

# BUILDING(S) OF NOSTALGIA

## BUDOVA(NÁ) NOSTALGIA

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THE CARING STATE AND  
ARCHITECTURE: SITES OF  
EDUCATION AND CULTURE IN  
SOCIALIST COUNTRIES, 2021

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The collective monograph *The Caring State and Architecture: Sites of Education and Culture in Socialist Countries* was published in 2021 by the publication department of the Croatian Ethnological Society. Supported by the University of Zagreb, the host institution of the publication's editors Jasna Galjer and Sanja Lončar, the result is an exceptional publication focusing on the theme of multipurpose buildings for education and culture, and their societal significance in the socialist and post-socialist eras. It comprises an interdisciplinary investigation in which the authors examine the given phenomenon from the standpoint of art history, ethnology, sociology, anthropology, architecture, musicology, or political science in the developmental context of former socialist countries: Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Hungary. Though after 1945, these states had largely similar economic and ideological frameworks of state socialism, each of them after 1990 experienced individual trajectories of development with widely differing dynamics. What still links them, however, is a "shared" past, represented today by the (more or less) living material and non-material products of the previous regime. One essential component is the present volume's topic of multipurpose buildings that, in the socialist era, were intended to support education, culture, and no less the spread of political ideas and hence held exceptional importance.

The individual contributions examine the phenomenon of multipurpose buildings for education and culture from various angles of interpretation, placing them in the political, social, and cultural context of each specific country and period. Most frequently, this built artefact is followed from the standpoint of its development as a typological category or through examination of specific architectonic

realisations. At the same time, a variety of other factors (political, social, etc.) are involved that influenced the form's development, as well as the relationships or memories that these places generated. Special attention is granted to changes in the functioning of these buildings in the period from the end of the 1980s until the present, with attempts at evaluating the level of preservation of their architectural values and social roles.

The subject of research of the included authors presents a wide range of cultural and educational multipurpose structures. Yet what realisations can be justifiably classified under this conception? The editors of the publication state in their introduction that in the case of European states, it implies an exceptionally large and diverse group of buildings and institutions (p. 16). Taking into account the relatively restricted length of this anthology, it is necessary to emphasise that all the same, the publication presents an unusually broad spectrum of buildings in this typology, as well as their changes in the context of the development of specific countries or cities in the investigated period. Considering the international range of authors contributing, it is also worth mentioning the editors' success in handling the English translations of various institutional names, typologies, or structural components, which depending on the period and country examined had highly specific conceptual delimitations.

As the thematic range of contributions is indeed so wide, the present review aims to draw attention to the most noteworthy and most essential points in the contributions to the current volume.

The greatest share of texts consists of contributions from Croatian experts, thanks to which the reader has the chance to gain a

knowledge of the question of multipurpose buildings in this nation all the more thoroughly. As elsewhere in state-socialist Europe, the start of buildings for public culture and education in Croatia reaches back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This theme, which Sonja Lončar addresses in her contribution allows for a presentation of the entire range of this typology. Specifically, she focuses on the architectural oeuvre and programmatic text of the Croatian architect Aleksandar Freudenreich, through which it is possible to observe the changes in the development of this category through the many differing political and social-cultural changes in the land. Freudenreich's work, entitled *Educational Hearths: A handbook for encouraging the founding and construction of community centres with halls in Croatia* (1943), forms not only a unique instance but indeed the very first such text in Croatian architecture addressing multipurpose buildings for education and culture (p. 67). Further, she stresses the exceptionally broad range and fertile career of this architect, combined with his strong interest in the theatre arts and in folk culture.<sup>1</sup>

As an opposing counterpart to the "mass-produced" and not always architecturally impressive buildings of small community centres or houses of culture, there also existed the buildings intended for major institutions of nationwide importance. Reinforcing their significance was the placement in prominent localities of major cities, exceptional architectural forms, or luxurious interior fittings. One such building is the *Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall* in Zagreb<sup>2</sup> - one of Croatia's most frequently visited cultural institutions, which at the time of its completion could boast of exceptional acoustical conditions. Previously a location for the meetings of social elites, later open to all working people, the Lisinski Concert Hall is one positive example of a building and institution in the former regime that still enjoys popularity among its visitors in the present.

Also included in the series of buildings for major Croatian cultural and educational institutions is the previously noted *Moša Pijade Workers' University* in Zagreb, discussed in the contributions by Jasna Galjer and Tihomir Žiljak. The largest and the oldest institute of higher education in Croatia, it was founded in 1953 as part of the process of establishing "workers' universities" throughout Yugoslavia, with the goal of educating the working population and integrating them into the process of national industrialisation (p. 121). Tihomir

Žiljak in his contribution follows the impact of political factors on the development of the institution and the effects of its activity in terms of educational programs, financing, or adaptation of university spaces. Jasna Galjer, in turn, examines the influence of structuralism on architecture and planning, using as her example the city of Zagreb and its university. Particularly interesting here is the sub-chapter *CIAM and the Transfer of Architectural Ideas and Ideologies in the 1950s*, pointing to the inspirational sources for architect Radovan Nikšić in his design for the University of Zagreb. In this section, we learn of his active relationship with the Dutch architectural scene, which he established during his work and study term with the Dutch architects Johannes H. van den Broek and Jakob Bakema. In 1959, the same Croatian architect participated in the last official meeting of IAM in Otterlo, where he presented his project for the university building (p. 107). Galjer's text forms a significant contribution to the discussion on architectural creation in the socialist era, drawing attention to the mutual connections and influences linking architects in the East, the West, or equally in non-aligned nations.

The case study by Dragana Konstantinović from Serbia completes the section of contributions discussing significant buildings, complexes, or institutions of national importance in the territory of former Yugoslavia. Here, she takes as her topic one of the most extensive sports and communal structures constructed in Yugoslavia - *SPENS*. Its architects, Živorad Janković and Branko Bulić, conceived it as a multipurpose structure with an ingenious spatial design of internal "streets". By including this realisation among Janković's "megastructures", the author underlines the building's most salient aspect, its size, which currently forms a problematic dimension linked to the ideological program of buildings from the socialist era (p. 173).

As in Yugoslavia, multifunctional educational-cultural buildings form a sizeable category of built objects in the former Warsaw Pact states of Central Europe. That these institutions were not always newly built structures is tellingly underlined by the contribution by Veronika Rollová, discussing the adaptations to Prague Castle. Here, the changes are followed through the series of grandiose projects for museums or galleries, or the "Path of Socialism", planned to present the history of the Czech (and Slovak) nation in alliance with the new socialist ideology.

The institution of the “House of Culture” in both Hungary and Czechoslovakia<sup>3</sup> is retrospectively addressed in the texts by Mariann Simon and Michaela Janečková, through an analysis of its typological evolution. Janečková, in the introductory part of her text examining specific examples of the type from the period before the end of World War II, confirms her thesis that the culture houses built in the socialist period are not exclusively the product of Communist ideology (p. 46). She provides a brief overview of similar institutions, indeed predecessors, from the eras of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy or the first Czechoslovak republic. Both authors, in the context of socialist institutions, discuss the projection of shifts in the political-social climate into the very titles of the institutions, names of buildings, or even designations of their components.

A certain nostalgic mood present in all texts in the present anthology is most forceful in the contribution by Lejla Kreševlaković at the conclusion, where she investigates the individual testimonies of direct participants in the events connected to the community centres in present-day Serbia. The central theme of these conversations was the various milestones in the existence of these buildings, which held a major role in shaping relationships with the community or the ties of the community to these locations. Additionally, the contribution addresses witnesses speaking of the results of the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1992-1995 period, which in her view were another reason, along with the end of Tito’s socialist regime, for the gradual decay and the impossibility of renewal of the role of these buildings. By contrast, she regards as still vital and worthy of preservation the previously noted social relations and personal ties associated with them, which she describes as a major component of non-material cultural heritage. (p. 202)

Despite the scepticism towards the revival of this phenomenon, as expressed in most of the case studies, it is still necessary at this point to emphasise one positive aspect linked to the current attitude of the public to this built heritage – among other things – from the socialist era. With the urgency of the need to preserve it, there has emerged in recent years a more intensive desire to protect it through researchers becoming able to communicate the values of post-war architecture in both the expert and lay communities. The result, in turn, is a rising interest in this part of architectural heritage, which attests to a change in

the perception of these buildings from the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even this anthology is, therefore, an exceptionally significant contribution to the discussion on whether the houses of culture, community centres, and other multifunctional buildings for culture and education are currently worthy of attention, preservation, and further use.

**1** Architect Aleksandar Freudenreich (1892-1974) was also active in both professional theatre and the organisation of amateur cultural undertakings. His activities were strongly linked to the field of ethnology – involving research into vernacular architecture and, during his term at the Ministry of Construction of the Croatian People’s Republic, assisting in the renovation of war-damaged villages in Croatia. LONČAR, Sanja. 2021. Programmatic Texts and Understanding the Socio-Cultural and Political Dimensions of Architectural Typologies; The Example of the Book Educational Hearths (1943) by Croatian Architect Aleksandar Freudenreich. In: Galjer, J. and Lončar, S. (eds.). *The Caring State and Architecture: Sites of Education and Culture in Socialist Countries*. Zagreb: Ethnological Society and The University of Zagreb, pp. 67 – 93.

**2** In 1973, the building won the *City of Zagreb Award* and in 1974 the *Zagreb Salon Award* UNKIĆ, Ana. 2021. The Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall (Zagreb); An Exclusive Space and/or a Place of Diversity. In: Galjer, J. and Lončar, S. (eds.). *The Caring State and Architecture: Sites of Education and Culture in Socialist Countries*. Zagreb: Ethnological Society and The University of Zagreb, pp. 137 – 153.

**3** A publication appeared in 2021 on the theme of houses of culture in Czechoslovakia, see: VEVERKA, Lukáš. 2021. *Mezi sjezdy a tanečními. Kapitoly z dějin kulturních domů*. Praha: CA Press, 252 p.