

# From Utopia to Decay: Rethinking Periodization and Restoration in Socialist Modern Architecture

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## Abstract

This paper uses critical theoretical methodology rooted in historiography and heritage theory to reinterpret socialist architectural and heritage narratives, while blending conceptual critique (rethinking periodization), contextual comparison (socialist vs. Western modernities), and philosophical inquiry (decay, temporality, restoration) to build an argument about how we understand and preserve modernist heritage today. It applies critical reading and hermeneutic interpretation to examine how architecture, ideology, and temporality intersect in socialist contexts. The approach emphasizes decay, transformation, and hybridity as integral aspects of heritage, proposing a dynamic understanding of modernism and restoration in post-socialist environments. Finally, this paper challenges rigid art-historical periodizations, emphasizing that ideological shifts, more than historical phases, shaped its boundaries. In Yugoslavia, this synthesis gave rise to a hybrid modernism, blending international aesthetics with local politics.

## Keywords

Socialist Modernism, Periodization, Hybrid Modernism, Restoration, Heritage and Decay.

## Rethinking Periodization

Periodization has structured historical narratives, thus dividing cultural production into clear chronological blocks. But these boundaries are not neutral since they privilege linear, Western-centric timelines that is obscuring the plentitude of modernities. In order to emphasize the need for alternative temporal categorizations that highlight connections above a sequential account of events, we have to rethink periodization as we know it. Modernity in Central and Eastern Europe was not simply a belated imitation of Western trajectories but an ideological project with its own temporalities. Socialist modernism is a good example of so-called 'qualitative contemporaneity' that operated alongside of the West, merging revolutionary pasts, ideological presents, and utopian futures. Such an operative framework resists rigid chronological boxes and instead situates architectural production within specific and changing political and cultural contexts. By embracing asynchronous and overlapping temporalities, we can move beyond restrictive labels of periodization and accept modern architecture as part of an evolving, contested field of meanings. Therefore, periodization should not be understood as a fixed boundary but as an interpretive tool that can acknowledge plurality, hybridity, and the politics of time itself.



Fig.1 Zagreb, Trnje district, modernist mass housing, 1950-1970 © Wikimedia Commons.

### **Contested terrain of Modernity and Modernism in Socialist context**

‘Modernity’ invokes a broad cultural and historical condition with the emergence of rationality, secularization, industrialization, and the Enlightenment belief in progress. On the other hand, ‘modernism’ refers to cultural, artistic, and intellectual responses to these same processes that were often experimental, ambivalent, and self-critical. The Soviet experiment was a form of ‘monistic modernization’ that was a centralized and authoritarian attempt to accelerate history by subordinating society to the dictates of rationality and ideology. Modernity, as Križan frames it, is inseparable from the Enlightenment’s belief in the transformative power of reason.<sup>1</sup> In the Soviet Union, this translated into the conviction that society itself could be engineered like a machine; thus political control and planning became the instruments of a rational project that promised to eliminate backwardness and a radiant future. This monistic vision also eliminated pluralism, reducing society to a homogeneous mass and silencing dissent. In this sense, modernity in the socialist context was not about diversity or dialogue but about totalization. As Križan argues, the Enlightenment promise of freedom and rationality concealed an impulse toward control and homogenization. Meanwhile, modernism in Western Europe and North America often functioned differently and embodied a complex ambivalence toward modernity. Artists



Fig.2 Zagreb, modernist building, 1964 (arch. Ivan Vitić) © Shadow Casters.

and architects experimented and expressed progress with new forms, but also expressed fragmentation and dissonance. In the Soviet Union, modernism initially flourished as part of the revolutionary avant-garde, but that was short-lived since by the 1930s, the avant-garde gave way to socialist realism. The diversity of modernist expression was suppressed in favor of a cultural language that reflected the monistic rationalization of politics. It means it tried to explain and control everything under one universal system, leaving no room for pluralism or alternative ways of being modern.

### Hybrid modernism in socialist Yugoslavia

A bit later, a specifically socialist modernism emerged in Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia distanced itself from Soviet socialist realism after the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 and developed a hybrid modernism that combined international modernist aesthetics with local political and cultural context. Architectural projects such as the monumental *spomeniks* (memorials) and modernist housing complexes represented both participation in Western modernist currents and articulation of a distinctly socialist identity. However, socialist modernism did not simply imitate Western models but asserted its coeval modernity while rejecting subordination to Western timelines. Modernity in socialism was a political-ideological project that rationally modernized society, and





Fig.3 Zagreb, Ivan Vitić building, after restoration, 2018 © Shadow Casters.

simultaneously was centralized under authoritarian control. In contrast, modernism was a cultural-aesthetic negotiation within this project that was often caught between experimentation and constraint. While modernity imposed homogeneity and universality, modernism reached for the plurality of expression and subjectivity. However, in the socialist world, modernism was never fully autonomous because it was shaped and censored by the demands of political modernity. Yugoslav architects like Bogdan Bogdanović developed innovative modernist forms for memorials and public buildings, which followed international styles and expressed local socialist narratives. In this sense, modernism in the West was a field of ambivalence and critique, and in the socialist world, it was a site of negotiation with modernity. Modernity, as Križan shows, was not simply a neutral process of modernization but a monistic and authoritarian project that transformed society in the name of reason. Socialist modernism was the cultural and aesthetic field where the modernity project was contested and reimagined. By analyzing this distinction, we see more clearly how the socialist experience illuminates the broader paradoxes of modernity itself and its periodization. It reveals how the Enlightenment promise of progress can lead to repression, and how artistic modernism remains a crucial site for grappling with those contradictions. As Choay reminds us in *\*The Invention of the Historic Monument\**, the very notion of heritage is a modern construct, born from the desire to assign historical value to architectural decay, transforming ruins into objects of cultural memory.<sup>2</sup>



Fig.4 Jasenovac, Kamenji cvijet memorial, 1966 (arch. Bogdan Bogdanović) © Wikimedia Commons.

### Why and How We Preserve ?

Contemporary scholars argue that the material reality of architecture is inherently transient. Every building has to die, that is to begin a process of decline. There has been a radical reorientation of conservation theory: away from permanence and towards a recognition of decay and transformation. Rather than freezing structures in a fixed historical moment, DeSilvey advocates allowing certain sites and objects to follow their natural trajectories of decline.<sup>3</sup> This is also curation because it supports a careful decision to let entropy become part of the story. For DeSilvey, rust and collapse are not failures but reveal the passage of time more vividly than polished restorations ever could. The so-called 'original' state of an object or building is a narrative constructed in the present. By calling this the 'end of conservation', Muñoz Viñas does not mean to abolish the practice altogether but to strip away its illusions of permanence and authority.<sup>4</sup> Conservation is not about halting time but about negotiating with it, making decisions that are open to reinterpretation. Jacobs observes that architectural discourse is saturated with fantasies of endurance. The lifecycle of a building is always bound to decline: walls crack, facades crumble, and eventually, demolition is inevitable. Architectural culture represses the inevitability of endings, and for Jacobs, this is but a 'delusion', one that perpetuates the myth that permanence is attainable.<sup>5</sup> Her intervention reframes architecture as a temporal practice, enmeshed in cycles of growth and disappearance. DeSilvey, Muñoz Viñas, and Jacobs articulate a shared critique of permanence and an invitation to embrace transience. These perspectives converge on a critical reimagining of architecture and heritage: instead of conceiving buildings as immortal monuments, we can understand them as participants in ongoing, dynamic processes of change. It asks us to see ruins not as failures but as phases in architectural lives, capable of generating new meanings and uses. It also forces us to grapple with ethical questions: what does it mean to 'let go' of a building? And most importantly, what kinds of stories do we want our built environment to tell – stories

of static endurance, or stories of change and renewal? Finally, it invites us to imagine new ways of practicing architecture and restoration. As Carbonara argues in *An Italian Contribution to Architectural Restoration*, restoration should balance respect for the historical authenticity of a structure with the creative act of renewal, a principle that aligns with contemporary rethinking of decay and transformation.<sup>6</sup> These issues are more than pressing in modernist housing that often used materials or construction technologies that were innovative at the time but for which long-term performance was not fully understood: e.g., reinforced concrete, flat roofs, curtain walls, large single-pane glazing, etc. Modern housing blocks often no longer meet current standards (thermal comfort, energy use, accessibility, seismic safety, fire safety, etc.). Many modernist buildings require specialised repair, which may be very expensive. Furthermore, neighbourhoods or large housing blocks are quite complex terrain for restoration: there are many units with many components that often share infrastructure (services, façades, stairwells, etc.). Furthermore, restorators and conservators have to coordinate conservation across many owners, tenants, dealing with the cost of large-scale repairs, managing logistics, and disruption to inhabitants. This dialogue underscores that the preservation of modern heritage is not about enshrining permanence but about embracing complexity and evolving narratives that are materially grounded, as Forty reminds us, in the very concrete of modernity.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

In light of these reflections, the contested narratives of socialist modernism compel us to reconsider how we position twentieth-century architecture within the shifting terrain of periodization and restoration. The cases explored demonstrate that modernity in socialist contexts cannot be confined to Western linear periodization but instead speaks to hybrid forms of temporality and identity in socialist contexts. This resonates with the broader conference aim to interrogate the fragile boundaries between ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ and to probe the ambiguities of heritagization. By foregrounding hybridity and ideological negotiation, we need to embrace an expanded understanding of restoration as a practice that mediates between decay and renewal. In this sense, socialist modernism is not only a historical subject but also a methodological lens that we should use to rethink how we engage with modern heritage today. Ultimately, this dialogue underscores that the preservation of modern heritage is not about enshrining permanence but about embracing complexity and evolving narratives. This echoes Choay’s observation that preservation itself is a cultural invention rooted in modernity’s temporal anxieties.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>M. KRIŽAN, *Um, modernizacija i društveni poreci sovjetskog tipa*, Rijeka, Biblioteka Dometi, 1991, p.37.

<sup>2</sup>F. CHOAY, *The Invention of Historic Monument*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.34.

<sup>3</sup>C. DE SILVEY, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p.56

<sup>4</sup>S. MUÑOZ VIÑAS, *Contemporary theory of Conservation*, London–New York, Routledge, 2005, p.72.

<sup>5</sup>S. CAIRNS – J. M. JACOBS, *Buildings Must Die: A Perverse View of Architecture*, Cambridge–London, The MIT Press, 2014, p.10.

<sup>6</sup>G. CARBONARA, *An Italian Contribution to Architectural Restoration*, 2012, Shaftesbury: Donhead Publishing, p.45.

<sup>7</sup>A. FORTY, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History*, 2012, London: Reaktion Books, p.18.

<sup>8</sup>F. CHOAY, *The Invention of Historic Monument*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 57.