



## LOOKING FOR YU

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### SCENES FROM AN UNFINISHED MODERNIZATION

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For the past three years, Wolfgang Thaler's has traveled through the region of former Yugoslavia on a quest to photograph the architecture of the socialist period. We, the authors of this text, have navigated him on this journey, guided by our supposed expertise as a critic and a historian of architecture. Armed with a handful of books, piles of old journals, and with Google Earth, we have mercilessly dispatched Thaler to bustling metropolitan boulevards, remote mountain towns, coastal cities crawling with tourists, sleepy suburbs, and all kinds of uninhabited landscapes, not always knowing what he would find there. What he did find has been painstakingly transformed into an extensive photographic database that testifies to a remarkable collection of distinct architectural cultures developed in former Yugoslavia as part of a common project of rapid modernization.

Ironically, after three years of travel it is now Thaler that is the real expert in this topic as the only one of the three of us who has had a first-hand personal experience of all the sites shown in this exhibition. His photographic testimonies of such immediate experiences alter our previous, largely academic, assessments of the buildings that we selected here. The resulting reassessment occasionally led to a certain disappointment, but more frequently it helped us discover qualities that could not have been predicted from just plans and historical photos. The lens of Thaler's camera thus often strays away from the well-known iconic views, finding the less known angles of some celebrated buildings to capture the essence of their position in broader urban contexts, or the mastery of their detailing, or their technological ingenuity, or, in some instances, all of the above at the same time. The camera also uncovers a few gems previously ignored by critics and hence known only to a select few. Most strikingly, however, the exhibited photos present us with a testimony to the passage of time, documenting the varied destinies of buildings, cities, and landscapes of a defunct state and a defunct political system in the face of social change, neglect, and destruction. Some of the buildings have aged well, protected by the representational prestige they enjoy, often of the political kind. Others have fared worse, deteriorating under new social and economic conditions that no longer favor their original functions. Yet others have fallen pray to their own representational purpose, which put them in the position of prominent targets during the decade of war in the 1990s. Subtle and atmospheric, many of Thaler's images invoke a sense of melancholy that is impossible to shake off, as they unavoidably remind us of the high ideals they once embodied and of the sudden plunge into destruction that followed.

Seen together in one place, the photos at the show speak of a compelling variety of eloquent architectural languages compressed into the small, but heterogeneous cultural and geographic space that was once



socialist Yugoslavia. Almost every major trend from the international scene after World War II finds a recognizable representative here, but always with a twist, revealing the unmistakable signs of the process of cultural transfer, which appropriates foreign models only to make them one's own through technological or programmatic adjustment to local conditions. Even more importantly, several highly original personal poetics emerge out of this multitude, indicating that the region may deserve to be inscribed into the map of international modernism far more prominently than has been the case so far. Unfortunately, very few of these poetics have seen any systematic reassessment and interpretation even in their own domicile countries, let alone abroad, pointing towards a pressing need for their serious historization from an already substantial historical distance.

The multitude of architectural poetics presented here may confound the uninitiated and result in an erroneous impression that the region and the period lacked any sense of coherence. But there is a system to this multitude, since the various parts of the former country developed relatively distinct architectural cultures, each fostering a more or less pronounced identity centered on its own ethnicity/nation. This fact may raise the question whether one should even study the former country as a whole: if the region's national architectures were as distinct as their subsequent divergent development suggest, was there anything that they shared at all? The question is, of course, yes: for almost half a century, they shared the same political system based on socialism, the same foreign policy that shaped their relationship to the international context, the same organization of architectural profession, and similar economic conditions. All of these affect architecture far more profoundly than we may want to acknowledge, as focused as we are on individual invention and ingenuity. The real question, then, is what can be gained from studying the region as a whole. Without denying the obvious distinctiveness of the various architectural cultures, we believe that there are more than just a few important lessons to learn from such a holistic study; they are as much in the interest of individual national cultures as in the interest of purely academic concerns. While acknowledging the undeniable fact of a common past, a better understanding of the broader Yugoslav context may also help differentiate between what was common to the whole former country and the specificities of national cultures, thus, paradoxically, bringing their individuality into sharper focus. This may be particularly important for those parts of the region with a less established tradition of writing modern architectural history, where a common history may provide a methodological and theoretical "armature" for the development of local ones.

Subjective and surprising as they may be, Wolfgang Thaler's photos of buildings from around former Yugoslavia for the first time compile a broad view of an exciting and exceptionally rich body of modern and post-modern architecture from the region. It is an architecture that so far has been neither systematically explored nor presented in a holistic way. This laconic but, we hope, still inspiring overview is an eloquent reminder of the values and aspirations of a unique architectural culture and of a society that no longer exist, but whose achievements surely deserve to be reevaluated.