

Social and Aesthetic Camouflage: Case Study of New Belgrade

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1 ABSTRACT

The general level of this research represents the study of New Belgrade, which deals with the interpretation of the relevant aesthetic and social models of shaping the city, namely the theory of functional city as an aesthetic paradigm and Henri Lefebvre's "unitary theory" of social space. The validity of the presented aspects is given by the statement that New Belgrade emerged from the conflict between "the two dominant... ideologies of the postwar period: the modernist, or CIAM's dogma of functional city and political, Marxist – socialist dogma, in the context of the ruling system."¹ On the specific level, the study deals with the problem of the individuals, which are, in the case of both dominant ideologies, neglected and marginalized. The phenomenon of camouflage represents the aesthetic "mechanism for inscribing an individual within a given cultural setting" and as such can serve as a unique tool for deconstructing and analysing of predominant aesthetic and social paradigms in shaping of the city.²

2 INTRODUCTION

The general level of this research represents the study of New Belgrade, which deals with the interpretation of the relevant aesthetic and social models of forming. According to her book "New Belgrade: Modernism questioned" the author Ljiljana Blagojevic states that New Belgrade has emerged from the conflict between "the two dominant... ideologies of the postwar period: the modernist, or CIAM's dogma of functional city and political, Marxist – socialist dogma, in the context of the ruling system."³ Thus, on the one hand, as a method of analysis this research introduces the theory of functional city as an adequate aesthetic paradigm and Henri Lefebvre's "unitary theory" of social space, on the other hand.

On the specific level, the study deals with the problem of the individuals, which are, in the case of both dominant ideologies, neglected and marginalized. The aesthetics of the functional city does it, authoritatively, through the separation of the parts of the city, which leads to loneliness and isolation of individuals, families, groups, etc., while the ruling political ideology of socialism creates the illusion of homogeneity and happiness through the mask of collectivity.

As Ljiljana Blagojevic directly indicates, the importance of Henri Lefebvre in the case of New Belgrade is exceptional. In the accompanying text for the international competition for the improvement of urban structure of New Belgrade in 1986, Henri Lefebvre and the team of architects Serge Renaudie and Pierre Guilbaud demonstrated the requirement for the transformation of the society, which is based on civil rights - the rights of the individual.⁴

Interpretation of the human need to identify with an environment and methods for establishing connections with the culture as a whole "with which one wants to feel connected" gives Neil Leach in his book, *Camouflage*⁵. The phenomenon of camouflage is an aesthetic "mechanism for inscribing an individual within a given cultural setting" and as such can serve as a unique tool for deconstructing and analysing of predominant aesthetic and social paradigms in the shaping of the city, illuminating the individual experience of space⁶.

The research aims to put the emphasises on the existence or lack of awareness of the position of individuals in modern spatial concepts and to arise practical methods by which individual succeeds to build his own identity and ensure its own survival, in conditions that are already set in the environment.

¹Ljiljana Blagojevic, *Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam* (Beograd: Zavod za udzbenike, Arhitektonski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, Zavod za zastitu spomenika culture grada Beograda, 2007), 244.

²Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge: Mass., London: The MIT Press, 2006), 240.

³Ibid., 240.

⁴Ibid., 208.

⁵Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge: Mass., London: The MIT Press, 2006)

⁶Ibid., 240.

Already mentioned ideologies of functional city and politics of socialism in some way represent the general terminology, but spatio-temporal context of New Belgrade and the phenomenon of camouflage imply further clarification.

2.1 Spatio-temporal context – New Belgrade

New Belgrade is a modern city, which was built in the second half of the twentieth century, on the marshy plain surrounded by rivers Sava and Danube, stretching between the historic cities of Belgrade and Zemun.⁷ Construction of New Belgrade, started after Second World War, in 1948th, in the changed socio-political conditions, in order to represents the new capital of the new Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. "Its modern urban ethos is derived from the ideas of modern movements, which are formulated and then transformed through the process of great historical and spatial changes of the twentieth century"⁸. The basic structural elements have been taken from modernist concepts of Le Corbusier's Radiant city and project of Lucio Costa for Brasil⁹. However, as Blagojevic had shown in her analysis of the ideology of New Belgrade, the impossibility of modernist / urban, or political ideology "to become homogeneous and hegemonic" new city proved to be a "unique example of which is substantially different" from both paradigms¹⁰.

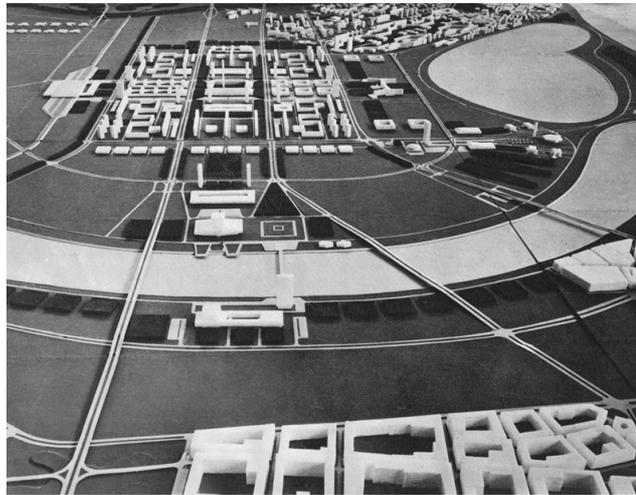


Fig. 1 Scale model of the regulation plan of New Belgrade, 1962¹¹.

2.2 The phenomenon of camouflage

Starting point of the research of phenomenon camouflage is determined by transition in etymology of the term camouflage, which is manifesting as a gradual change of meaning. The term derives originally from the French camouflet which signify an explosive device designed to ward off enemy miners by making their tunnels collapse. Widespread use of camouflage started from the First World War by the formation of "camouflaged units" with uniforms that are designed to be blended in the immediate surroundings of trenches. Today, the primary meaning of the word camouflage (fr. camouflage) implies disguise, colouring of warlike material so that it is not different from the environment, also baffling¹².

Methodology of camouflage explained Roy R. Behrens claiming that its method is "... not exclusively to make an object blend into the background (blending) or to make it to look like something else (mimicry), but to break up its contours into unrelated components" which can not or hardly can be related with each other¹³. In other words, the phenomenon of camouflage is based on two different tactics – the first is camouflage of primarily physical characteristics in environment and second is camouflage of behavior in the behavior of

⁷ The Municipality of New Belgrade, established in 1952, today covers the area of some 4.000ha with population of 236.898 inhabitants. See: www.novibeograd.org.rs

⁸ Ljiljana Blagojevic, *Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam* (Beograd: Zavod za udzbenike, Arhitektonski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, Zavod za zastitu spomenika culture grada Beograda, 2007), 13.

⁹ Milos R. Perovic. *Iskustva proslosti* (drugo izdanje). Beograd: Plato, 2000.

¹⁰ Ljiljana Blagojevic, *Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam* (Beograd: Zavod za udzbenike, Arhitektonski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, Zavod za zastitu spomenika culture grada Beograda, 2007), 245.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹² According to Serbian official Dictionary of foreign words and expressions, Milan Vujaklija, *Leksikon stranih reci i izraza*,

¹³ Roy R. Behrens. *False Colors - Art, Design and Modern Camouflage* (Dysart, IA: Bobolink Books, 2002)

another organism or group. At this point, too, we are coming to the threshold of separation of starting point of this research - aesthetic and social camouflage.

Also in this research, the camouflage presents the specific form of representation and identification, beyond the narrow domain of disguise, by which it consists the form of symbolization. It operates through the medium of establishing of relations with each other.

3 AESTHETIC ASPECT OF THE CITY

3.1 Functionalism

The basic paradigm of reconstruction or construction of new cities, in the period after the Second World War, was CIAM's concept of functional city that is next to Corbusier's concept of Radiant city - the city of sun, space and green - compiled in Athens Charter (1943). The essence of the concept is the strict segregation of the four main activities - housing, work, recreation and transportation, where housing is almost completely removed from the city center.

Criticism of the functional city, suggested by Henri Lefebvre, indicates adverse circumstances which cause negative implications against individuals as well as collective, namely all users of space. According to Lefebvre's critique there are "towers and straps ominous dimensions, lost in a desolated space", whose disarticulation and isolation means "to kill the city, as it would kill any other living organism". Dissolution of usually connected activities in the urban tissue causes the inability of every single element, and thus city as a whole, and as a consequence loneliness arises:

"Loneliness of individuals, families loneliness, within the family, groups, neighborhoods, apartment buildings, offices ... loneliness causes inertia, and when it becomes collective, it ballasts the social life of communities and collective's movements; it prevents solidarity and sociability and endangers the development of individuals and collectives"¹⁴.

During the 1950s, awareness of the emotional and material needs of people was also inherent to CIAM's advocates, who reinterpreted their goals and strived to work on the formation of an adequate physical environment, in this sense. A particular shift from the severe functional settings was made by Alison and Peter Smithson who put the emphasis in their work on the issues of belonging and identity, and individual's need to be identified with the physical structure of the city - house, neighborhood, street...¹⁵

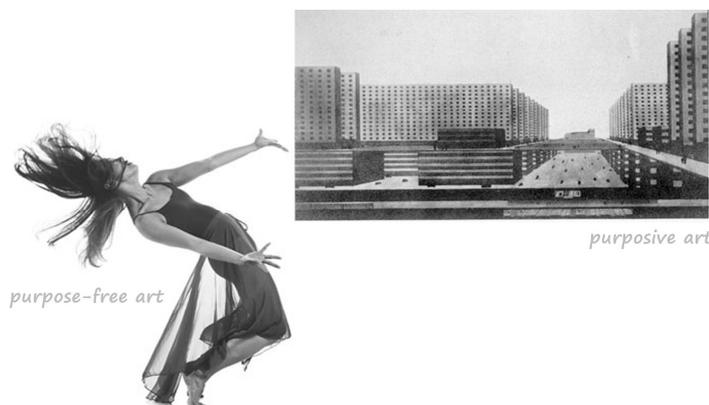


Fig. 2 Purposive and purpose-free arts

3.2 Aesthetic camouflage – identification with the space

Free from ambition to enter the territory of functionalism in modern architecture, we will make use of Adorno's criticism of functionalism, in order to show what functionalist's space actually offers to individuals. Adorno made difference between the functionality itself and an aesthetic of functionality, and argued that what seems to be functional might not prove to be the functional, and vice versa. Also he stated

¹⁴ Henri Lefebvre in Ljiljana Blagojevic, Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam (Beograd: Zavod za udzbenike, Arhitektonski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, Zavod za zastitu spomenika culture grada Beograda, 2007), 43.

¹⁵ „Urban Re-Identification Document“ in Ljiljana Blagojevic, Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam (Beograd: Zavod za udzbenike, Arhitektonski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, Zavod za zastitu spomenika culture grada Beograda, 2007).

that purposive and the purpose-free arts can never really be separated owing to their dialectical relationship¹⁶. Finally, Neil Leach establishes unexpected conclusion: “Is the function, then, despite what Adorno said, a little more than an aesthetic category?”¹⁷

Hence by using the conclusions which Adorno and Leach problematized, functional modern city can be understood as an aesthetic category which is itself able to produce symbols. By assimilating those symbols man becomes able to identify with his environment. In other words, even a functionalism of modernism and paradigm of machine have symbolic importance and allow a man to be identified with them.

4 SOCIAL ASPECT OF THE CITY

4.1 Lefebvre “unitary theory” of social space

Exploration of relationships between the individuals and the city begins by studying Lefebvre’s “unitary theory” of social space. According to Lefebvre, conceptual triad is consisted of: 1 social practices which take place in the space of everyday life, 2 representational space - forms of knowledge and practices which organize and represent space, such as architecture and urban planning, social engineering, etc., and 3 representative space or the space of symbols whose focus is based on the process of creating symbols and meanings of place. By thesis that “(social) space is a (social) product” Lefebvre precisely signifies on different social practices, which establish and represent space¹⁸. Consequently, in modern societies, the hegemony of the state’s institutions and authorities is highly prominenced, by using the knowledge and technical expertise, as well as space, as the means of embodying their power. Lefebvre also indicates the dominance of the state’s institutions in the space:

“As a product of violence and war, it is political, instituted by a state, it is institutional. On first inspection it appears homogeneous; and indeed it serves those forces which make a tabula rasa of whatever stands in their way, of whatever threatens them - in short, of differences. The notion of the instrumental homogeneity of space, however, is illusory – though empirical descriptions of space reinforced the illusion – because it uncritically takes the instrumental as a given.”¹⁹

From the previous, we are arriving to the final margins of the modern process of the production of space, namely the place of the individuals, users of space, or the city, which is completely neglected. Illusion of happiness of the individual in modern society is consequence of the apparent homogeneity and happiness through collective way of life. Is it possible, through collective way of life, to build identity and to establish identification with the social environment, is the key issue of this aspect of the research?

4.2 Social camouflage – identification with the society

“The urge to identify with our psychical environment is merely a manifestation of a larger desire to establish some connection with culture as a whole, and to overcome the threat of alienation”²⁰ The question of identification, as it meticulously explains and decomposes Neil Leach, can be simultaneously or independently observed in two planes - the physical and mental. The process of mental assimilation is set as the crucial issue of barrier between man and space (collective) which surrounds him. The identification process is made difficult by the very nature of human psychology and is manifested as a defensive mechanism. In the primary identification the “subject has yet to distinguish its identity from that of other object,” while in “secondary identification the subject is able to identify with another object as a separate entity.”²¹ There is two-fold deterritorialization in overcoming the limits of a single body (human) - the loss of internal boundaries, which allows both the influence of external events on the body and expansion of the inside outward²². To summarize this part of research - destabilization of the man’s mental level is only temporary, and the new plane of stabilization individual establishes by the overall identification with the social collective, while in this process the collective receives new quality.

¹⁶ Adorno in Neil Leach, eds. *Rethinking Architecture: A reader in cultural theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), 5.

¹⁷ Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge: Mass., London: The MIT Press, 2006), 48.

¹⁸ Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space* (1974). Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

¹⁹ Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space* (1974). Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 285.

²⁰ Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge: Mass., London: The MIT Press, 2006), 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

²² Greg Lynn. *Multiplicious and inorganic bodies*. *Assemblage* 19. December 1992, 47.

5 CASE STUDY OF NEW BELGRADE

5.1 Aesthetic aspect

As the survey of Ljiljana Blagojevic has shown, planning and design of an urban structure of New Belgrade, was not the result of a single modernist concept, but of many interpretations of the modern idea of functional city.²³ The success of an urban structure and thus the city as a living organism with its social, political, cultural and other conditions of individual's life represents the basis of contemporary debates about the New Belgrade. What we can emphasize with certainty, however, is that occasionally through the modernist strategies and concepts awareness of the individual has been crystallized. Contribution to this gives the fact that the ideas and principles of CIAM has been familiar to Yugoslav architects²⁴, which practically shows the competition for the New Belgrade in the year of 1947²⁵. Indirectly, we can conclude that the progressive manner of the 1950s which has brought the reform to CIAM and Alison and Peter Smithson's "urban reidentification" of an individual, reached Yugoslav architects. An example is given by Yugoslav architect, Milorad Pantovic, an associate of Le Corbusier, who was opposed his theory against the concept of sterile isolation of Garden city and of uniform collectivism of socialism in early 1937th: "The modern town has to go for protecting the individual of diminishing of intellectual, moral and psychological value... It should develop all his creative activities, give him health, return to him the unity, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to revive his strong personality."²⁶

Question of whether aesthetics and representation of space itself can "overcome" threat from alienation of the individual, also invites the question whether the transformation of object's design - and the reconstruction of subjectivity through design - also call for greater structural, economic and political transformations? Contrary to famous Corbusier's state that by architecture revolution can be avoided, in the postwar Yugoslavia, namely the period of construction of New Belgrade, prevailed the attitude that architectural paradigms, namely modern and functional city, can be applied only by changing sociopolitical relations.

5.2 Social aspect

On the other hand, starting from the hypothesis of Henri Lefebvre that "every society - and thus every mode of production...- produces space, its own space" the New Belgrade could be observed as a specific space, once settled by Yugoslav people, which has been produced by public institutions and knowledge mainly represented by Yugoslav architect.²⁷ Individuals, even though apparently neglected participated in the creation of space, camouflaged under the mask of the collective. This form of spatial belonging is manifested through the concept of nationalism and national identity. Furthermore, Lach's statement indicates that for National Socialism it is "common that man wants to feel himself as a part of the larger community. We are often capable to almost completely erase our own individuality, while subscribing ourselves to the cultures of conformity..."²⁸ The question that arises is whether the loss of individuality is negative or, on the contrary, supplemented collective identity is quality?

Lacan psychoanalytic theory even claims that national identity is based on more than just symbolic identification. Lacan believes that national identity denotes a special form of enjoyment through the fantasy of "lifestyle" that threatens to be available to only one particular group, thus an individual, in order to avoid the threat of alienation, is identifying with the group. Furthermore, national identity, as a specific form of social camouflage, is expressed through specific rituals and practices which hold the community.²⁹

²³ Ljiljana Blagojevic, Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam (Beograd: Zavod za udzbenike, Arhitektonski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, Zavod za zastitu spomenika culture grada Beograda, 2007)

²⁴ Declaration of CIAM from 1928th was completely translated in serbo-croatian language and published in 1932.

²⁵ Ibid., 31.

²⁶ Milorad Pantović in Ljiljana Blagojevic, Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam (Beograd: Zavod za udzbenike, Arhitektonski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, Zavod za zastitu spomenika culture grada Beograda, 2007), 39.

²⁷ Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space* (1974). Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 31.

²⁸ Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge: Mass., London: The MIT Press, 2006), 1-2.

²⁹ Jacques Lacan in Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge: Mass., London: The MIT Press, 2006), 145.

5.3 Conclusion

To summarize, in the case of New Belgrade the question of the individual has been raised as a problem during construction of the city as well as the question of political and social conditions of that construction. National identity, as a specific form of identity and possibility of overcoming the threat of alienating, is formed in this case under the term of Yugoslav identity. In this sense, overall relation between aesthetics and society, namely discourse of architecture and discourse of nation, in the case of New Belgrade gives us an excerpt from concluding considerations from the book *Jugoslovenism in Architecture*, wrote by Aleksandar Ignjatovic:

“The structure of knowledge underlying the Yugoslav identity does not exist outside of his presentation ... Therefore the architecture can not be simply a reflection of a knowledge of the Yugoslav, but she - as a discourse and as interpretable reality - participate in its construction. It therefore can not be passive representation of certain ideological doctrine, there can be phenomenology in which only reflects the political and ideological knowledge, but the discourse of their construction ... „³⁰

6 CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

The determined spatial system is formed by symbols which move through different social networks. In this sense symbols are constructing the social space and become available to every individual who is free to estimate them. From there, the potential for the production of space is being created. The process of decomposition and re-synthesis is what characterizes cubistic techniques and theories which use their strategies, that is - the modern theory and the theory of camouflage.³¹

New Belgrade is the space of representation, or symbols, which resulted from the specific discourse of time, which is determined by modernist practice and political ideology. As addition to this goes Leach's statement that “through its ornamentation, art responds to the outlook of a particular epoch. It provides that epoch with a set of symbols.”³² However, New Belgrade has been produced as symbol by performing its social function. In other words, architecture of New Belgrade represent discourse in which the Yugoslav national community had been constructed, and hence every particular individual through the mode of camouflage and under the mask of collectivity. Intentions of prevailing ideologies may be failed, but in self-production New Belgrade managed to give rise to the problems of the new urbanity by questioning the position of the individual.³³

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³⁰ Aleksandar Ignjatovic. *Jugoslovenstvo u arhitekturi* (Beograd: Gradjevinska knjiga, 2007), 453.

³¹ Urbanists of modernistic avangarde decompose city on fundamental elements in the same way that cubistic painter do with their motifs, and after they assembling it, forming very new whole. Vladimir Perovic, *Iskustva proslosti (drugo izdanje)* (Beograd: Plato), 2000, 31. Gertruda Stein declared that when Picasso had seen camouflaged military vehicles he stated: “We originated that. It's Cubism”.

³² Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge: Mass., London: The MIT Press, 2006), 44.

³³ Ljiljana Blagojevic, *Novi Beograd: Otporeni modernizam* (Beograd: Zavod za udzbenike, Arhitektonski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, Zavod za zastitu spomenika culture grada Beograda, 2007)