



2024
Special Issue

AGG+ Journal for Architecture, Civil Engineering, Geodesy and Related Scientific Fields
АГГ+ часопис за архитектуру, грађевинарство, геодезију и сродне научне области

116-129

Categorisation | Original scientific paper

DOI | 10.61892/AGG202402116J

UDC | 72.036:727.6Dobrović N.

Paper received | 29/09/2023

Paper accepted | 31/10/2023

Jelica Jovanović

Independent researcher, Serbia, jelicajovanovic011@gmail.com

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* corresponding author

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CONTRIBUTION TO THE RESEARCH ON NEW BELGRADE: THE UNBUILT PROJECTS AND THE CONCEPTS OF NIKOLA DOBROVIĆ

ABSTRACT

Architect Nikola Dobrović is best known in Serbia for his only constructed building in Belgrade, the complex of the State Secretariat of National Defense (DSNO), better known as the General Staff, today an endangered cultural heritage and a crumbling building with an uncertain future. However, his short-term engagement as the head of the Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Serbia from 1946-1947, and his later professorship at the Faculty of Architecture University of Belgrade, are equally significant for Belgrade and Serbia. Documents testifying to the post-war period of his work are scattered in several places: in the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, the Museum of Science and Technology, the Historical Archive of Belgrade, and the rare publications can only be found in a few libraries in Serbia. In the course of his short-term work on New Belgrade, Dobrović provided several conceptual projects and sketches for New Belgrade within the Urban Planning Institute: the performance square, road schemes and the urban planning solution of the zone between the Palace of the Federation and the Railway Station - today's Central Zone of New Belgrade. Finally, at different stages of his career, Dobrović also designed individual objects, such as the project for the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and the building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which remained in the domain of 'paper architecture', unbuilt, and which provides an insight into the way he thought about the process of urban and spatial planning, through the positioning of buildings which would've generated the character of their immediate and distant surroundings.

Key words: *Nikola Dobrović, New Belgrade, the Greater Belgrade, Central Committee, block 32, Faculty of Electrical Engineering*

1. THE FIRST POST-WAR YEARS: GREAT ENTHUSIASM AND TREMENDOUS PROBLEMS

“No one can expect that his ideas would be accepted 100/100. 70-80 percent of chances for success are sufficient enough to give wings to one creator. He would flutter his wings if he is unable to fly due to the decrease in this percentage, regardless of the increase in all difficulties. If that percentage is reduced to only 15-20 percent compared to an even greater increase in difficulties, then it becomes clear to every person that there is no reason to fight for such percentage. The general circumstances in that case clearly show the fact that such a creator is not really necessary [1].”

Dobrović was appointed as the head of the Institute of Urban Planning in 1946, a position where he dealt with the urban planning of cities in Serbia and the so-called Greater Belgrade. In many ways, he started working on this assignment during the Second World War: in 1943, while he was travelling via Italy, he managed to join the Yugoslav Partisans on the island of Vis, where a group of experts was gathered to plan the reconstruction of the country after liberation. After the end of the war in 1944, he was appointed the head of the Department for Architecture within the Ministry of Construction of the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia, then the director of the Institute of Urban Planning of the People's Republic of Serbia in 1945 and finally the director of the Urban Planning Institute of the Executive Board of the People's Committee of the City of Belgrade in 1946. The immediate post-war years were a time of great poverty and planned distribution of personnel, so he visited cities and little towns in Serbia with the idea to organize urban planning services and develop plans, visited organizations in Belgrade and provided instructions for the design of buildings during reconstruction. A special and very big problem was that "the loss of the cadastral inventory", as Dobrović stated in his study *Konture* [2], and that there were no reliable plans of the city, which the Institute was developing along with all other tasks.¹ In addition to expert supervision of infrastructural repairs, the Institute worked on the reconstruction of Belgrade and Zemun and the planning of New Belgrade, planning of residential spaces, recreation, greenery, traffic - in general, the integration of parts of the city into one urban entity.

2. NEW BELGRADE WITHIN THE "GREATER BELGRADE"

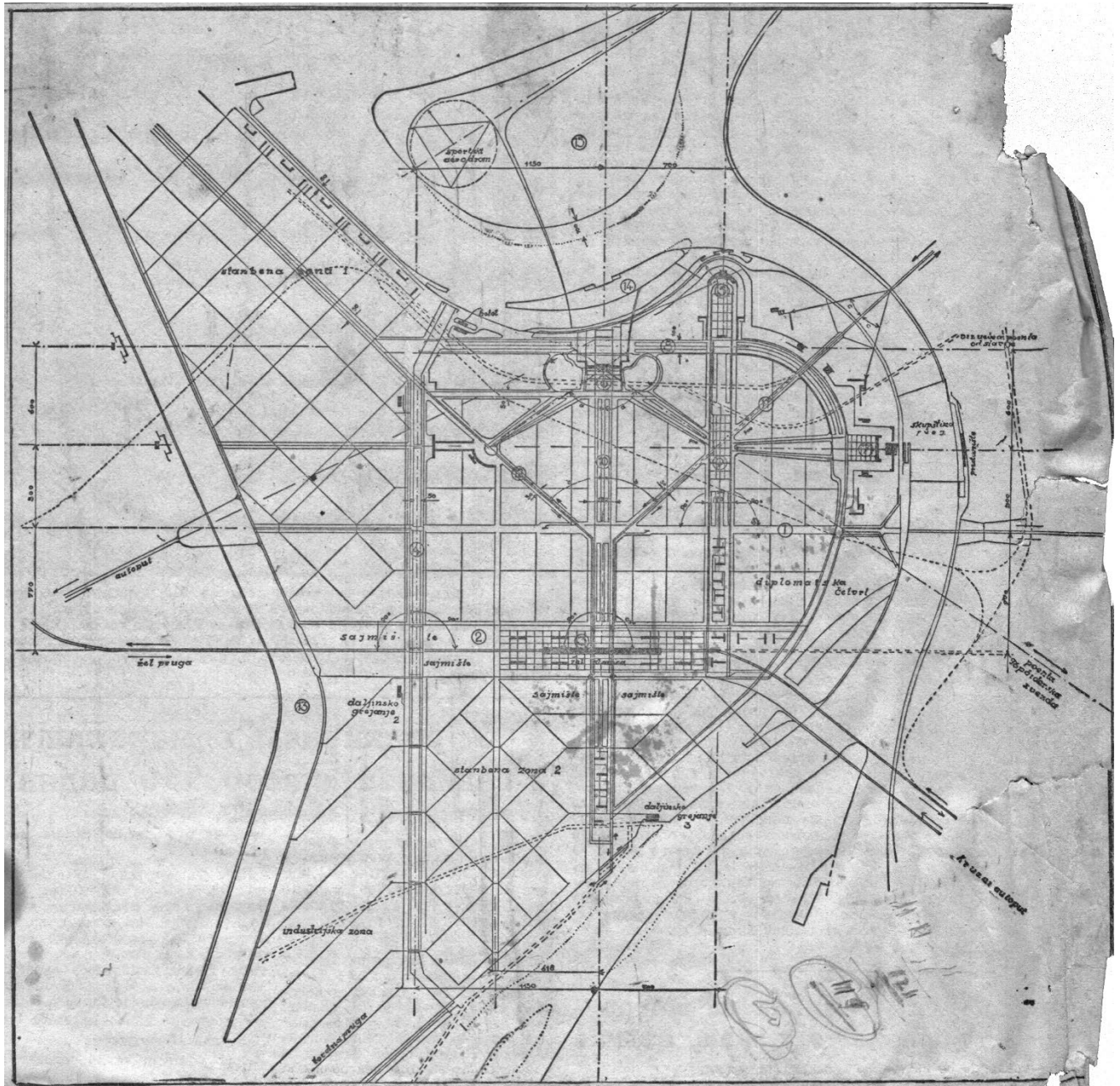
„The proper growth of a well-grounded city is easy to control at every stage of development and adapt to the new factors of life. A solid skeleton provides a future scale, which can outgrow the intended framework [2].”

Dobrović's approach towards New Belgrade is largely deduced from the larger image of the city and it is possible to observe three main starting points that are the recurrent themes in his work. The first one is the issue of the Greater Belgrade, as he would often name it in his works and always observed in a wider context, wondering about the position of Belgrade in the region, the Republic, Federation and Europe [3]. The next one is the issue of natural

¹ In order to present the scope of (his) work more clearly, it is important to note that the Urban Planning Institute later divided into the Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Serbia and the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade.

resources and the landscape with two dominant rivers: the monumental position carrying the symbolism the city has for this part of Europe. Finally, there is the theme of his understanding of the symbolism of that age, which is reflected in the construction of New Belgrade, to which he remained faithful for several decades. His engagement with the Institute ended in 1947, when he obtained the position of tenured professor at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Belgrade. Miloš Somborski assumed the position of the director of the Institute, and the New Belgrade project was taken over first by Stanko Mandić, and later on Branko Petričić. It is important to point out that soon after that, the complete administrative organization of the state changed from planned economy to self-management, as the result of the 1948 Cominform Resolution. Hence, the need for the buildings of federal ministries, which Dobrović counted on in his concept of the New Belgrade, ceased to exist: the ministries were transformed into secretariats that were all located in the Place of the Federation, i.e. the Federal Executive Council. In one word, his conception had lost its real programmatic and societal foundation, which also was not elaborated enough due to the lack of consensus about the project program – which has been another problem in the urban planning of New Belgrade for decades now, and until today visible on the ground. However, he presented it in programme indications, often wandering through different scales and scopes - from urban planning of rigidly separated zones, towards architectural design of monumental buildings that should present and trace his *demiurge* vision of (New) Belgrade [4]. In this key, it is also possible to observe the project of the Central Committee building as a form of generator of New Belgrade's urban development around its administrative and managerial headquarters. An administrative tower with an annex of classic, even soc-realist contours, dominating the Ušće area, was supposed to bring a visual benchmark into this space-. Although none of the proposals from the 1946 competition was developed, the tower still remained as a desired architectural typology, which was kept in the subsequent planning iterations of the New Belgrade.²

² After a series of competitions, the building was built according to the design of Mihailo Janković and the architectural studio "Stadion", in 1960-64 in the spirit of International style.



Идејна скица за решење новог дела Београда на левој обали Саве: 1. — Главни аутопут; 2. — Железничка траса; 3. — Жлица; 4. — Канал Сава—Дунав; 5. — Дом Централног комитета КПЈ; 6. — Зграда Претседништва владе ФНРЈ; 7. — Зграда Народног комитета ФНРЈ; 8. — Шетни и манифестациони булевар; 9. — Главна авенија у осовини Претседништва владе; 11. — Аутопут преко мостовног моста; 12. — Аутопут за Земун; 13. — Бежанска коса; 14. — Мало Ратно Острво; 15. — Велико Ратно Острво.

Figure 1. One of the conceptual sketches of the New Belgrade, Urban Planning Institute [5].

However, when his activities are observed in the context of the Greater Belgrade, as the profession at the time called the metropolitan area of Belgrade, which included Zemun, the old part of Belgrade, the future New Belgrade and the left bank of the Danube River, it is clear that the planning services were not able to pay too much attention to the site, which at the time was still unprepared, not ameliorated and unprotected from flooding. At that moment, there were more important, burning issues: they were planning the construction of new facilities for residential, administrative and recreational purposes, roads and services. Additionally, according to the First five-year plan, Belgrade would receive particular attention as the administrative, cultural, industrial and educational seat of the Yugoslav Federation and the Republic of Serbia. "The needs are so great that it would be necessary to demolish half of the (old part, author's comment) of the city to locate everything (...) but the area of Bežanijsko polje is unoccupied [2]". Dobrović lays out the 12 km long highway from Bežanijska kosa to Mali Mokri Lug, which is envisaged as the main traffic backbone of the city. In his vision of Belgrade, the development of Kalemegdan and the right bank of the Sava River is one of the priorities - of course, after meeting the requirements for moving the railway and the railway station from the Sava amphitheatre: it would be the location for the Opera, cultural facilities and buildings of ministries.³ It also envisages "the controlled area": Makiško polje as the Belgrade's source of drinking water supply; Železnik as a place of heavy industry with the residential area for workers; Čukarica and Rakovica, which would be remodelled as new rayons after the relocation of shipyards and industry; embankment of the right bank of the Danube up to Ada Huja; "the giant projects of the Greater Belgrade" - Film City, Traffic Institute, the recreational belt, State Hospital Complex, university city; the new housing estate Pioneers' City, which would also solve the issue of the displacement of the Jatagan mala informal settlement; public facilities around Tašmajdan and important streets; Topčider as a city park within the project of afforestation and greening of Belgrade with a continuous network of large and small parks. The definitive reconstruction of Old Belgrade was planned "after the construction of New Belgrade".

³ It is not specified, but it can be reliably claimed that he meant the republican ministries, because he had planned the federal ones on the left bank of the Sava river.

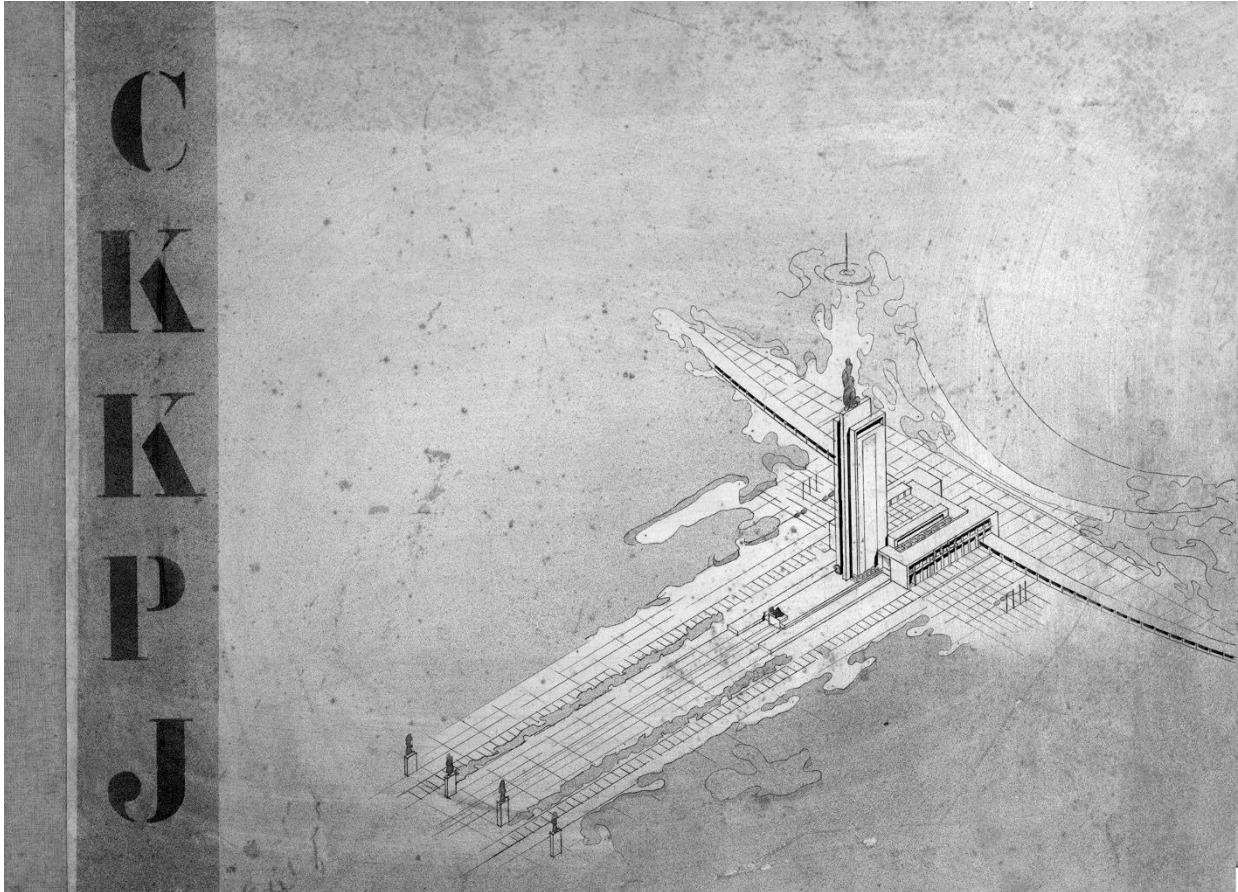


Figure 2. The CKKPJ project on Ušće, axonometry, Nikola Dobrović, 1947 [6]

3. NEW BELGRADE AND THE SYMBOLISM BEHIND ITS CONSTRUCTION: HOUSING IS (NOT) NECESSARY

According to the available sources, after leaving the Institute, Nikola Dobrović would appear in the context of the urban planning of New Belgrade with long breaks, with intervals of several years: in 1956 and 1957, he participated in the work of the Council of Urban Planning⁴, where he represented the views of the Society of Urban Planners of Serbia, the President of which he had been since 1955. He appeared at the Council meetings and expressed his views in a highly suggestive manner, even aggressively. It seemed that he had still hoped to reverse the planning process, which took a different course after he left the Institute. At that time, Stanko Mandić took over the urban planning of New Belgrade, who led the development of the General Plan for New Belgrade largely based on previous plans and studies, and after that, Branko Petričić, who further elaborated the plan [7] in accordance with the principles of the Athens Charter, and not "central monumentality [8]" as Dobrović had envisaged. After observing the elements of these plans, it is clear that there was continuity and that they represented a superstructure and a synthesis of individual plans and sketches that the Institute had worked on during Dobrović's mandate. For the

⁴ Council for Urban Planning on the occasion of discussing the New Belgrade General Urban Plan, which worked from November 1955 to the end of April 1957.

purpose of implementation, they had to go into detailed elaboration and obtain the form of a planning document, and to harmonize with the new administration and social needs, and finally, with the regulations and laws that have been adopted in the meantime. The sessions of the Council lasted throughout 1956 and the first half of 1957, and Dobrović constantly repeated his views and defended his outdated concept of the New Belgrade, in his desire to return the process to its previous state. He wrote the following text for the Council: "New Belgrade and the symbolism behind its construction", which was an integral part of the documentation discussed by the members of the Council, together with the text and drawings of the General Plan. In that text, he emphasized that with the construction of the New Belgrade, old Belgrade would finally be able to breathe and correct its major problems and crises, and that the role of the New Belgrade was to introduce "logical, legal and regulatory relations into the structure of the entire future greater Belgrade as an organic unit". However, in his opinion, there was still no need to build housing in that area, but only facilities for public purposes, which further indicated that Dobrović seriously ignored an objective problem of the ongoing housing crisis in Belgrade.

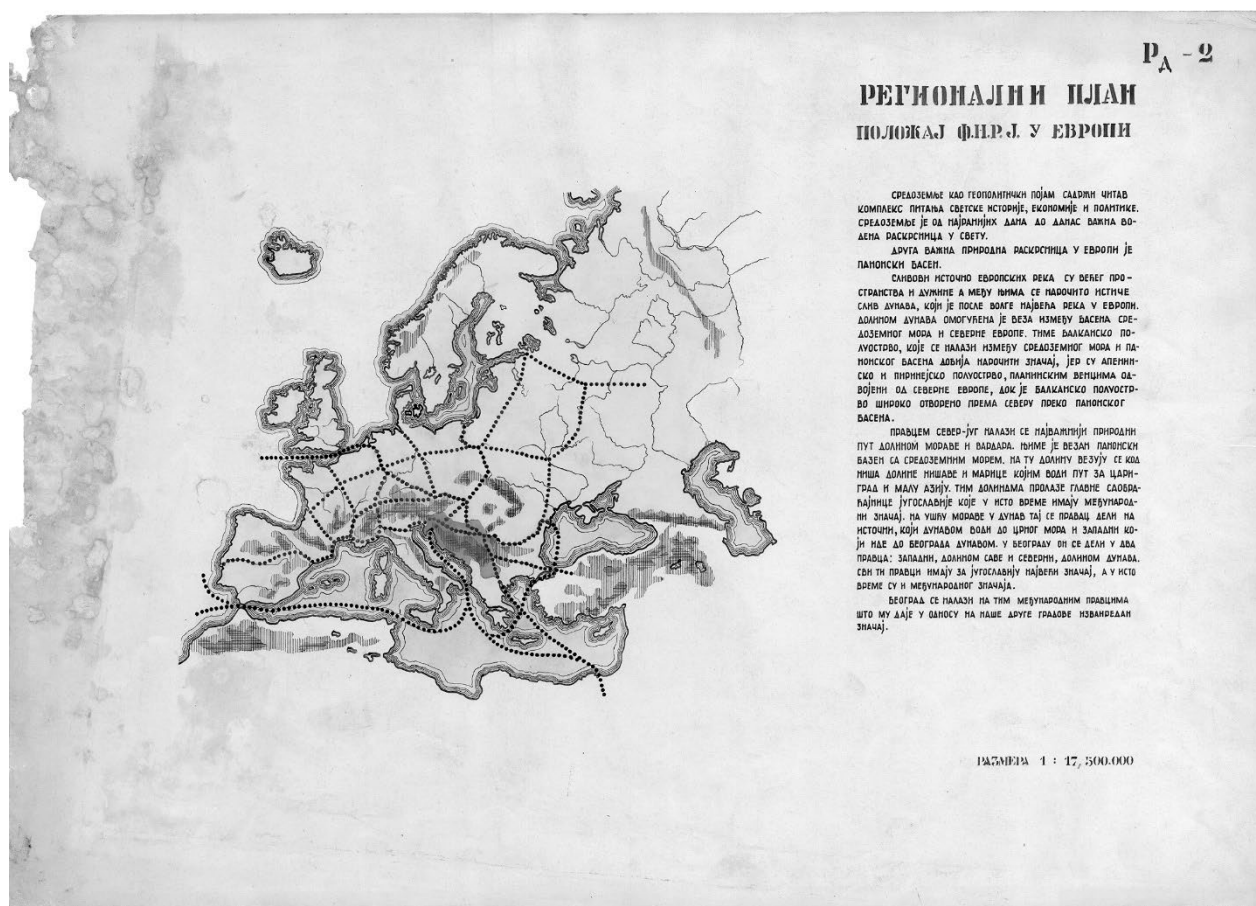


Figure 3. Regional plan of Belgrade, Urban Planning Institute 1947, Urban Planning Institute of the City of Belgrade [3]

On several occasions, the discussion would even become bitter when both Dobrović and Đorđević (director of the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade) would single out their

opinions into separate comments on various issues and details of the plan, and the session itself would take on the tone of a personal conflict, as the chairman Branko Pešić noted. Dobrović continued to insist on the importance of the area in the context of Europe: New Belgrade was a historical opportunity, because it was to be built only once, and it would represent the testimony of the "creative abilities of the Yugoslavs - a relatively small nation - to develop one of the key places in Europe and the world within one chapter of history. Yugoslavia should also justify the political fact that it is the owner of this precious part of the Earth." He considered the city a political symbol and affirmation of the Yugoslavs in the field of spatial creativity - in that context, some of the participants pointed out to him that it was not Europe that financed the city construction, but Yugoslavia, which had disposed of relatively modest funds and had to use them rationally. Also, he insisted on subordinating the built structures to the landscape formed by the Sava and the Danube, and abolishing the idea of an artificial lake on the Danube for the sake of a - highly undefined - formation of a hydro node on the Danube by drastically raising the water level from Đerdap Hydro Power Plant, which turned out to be almost impossible, "an action against the nature" as hydrotechnical engineers⁵ would call it. He attacked Petričić's concept of neighbourhood units, which he believed could not be the bearers of the symbolism of the city's 'urban being', that housing was not the reason to move the city to the left bank of the Sava because there was still room in the city for those needs, and insisted on moving the residential zone for 250,000 inhabitants on the edge of the zone, in the area northeast of today's Omladinskih brigada street and south of the highway. He considered that what the urban planning service of the Belgrade Municipal Council accepted was rather an "average construction program", which could be found in any place and for any purpose, corresponding to the "provincial rococo taste" - similar qualifications could be heard a lot later, when new residential blocks were erected during the 1980s and 1990s. Dobrović expressed his opinion that there was no sufficiently developed project programme for this area, that the planning service must not be responsible for developing urban plans and that it was necessary to organize public calls for proposals in the whole of Yugoslavia in order to obtain the most adequate solutions for this part of the city.

⁵ The sketches were published in the journal *Urbanizam Beograda* [9].

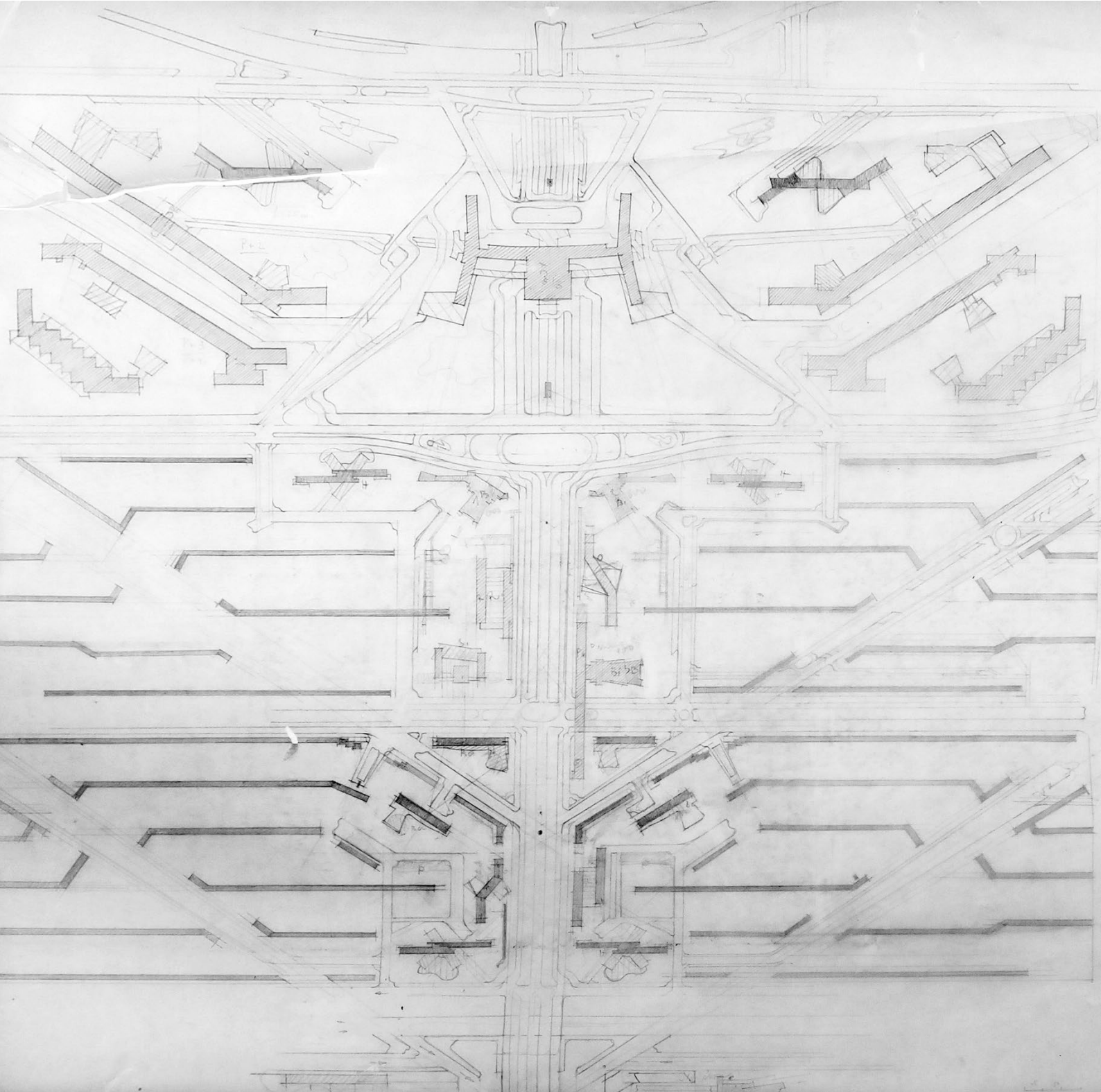


Figure 4. Drawings for the competition, New Belgrade, Nikola Dobrović [10]

4. FINAL REFLECTIONS: THE FINAL PROJECT FOR THE NEW CITY

"For brave people, New Belgrade is not a taboo; it is a programme that this generation can complete within 2-3 decades. Mocking should stop. Is there currently a better idea, a better programme for the future decades, for the life of the current generations? You cannot go back, standing in one place in one historical era is equal to work in vain [11]."

Dobrović revisited the topic of New Belgrade once again when, in 1963, he developed the conceptual design of the ensemble of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and the "Nikola Tesla" Institute, located in block 32, in cooperation with architect Ljiljana Babić. Ironically, Dobrović, who advocated for the shaping of New Belgrade through architectural competitions, now appeared in a - from a professional point of view - problematic and never fully explained role of the appointed designer of this complex. Namely, the competition for the building of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering was announced in 1961, and the first prize was awarded to the proposal created by Aleksandar Stjepanović, Božidar Janković and Mihail Naslas, but over time, the realization of this solution was abandoned, and Nikola Dobrović was directly appointed by the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade. The background behind this decision is not entirely clear, Ljiljana Babić said that the Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning of Serbia hired Dobrović, as a sign of confidence in his qualities and experience. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the investor, on the one hand, considered that they would get a better quality of the project and faster implementation if they hired a more experienced architect, whereas, on the other hand, younger colleagues withdrew and granted this chance to Dobrović, in order to give him another opportunity to work in Belgrade at the moment when the General Staff Building had not been constructed yet.

At that moment, the construction of blocks and buildings was in progress in accordance with the Regulatory Plan for the area of the New Belgrade municipality, which was adopted in 1962, and based on the results of the competition from 1959 for the Central Zone. From Dobrović's design of the block, it can be seen that the shape of the block itself in this plan iteration⁶ was rectangular, unlike today's square shape, which would probably be more appropriate to the urban form that Dobrović created by placing the buildings in the complex in the shape of the letter H at its base. As the project was developed alongside of mass housing construction in New Belgrade, the morphology of the block as proposed by Dobrović would introduce additional functional and form diversity into the urban fabric of this part of the city. The forms of classical modernity, typical for his work, would've be an additional contribution to the style, and an even more significant contribution to the typological diversity of New Belgrade's architecture, which, due to circumstances, never received its central functions in the scope which was planned and which such a large municipality would need. Unfortunately, the project was not implemented, partly due to the fact that one part of the teaching staff was against commuting to New Belgrade⁷, and

⁶ There were several transitional urban solutions until the final adoption of the urban matrix according to the Regulatory Plan for the area of the municipality of New Belgrade, which was adopted in 1962. The competition for the building of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering was announced in 1961 with the foundations that were current at that time.

⁷ About this broader phenomenon, "Why would I cross the Sava River if I am important" is written in Dimitrije Perišić's text, *Sećanje na arh. Milutina Glavičkog*, in the book *Milutin Glavički. Arhitekta - urbanista*, p. 16.

partly due to disagreements between the architect and the investor - Dobrović himself wrote about his disappointment in the book *Savremena arhitektura 4* [12].

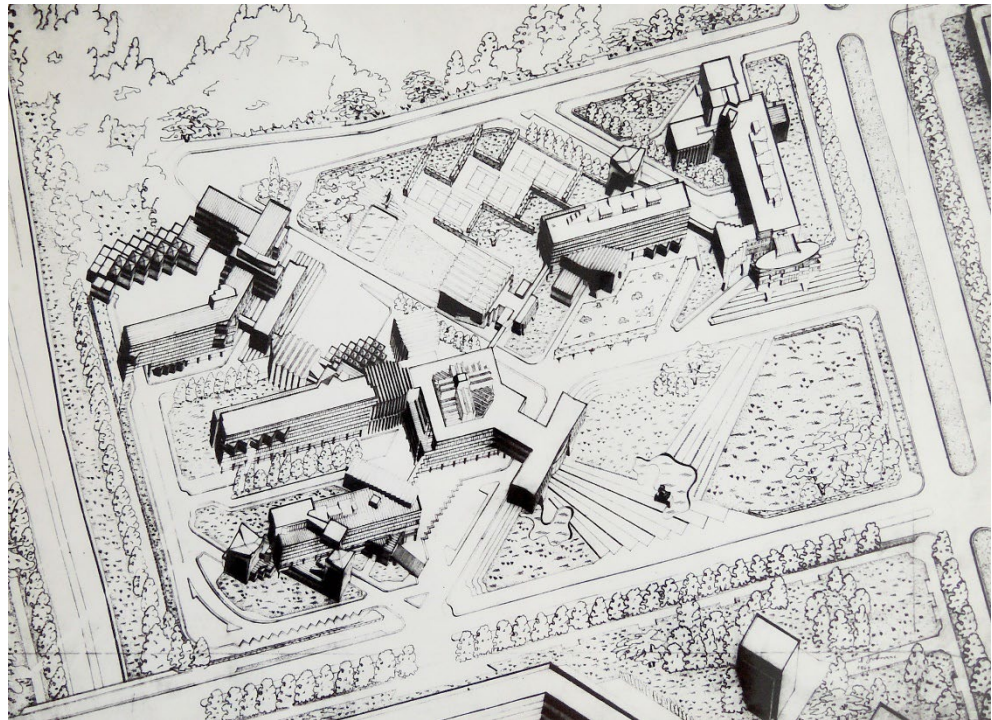


Figure 5. Faculty of Electrical Engineering and the "Nikola Tesla" Institute, isometry, Nikola Dobrović, 1963 [14]

When one puts together the author's biography, consisting only of projects and competitions, Nikola Dobrović often appears - and this is how he is interpreted in the literature - as a tragic figure of our architectural scene, a misunderstood author and intellectual who wasted his talent and energy in tilting at windmills. After reviewing the documentation, which will undoubtedly continue to be discovered in some old libraries, and networking the newly-acquired knowledge, and with a better understanding of historical circumstances, it will be possible to offer a somewhat different interpretation of Dobrović's work and his legacy. In many ways, many of Dobrović's concepts were continued in the practice of city planning and construction during the 1960s and 1970s: both competition policy and traffic management. Moreover, in the context of "the Greater Belgrade" one can see the outlines of his ideas about the recreational belt⁸, the settlement of Železnik and many others.

In many ways, Dobrović did foresee many aspects of the future of (New) Belgrade, but behind his words was his experience and knowledge as a protagonist of the city planning; therefore, he also knew the weak points of these plans. However, the city developed following the matrix outlined in the planning documents, which were in continuity with many of Dobrović's ideas. Observing the wider historical context of his involvement in the

Belgrade: Urban Association of Serbia and City Secretariat for Urban Planning and Environmental Protection, 1990 [13].

⁸ A detailed analysis can be found in the text written by Vladana Putnik Prica „Добровићеви нереализовани пројекти политичко-спортског стадиона и физкултурног појаса [15]“.

Ministry of Construction, i.e. the Urban Planning Institute, it is extremely significant that Dobrović was at the head of such important institutions in the crucial, formative years, as an uncompromising modernist but also an experienced architect with formidable knowledge of both historical and *contemporary* architecture.

Nonetheless, it must be stated that the dynamics of realization, which he had foreseen immediately after the war, was simply too ambitious and unfeasible at that moment. Dobrović imagined New Belgrade as a scene of democracy in experiencing everything that contemporary spatial art offered, a 'city of the sun' that would send out modern urban spirit and mood with all its being – today, the urbanism of New Belgrade is what the citizens appreciate the most as the quality of life is declining because the city is densified. Finally, New Belgrade, which was built "during the era of new architecture and urbanism", as such should become "a monument of this period for future generations". Therefore, Dobrović also anticipated its canonization as an exceptional heritage of modernist architecture and urbanism of global significance.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Parts of this research were presented for the first time at the symposium entitled "Architect Nikola Dobrović (1897-1967) – Fifty years later" which was held at the Institute for studying cultural development, on December 22, 2017.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Jelica Jovanović

Independent researcher, graduated engineer of architecture from Belgrade University, PhD student of University of Technology Vienna. Trainee of Getty CMAI, Central Institute of Conservation of Serbia, CHwB. OeAD One Month Visit scholar (Austria) and SAIA (Slovakia) researcher. Coordinator of *Unfinished Modernisations* and *(In)appropriate Monuments*. Web editor of DOCOMOMO Serbia. Curatorial advisor of MoMA for exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980*.

ПРИЛОГ ПРОУЧАВАЊУ НОВОГ БЕОГРАДА: НЕРЕАЛИЗОВАНИ ПРОЈЕКТИ И КОНЦЕПТИ НИКОЛЕ ДОБРОВИЋА

Сажетак: Архитекта Никола Добровић је у Србији најпознатији по свом једином изведеном објекту у Београду, комплексу Државног сектератијата народне одбране (ДСНО), познатијег као Генералштаб, данас угрожене културне баштине и рушевног објекта неизвесне будућности. Међутим, за Београд и Србију је једнако значајан мање познат његов краткотрајни ангажман на челу Урбанистичког института НР Србије од 1946-1947, те каснија професура на Архитектонском факултету Универзитета у Београду. Документа, који сведоче о послератном периоду његовог рада су расута на више места: у Урбанистичком заводу Београда, Музеју науке и технике, Историјском архиву Београда, ретке публикације је могуће наћи само у пар библиотека у Србији. У току свог краткотрајног рада на Новом Београду Добровић у оквиру Урбанистичког института даје више идејних пројеката и концептуалних скица за Нови Београд: манифестациони трг, шеме саобраћајница и урбанистичко решење потеза између Палате Федерације и Железничке станице – данашње Централне зоне Новог Београда. Најзад, Добровић у различитим фазама каријере концепира и појединачне објекте, попут пројекта за Електротехнички факултет и зграду ЦККПЈ, који су остали у домену 'папирне архитектуре', односно неизведени, а који пружају увид у начин на који је он размишља о процесу урбанистичког и просторног планирања, кроз позиционирање објеката који генеришу функционални карактер свог ближег и даљег окружења.

Кључне ријечи: Никола Добровић, Нови Београд, Велики Београд, Централни комитет, блок 32, Електротехнички факултет