Re-opening the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade. Notes on Non-alignment and the Canonical

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October 20th, 2017. Hundreds of people of all ages — families with children, teenagers, elderly — queue in front of the entrance to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (MoCAB). The event is reported in most of the Serbian press, radio and TV. Quite unusual and an astute communication stunt, the opening lasts for seven days, during which period the museum will be opened for 24 hours, with free access.

After being closed for ten years, pending an important and complete restoration, the building is reopened on exactly the same date as its original inauguration, October 20th, 1965, in order to meet the long-lasting expectation of the public (both professional and general) for this architectural landmark to come back to life.

One of the most important modern public edifices in the New Belgrade, and housing a major collection of Yugoslav modern art, the museum was also among the first institutions of its kind in Europe. The MoCAB was founded in 1958, an event followed by an architectural competition in 1960, won by Ivan Antić (1923-2005) and Ivana Raspopović (1930-2015), both young and promising architects trained in the Modernist tradition. This was their first commission together (to be followed by the strange and powerful brick memorial dedicated to the victims of October 1941, opened in 1976 in Sumarice — tragic, uncanny visual reminder of *pittura metafisica*), a remarkable example of experiment with modernist architecture at the margins of canonical Western Europe. The building was completed in 1965, and was awarded the same year the October Prize of the City of Belgrade for architecture and urbanism, the highest and most respected local award of the time.

Highly acclaimed by both the press and the public already at the time of its opening in 1965, both the institution (programmatically showcasing and collecting modern and contemporary Yugoslav art) and its architecture (an outstanding example of how modernity was absorbed and locally reinterpreted) were to become important landmarks in a larger urban and political construction, that of the new Capital of post-war Yugoslavia. Moreover, architectural critics (such as Vladimir Kulić) suggest that the museum deserves to be included in the international history of modernism, as a project that at the same time innovates within the canon of modern architecture and further anticipates late- and post-modern concepts in museum architecture.[1]

In order to understand the role of the Museum and of its re-opening exhibition within the contemporary Belgrade cultural scene, I will briefly recall the context of its appearance in the mid-1960s.

A land historically bordering the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires (thus, a symbolic margin between the Orient and the Occident), the territory beyond the river Sava started to be integrated into the planning strategies for the new Capital of Yugoslavia as early as the interwar period, after the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918. The extension of Belgrade became effective with the construction of the New Belgrade (Novi Beograd). The master plan was ready in 1950, following the urban layout first sketched in 1946-1948 by the renowned modernist architect Nikola Dobrović, who was appointed by Josip Broz Tito to carry out the reconstruction project of the city that was severely damaged during the Second World War.

1 Vladimir Kulić, "The Museum of Contemporary Art: Why Architecture Matters" (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art Monograph), to be published in 2018.

The left bank of the Sava River offered the perfect setting for the establishment of the new administrative and political district of Belgrade as symbol of a new beginning of the new Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's capital city. Seen as the "heart of New Yugoslavia",[2] the construction of the New Belgrade followed a functionalist scheme, inspired by the modernist urban theories that had already been influential for Yugoslav architects in the interwar period. A vast city-in-the-park emerged on the former marshland along the river, and although the original radial structure proposed by Dobrović was gradually abandoned after 1950, the initial idea of enhancing the monumentality of major political and administrative buildings had been the basis for some important architectural competitions for the Presidency of the Government (1947) and later for the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The construction of New Belgrade was seriously slowed down after 1950, due to political and economic crises, but was picked up again during the 1960s and 1970s, on new foundations that would focus on the construction of large housing units.

The choice of a functionalist approach and a modernist image was both an architectural and a political decision, one that would meet the agenda of a socialist regime that was interested not only in social and economic modernization or in ideological ideas about progress, but also in internationally displaying the image of an independent Yugoslavia. Since architecture had a crucial political role as instrument of propaganda, the political discourse had to address directly the image that architecture and the new city were about to create. As shown by architectural historian Ljiljana Blagojević, this choice demonstrated a decisive shift from socialist realism — dominant in the Eastern countries under the influence of the Soviet Union — towards a new paradigm, an invention that was named the *contemporary socialist architecture*.[3]

This declaration of contemporaneity was congruent with Tito's famous declaration of non-alignment and the foundation of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1956, a political statement that rejected the influence or interference of any superpower (United States or Soviet Union) in internal political affairs. This particular position of Yugoslavia during the Cold War reflected a strong will to define a specific identity, focusing on contemporaneity and a re-interpretation of socialism itself ("self-managed socialism", "market socialism").[4] The progressive ideals and aesthetic of modern architecture fitted such an agenda perfectly.

It is against the background of this statement of strong contemporary identity at the borders of Western modernity and at the shifting margin of the Socialist block, that the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade was constructed in 1965. After the 1990s, in the context of a conflicting geopolitical scene that finally led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the MoCAB gradually declined and was severely damaged by a missile during the NATO bombings in 1999. After 2000, the building was partially revitalized, but although serious efforts were made in planning the refurbishment, the museum had to close in 2007 due to lack of political support combined with the economic crisis. Nevertheless, the institution continued a dynamic and uninterrupted exhibition activity in two other improvised satellite venues.

After a decade of works, the MoCAB finally reopened this autumn, following a meticulous restoration that managed to conserve the crystal-shaped iconic image of the modernist original, while introducing new functionalities and new conservation requirements, and carefully enhancing the spatial and architectural qualities of the building.

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2 "…the center of the of the brotherly union of Yugoslav people", Milorand Panić-Surep, cited in Brigitte le Normand, *Designing Tito's Capital. Urban Planning, Modernism, and Socialism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), vi.

3 Ljiljana Blagojević, "The Capital of No-City Land", in *Differentiated Neighborhoods of New Belgrade*, edited by Zoran Erić (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009), 22-33.

4 This special situation that encouraged internal economic competition has led important left-theorists such as Henri Lefebvre to regard Yugoslavia as having a very particular position in the "urban revolution", one that could, if managed correctly - in his opinion - avoid both the crises of neo-liberalism and the limitations of socialism. Yet in a text that accompanied the presentation for the International Competition for the New Belgrade Urban Structure in 1986, Lefebvre strongly criticizes the zoning schemes implemented in the city development, that failed to realise the idea of the "Socialist City". However, Lefebvre's visit at the Korčula Summer School for Philosophy made him describe the Yugoslav context as "Dionysian Socialism". See Zoran Erić, "Differentiated Neighbourhoods of New Belgrade", in Erić, *Differentiated Neighbourhoods*, 9-20.





The volume emerges from the concrete frames that define the cantilevered white marble zigzagged cubes of the facade floating over a Mies-like glass box containing the transparent ground floor of the exhibitions. Perhaps a slightly lighter shade of grey for the frames might have been closer to the original idea of contrast between the marble and the concrete. But this could just as well be a speculation, since what is accessible to visitors like myself are only the photographic images of the initial building and, of course, later examples that resonate with the strong and complex image of the MoCAB; and I am thinking here of Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum (completed in 1972) or even of I.M. Pei's Mudam in Luxembourg (completed in 2006).

The original strong relation between the park and the building was acquired through opening the glass box towards the outside, suspending the crystal-like rotated cubes over the ground floor as perhaps a remote reminder of the former marshland or the *corbusean* pilotis, and providing openings at the higher floors that, due to a clever spatial organization, allow for a permanent view towards the park, the river and the city. This relation with the exterior has now been strengthened by the open-air sculpture park — an exhibition that continues the interior. At the same time, the introduction of slightly darker glass in the façades ensures an elegant mediation between the genuine aesthetic of the building and the light protective ambiance of the exhibition halls, thus keeping open the view to the park and simultaneously meeting the new conservation and museographical standards.

A special attention has been given to the restoration of the interior design, to the use of materials (wooden panels and ceilings, concrete walls, staircase, some of the original chairs restored by their initial manufacturer, who was traced down and involved in the process), and to the neutral yet effective design of the museum furniture (benches, publication stands, children workshop area, lavatories, signaletic). All these elements enable the rich and fluid spatial experience of the two juxtaposed grids (the skeleton and the 45-degree double-rotated cubes), allowing permanent plunging views between the floors and the exhibition spaces.

Further intentions announced by the museum staff envisage the construction of an outdoor pavilion for a cafeteria that would change periodically, following an architectural competition - a project inspired by the annual project of the Serpentine Gallery for the Pavilions in the Kensington Gardens.

The MoCAB reopened with a large exhibition that offers a complex retrospective of more than a century of art produced in Yugoslavia and Serbia, under the title "Sequences. Art in Yugoslavia and Serbia from the Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art". As the title indicates, the show is organized chronologically around a series of eighteen moments illustrating historical shifts in Yugoslav and Serbian art. As stated by the curators, "the notion of 'sequence' comes from film terminology, where it stands for a series of scenes, connected by the unity of time or location, forming a distinct narrative unit."[5]

The sequences are defined chronologically and stylistically and demonstrate a remarkable synchronicity with the corresponding moments in international art:[6] "Bourgeois Modernism", "Social Art", "Abstract Painting", "Zenitism", "Slovene Constructivism", "Belgrade Surrealism", "Neo-avant-gardes", "New Artistic Practices", "Abstract Landscape and Vitalist Sculpture", "Figurative Existentialism", "High Modernism Abstraction", "Late Modernism Abstraction", "Photography and Society", "New Objectivity", "New Image", "Photography and Subculture", "The art of the 1990s in Serbia", "The Art of Today".

5 Dejan Sretenović, "'Sequences': The Reading Manual", in *Sequences: art in Yugoslavia and Serbia from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art* (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017).

6 While most of the titles of the sequences are self-explanatory when in comes to parallels with European and international art tendencies, the "Zenitism" is probably less known as a local movement. It derives from "Zenit", a journal that appeared in Zagreb and Belgrade between 1921 and 1926 under the direction of Ljubomir Micić and promoted most of the European avant-garde art: Expressionism, Cubism, Constructivism, post-Cubist abstraction. The movement was interested in literature, poetry, visual arts, graphic design, film, architecture and music.




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Carefully curated and professionally documented, the show includes all of the major artists active in Yugoslavia and Serbia over a span of a decade, while masterly using the museum in a way that both accentuates and refines the spatial experience. The combination of the free plan and the *Raumplan* (major architectural innovations of high modernism) results in a permanent fluctuation between the floors, heights and various rooms situated at different levels, so that from each floor one can perceive the combination of spaces on the upper and lower levels, as well as catch glimpses of the other exhibition areas on the same level. This movement enables a very particular and dynamic experience: from one "sequence" one can anticipate the following ones or recall the previous, while visually pendulating from one historical moment to another.

The fluid motion through time and stylistic sequences is ensured by the central staircase, a unifying element that connects the floors and semi-floors, from the extrovert ground floor, panoramically opened towards the park (and exhibiting the first periods of the 20th century: foundations for what will succeed), gradually going up towards the first floors showcasing the historical avant-gardes and post-war experimentation, and finally towards the more introverted top floors (less connected with the exterior, thus more adapted for video art and the variety of contemporary mediums) that present the periods of the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and the art of today.

Symbolically, the ascending format of the exhibition parallels the chronological axis of Yugoslav and Serbian art history, while the elaborate arrangement of irregular, fragmented spaces of the museum (rooms vary in size, shape, height, opening/seclusion, following the play of the juxtaposed grids) provides an extraordinary site for the complex network of associations at play on the art scene (simultaneity, overlapping layers, arborescent directions especially from the avant-garde on).

As suggested in the curatorial concept, each artistic sequence is an episode of a larger series, but it also functions as an independent show (the unity of time and space), therefore allowing later removals or replacements and enabling a dynamic, plural perspective upon recent art history. This flexibility and the possibility of constant rearrangements of the sequences of the exhibition introduce questions about the contemporary museum, a dynamic public space that has to constantly negotiate between its normative function of displaying canonical art and its mission as a mediator and facilitator of the current art scene.

The re-opening of the MoCAB challenges this very role of the museum as both a place of education and of research, one that, while re-accustoming the public to this museum, also actively contributes to re-writing the history of recent art, as a site for curatorial debate and public interaction.

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