetteraVentidue, Siracusa.

Lorenzo Pignatti is full professor and Director of the Department of Architecture - Università G. d'Annunzio – Pescara (Italy) where he teaches architectural design and carries out studies and research on the Adriatic-Balkan region. He has promoted numerous international exchange initiatives, organized conferences and workshops in various countries and published various contributions on these issues. He is Professor Emeritus of the University of Waterloo (Canada) and scientific consultant of the Rome Program that the same university carries out in Italy. He has always been an investigator of various phenomena related to the development of modernity and has reinterpreted them both in theoretical research and in design. He is a founding partner of the Ottone Pignatti Architetti (Rome) which has concentrated its work on urban regeneration and on the design of public spaces; among these the redevelopment project of Piazza San Cosimato in Rome.