

Code Switching: Female Architects of Yugoslav Late Modernism - Between Domesticity and Avant-Garde

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Female architects of Socialist Yugoslavia, many with families and children concurrent with their career peaks, commonly co-opted an image of the avant-garde artist for their professional lives. The explicit normalcy and domesticity of their private spheres appeared to be largely and publicly suppressed in favor of a black-clad persona, whose work and communication veered away from the everyday and relatable, choosing to focus on the outwardly conceptual, and the abstract. Additionally, the overt separation of the collective government-run architectural practice, and a simultaneous individual (i.e., private architectural practice) for women architects triggered a similar type of code switching. In that case, the avant-garde iconography provided for a consumable media-savvy figure. For the architects of Atelje Lik and the architect Svetlana Kana Radević, operating in a country where architecture was the precise embodiment of societal ideals, code-switching counteracted the established patriarchal environment, but also positioned their private practices, better placed to realize their progressive social ideals through architecture.

INTRODUCTION

On May 12, 2022, in Turin, Italy, the Serbian architect and vocalist Konstrakta (Ana Djuric) performed her song “In Corpore Sano” (A Healthy Body) at the second semifinal of the Eurovision Song contest. The performance, hailed by some as “too clever” for Eurovision, questioned the relation of mental to physical health of “the artist”, and showed Konstrakta obsessively washing her hands while rifling through names of organs and ailments which directly affect physical beauty. The lyrics end with “A sick mind in a healthy body/A sad soul in a healthy body/A desperate mind in a healthy body/A frightened mind in a healthy body/So what do we do now?”

‘In Corpore Sano’ has drawn comparison to the works of fellow Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović’s 1975 performance piece ‘Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful’. In this work, Abramović vigorously brushes her hair, with

increasing aggression, while repeating the phrase “Art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful”. Wincing in pain as she continues to brush her mane, she re-positions a banal act at the intersection of beauty and health, making it exceedingly difficult to watch.

Although there are overt similarities between Djurić and Abramović, this paper posits that deeper influences on Konstrakta’s practice come from the female architectural avant-garde of the post-war Yugoslav period. More to the point, the female architects of that period, many with families and children concurrent with career peaks, would commonly, co-opt an image of the avant-garde artist for their professional lives¹. The explicit normalcy and domesticity of their private spheres appeared to be largely publicly suppressed, in favor of a black-clad persona, whose work and communication veered away from the everyday and relatable, choosing to focus on the outwardly conceptual, and the abstract. Similarly, code switching played a part in the overt contrast of the images and roles of women when they were, often simultaneously, employed in a government-run architectural design studio (a professional collective) versus practicing as an individual, private architectural endeavor.

WOMEN IN POST-WAR YUGOSLAVIA

For the women who designed the architecture of Yugoslavia, the architect-appropriated iconic female references the woman partisan, the WWII peasant grassroots warrior, emancipated through war, and critical in defining women’s rights post-war². Although seemingly unrelated, *partisanke*³ is a direct chronological precursor to the female architects that came of age in the 1950s and 1960s. More to the point, *partizanke*⁴, photographed together all wearing the androgynous trench and knee-high leather boots, monochrome, exalted an aesthetic visually comparable to present-day Matrix movies, exemplifying a type of futurist avant-garde of female power. It was that aesthetic and attitude of unwavering female leadership that many women architects took on.

It was the female partisan fighters who formed the Women’s Antifascist Front and cemented women’s constitutional equality



Figure 1. Partizanke in Slavenska Požega, September 17, 1944. *Wiki*

in the newly formed nation, enabling women to flourish in the architectural profession. Female partisans radically advanced feminist causes and elevated women's position, solidifying the core tenant of the socialist Yugoslav state: equality is based upon the egalitarian distribution of wealth; and vice versa.

Furthermore, the formation of socialist Yugoslavia at the conclusion of WWII was predicated upon a peasant uprising against Nazi occupation, and a hard, long slog of four years of war, unaided by the East or West, which saw each family decimated and a new reinvented society being born. Having replaced a largely agrarian economy, the novel devised system of self-governance called "self-management" arose as a radical and complete transformation of ethics, social structure and working life, where the (mostly uneducated) masses were tasked with its implementation. It was a subtle yet strikingly important realization that to self-manage, and to do it well, the masses needed to have education, and thus new institutions of all types were required. Yugoslav society was completely rethought and restructured: housing, governance, all phases of education and entire industries, all created anew. Because of the reinvention – of everything – women, and women architects specifically, felt as though they could re-invent themselves too.

Crucially, reform meant the physical redesign of entire realms. Women architect practitioners often took the lead through design research, publications, and exhibitions. The great majority of architects practiced as a part of institutions: government-run design and planning institutes and public construction corporations.⁵ The default was a team structure with individual practitioners suppressed in favor of the group. Gender equality, although codified on paper, was not a reality, bowing to the profession's male-dominated culture and wider ingrained systems of inequity rooted in women's domestic labor. Although the number of women in the architectural profession significantly increased in Yugoslavia in the years after WWII, the

number of recognized female architects remained small, and their many significant works and contributions to this day remain neglected and undocumented.

ATELJE LIK

The women architects who practiced as Atelje Lik (Atelier Lik) all commanded public profiles and took on the rarefied iconic public persona of radical architect, avant-garde, whilst maintaining separate domestic private lives that contrasted this public veneer.

Founded in 1957 as a private practice, when privately owned architecture offices were scarce, Atelier LIK had the status of a creative agency.⁶ Considered a rock star supergirl group, due to their gender and young age, the principals were heavily covered by the media of the time. Comprised of four female architects – Sofija Nenadović, Vesna Matičević, Nadežda Filipon Trbojević and Dušanka Menegelo Aćimović, along with Vladislav Ivković, the sole male, the practice was led by women for the duration of its existence, until the early 1990s.⁷ The young women who led it were not members of the Communist party, but still managed to acquire large commissions and successfully maintain the practice for many decades, atypical at the time.⁸



Figure 2. "Without the Fifth": Four out of the five principals of Atelje Lik photographed in the newly constructed Belgrade airport. *Žene u arhitekturi*.

Black-clad, fashionable, glamorous and cosmopolitan, the four female architects were regularly photographed on airport runways, accepting prizes from all-male juries, or surrounded by male peers while presenting their mostly infrastructural projects. Whereas many female architects chose to, or were relegated to, designing housing and the domestic realm, Atelje Lik specialized in airports, something usually seen as the province of men, to this day. In their time, Atelje Lik designed 11 airports, including that of the capital, Belgrade.⁹

Yugoslavia undertook a massive airport construction plan because it hoped to occupy an important place in international air traffic. Being at the intersection of many important air routes connecting Western Europe to the Near, Far and Middle East and from Central and Eastern Europe to Africa and South America, the country lacked adequate infrastructure, including runway size and scope to accommodate the largest planes of the time¹⁰. Twenty airports were constructed in a decade, in cities across the country¹¹; Atelje Lik was part of this ambitious initiative.

The women were all born in 1928, two pairs of school friends who enrolled in architecture school together in 1946 and 1947, right after the war.¹² Their collaboration began in 1953, when they worked together in a Belgrade architecture office by day, creating competition works privately for themselves at night. Atelje Lik was founded when the team won the Belgrade airport competition. For the project, after having won the competition, the female team of authors invited Ivković, a friend, to work with them¹³. In professional circles, Ivković would go on to be considered as the “airport expert” for the rest of the many decades of his career¹⁴ despite the fact that immediately after winning the Belgrade airport competition, Sofija Nenadović spent 6 months working in the Paris studio of architect Henri Vicariot, designer of the Paris airport Orly.¹⁵

After the success with Belgrade Airport, Atelje LIK made competitive solutions or projects for 10 more airports in the former Yugoslavia. Their architectural team was not always complete and the authorship varied, as the members worked on projects in different combinations: The airport in Osijek, finished in 1970, was designed by Sofija Nenadović and Nada Filipon; the airport in Podgorica, built 1959-1960, by Vesna Matičević, Dušanka Menegelo and Vladislav Ivković. In the competition for the airport in Dubrovnik, Vladislav Ivković was listed as the author/winner; however, subsequently, Sofija Nenadović developed the project.¹⁶ The different combination of partners listed for each project had to do with the female partners taking professional breaks for maternity leaves.

As an example of the distance between the professional and the private spheres, the following recollection stands out. In 1966, Sofija Nenadović was on leave, having designed a residential building in the Serbian city of Smederevo, which was completed by Dušanka Menegelo. During the construction

of the building, Nenadović was unexpectedly visited at her home by the project construction team, the “delegation” from Smederevo. As Nenadović recounts: “The building was supposed to have glass railings on the terraces and they came very seriously to ask me to approve the color of the glass. I didn’t know where to turn, the baby didn’t stop crying, and I wasn’t interested in that building at the time. I said put any color, and they left happy. Later, I saw the disaster myself - they put purple glass on the terrace railings on the red brick façade”.¹⁷

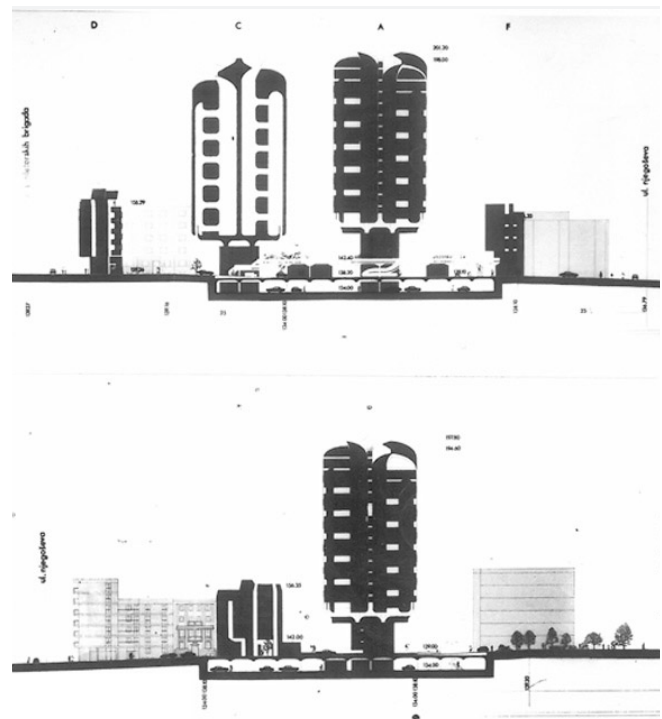


Figure 3. Sofija Nenadović's conceptual solutions for blocks A-13 and A-14 in Vračar, Belgrade. *Žene u arhitekturi*.

As evidenced, code switching was necessary not only to instill a distance between architectural practice and home, but also to allow women the space to define the professional realm as they saw it. A constructed persona dimmed the accessibility and relatability of a female domestic figure, allowing for both roles to be created and flourish independently. Addressing the assumption that domesticity and its visual culture were (or are) counter to the notion of avant-garde¹⁸, code switching was a way to un-blur the categories of architect/ colleague and wife/ mother.

That stylized aesthetic extended to the work, most notably the representational style. Drawings were bold and geometric, high-contrast renderings of pure black and white, devoid of annotation. Formal abstraction and plasticity determined the legibility of the projects, denying a technical “registration” that would have been considered normative. This description



Figure 4. Kana receiving the Federal Borba Prize. *Archive of Svetlana Kana Radević.*

resoundingly applies to the work of Svetlana Radević, known as Kana, an intensely prolific and inventive architect whose work and life spanned three continents. Kana's buildings embody the ebullient geometries and structural gymnastics of late modernism, overlaid with a materiality and textures that echo her Montenegrin roots.

SVETLANA KANA RADEVIĆ

Born in 1937, and a decade younger than the architects of Atelje Lik, Svetlana Radević also graduated from the architecture school at the University of Belgrade, albeit in 1963. Bogdan Bogdanović, the surrealist architect, designer of many Yugoslav memorials and former mayor of Belgrade, was her thesis advisor¹⁹. Kana, as was her affectionate nickname in Yugoslavia, won her first competition in 1964, at age 28, similar to Atelje Lik.²⁰ However, as the members of Atelje Lik nurtured robust domestic lives whilst keeping a distinct separation from professional ones, little is known of Kana's private life, despite a fascinating personal archive of drawings, photographs and super 8 films²¹. She was a single woman practitioner, which was at that time and place, was extraordinary.

In 1968, she won both the Republic (State) and Federal Borba Prize for her design of the Hotel Podgorica, the highest architectural honor in Yugoslavia. She was its youngest recipient ever, the only woman to win the prize, and for her very first built project.²² Undeniably for all these reasons, coverage of the Borba Prize was a media spectacle, with Kana widely photographed, always at the center, a veritable celebrity, and the only woman architect surrounded by all-male groups. "Her archive includes a photograph of her accepting the prize, clad in a black velvet dress, an ornate lace collar, and a large, confident smile as she shakes hands with the all-male jury – one of many photographic displays that attest to her cultivation of the glamorous, feminized public image of an elegant cosmopolite."²³

Architectural awards and the results of competitions were important in Yugoslavia and they were closely followed by the

public. When large and important architectural competitions were held, the publicly-accessible judging was held in prominent community locations such as conference centers and hotel event spaces, and broadcast live on the radio. The members of the jury talked about why one project was better than another – the process was transparent. This was part of the zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s of self-government in Yugoslavia. People widely contributed to public projects directly from their salaries ("samodoprinos"); therefore, they cared about the results of a sports complex, a clinical hospital center or a library. Kana's practice operated in that environment.

In 1972, having completed several built projects, Kana received a Fulbright Scholarship and moved to Philadelphia to study with Louis Kahn at the University of Pennsylvania. The sole woman out of 22 students in the class, she matriculated in a year and moved on to doctorate studies.²⁴ Even when studying at UPenn and subsequently working for Kisho Kurokawa in Tokyo, she maintained parallel trajectories of professional production – school work in Philadelphia, and competitions in Yugoslavia. Even as the funding for her doctoral studies was cut at UPenn, Kana returned to Yugoslavia to embark on a new project, Hotel Zlatibor in Užice, Serbia, having won the competition during her studies.

Kana did not marry nor start a family as would have been expected of women in her time; the intimate window into her private life, such as that of Atelje Lik is unknown. However, throughout her career, code switching centered on the dual practices that she kept, and was amplified by complex negotiations of place, gender, and architectural discourse. Across her work and in her wider creative identity, there is a differentiation between how she presented herself and her projects in her own individual private practice, as contrasted to her participation to collective design teams in the role of public civil servant, such as that at the Republic Institute for Urbanism and Planning (RZUP) in Podgorica (Titograd)²⁵. Kana consistently navigated between the media-attracting avant-garde persona of her private practice and the subdued, non-descript neutrality of collectivity in public practice²⁶.

"Complex negotiations of place, gender, and architectural discourse appear across her work, and in her wider creative identity".²⁷ The geopolitical circumstances of Kana's life, positioned her as an architectural figure who deftly engaged numerous opposing spheres across different social registers – requiring multiple types of code switching: regionally her work simultaneously referenced the Montenegrin vernacular building tradition along with the global design trends of late modernism; nationally, she put the provincial socialist republic of Montenegro and its capital Podgorica (Titograd) at the center of her work versus engaging Belgrade, Zagreb or Ljubljana, the more affluent and developed centers in terms of architectural discourse; as an architect designing social spaces and civic condensers in a country that facilitated a progressive

public sphere through each small-scale intervention; and internationally, she subverted hierarchies to work in a decentered, post-colonial axis by which the Montenegrin²⁸ architect simultaneously and seamlessly worked between Philadelphia, Tokyo, and Podgorica.²⁹

More to the point, the ingrained sexist expectation³⁰ of feminine domesticity overlaid by with post-war communist gender equality of Yugoslav state ideology meant that code-switching, a dissociative public image, and co-option of avant-garde iconography, allowed Kana to simultaneously cement her ability to have an independent creative practice, as well as to realize her progressive social ideals under a state with a covertly oppressive system.

Lastly, many of these women architects' archives of this time are lost to history and can only be reconstructed through narrative, on-the-ground research and analyses of native-language sources written at the time. With Kana, a film remains, commissioned by the state television station of Montenegro, from 1980.³¹ Titled "Life Unites Man", with Kana fashionably dressed using a stick to draw in the sand on a Montenegrin beach, the movie attempts to position her creative practice and explain the importance, influence and meaning of architecture to the general public. Engaging mostly architectural discourse, Kana talks about the seductiveness and prevalence of architectural space and its creation in the mind of an architect. "Architecture is more than an adventure of space and material. It is where aesthetic acts are converted to ethical ones."³²

CONCLUSION

The women of Atelje Lik and Svetlana Kana Radević provide a lens to scrutinize prevalent modes of women's contemporary architectural practice. For these architects, the avant-garde image used in support of their private architectural practice operated as a veneer over their complex domestic lives and company employment. The women architects of Socialist Yugoslavia code-switched in this manner in order to counter both the ingrained patriarchal perspectives, as well as the established vanguard of the time. Without this duality in their lives, they would have not been able to sustain their work at a time, and in a place, of radical social restructuring and change; their professional outputs would have similarly been substantially limited.

We can also read the code switching as an attempt to reference the modalities and systems of the West, to align with structures and techniques outside of the conventions of socialism. The avant-garde artist was beyond the societal sphere of a post-agrarian (Yugoslav) society, and was viewed as not only an intellectual figure, but also having permission to experiment and go beyond established norms. This included freedom of speech, as well as novel form, aesthetics and discourse. Atelje Lik and Svetlana Kana Radević understood this and deftly operated within it.

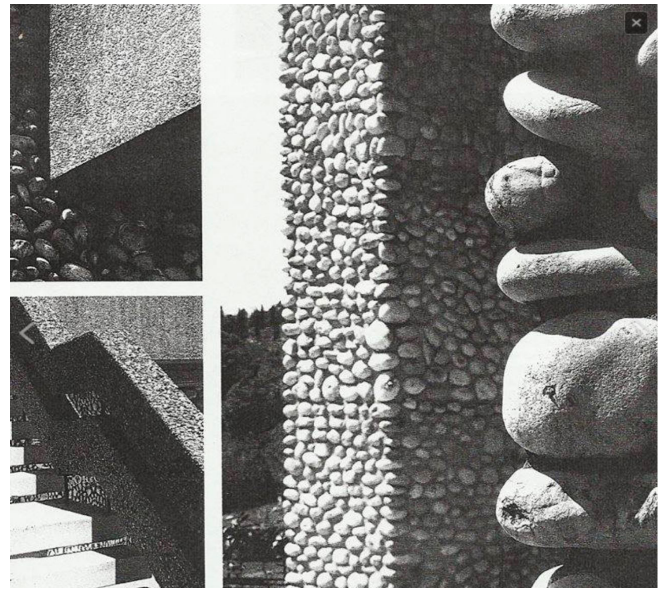


Figure 5. Details of the Hotel Podgorica showing vernacular building techniques and modernist geometric forms. *Janjusevic, Biljana.*

The practice of code switching continues for female architects today, often for the very same reasons, and it creates schisms and divergences within creative practices that could easily be seamless. In order to shift the field today, we can take a cue from the women architects discussed herein, and point to their work, acknowledging the primacy of architecture as a tool of social change, both in their society, as well as today. Only after our architecture and built works start to reflect our civic values, can we talk about new forms of knowledge, identity, community, devoid of tactics of self-representation and code switching.

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31. "Žene, Arhitektura i Crna Gora: Svetlana Kana Radević - Jedan Od Najznačajnijih Arhitekata Balkana 20. Veka - BBC News Na Srpskom." (Women, Architecture and Montenegro: Svetlana Kana Radević - One of the Most Important Architects of the Balkans of the 20th Century - BBC News In Serbian), BBC News, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-60074317>.
32. Ibid