

Balkan bigness

From provincial town to a big country's capital, then back to being the big capital of a small country: **Belgrade** has retained its metropolitan size, and atmosphere.

— SERBIA — TEXT: VESNA VUČINIĆ, ILLUSTRATION: LOULOU & TUMMIE

To get one misconception out of the way before we start: anyone coming to Belgrade to marvel at historical buildings or to stroll through narrow medieval streets will be disappointed. For in spite of its long history, the city has not enjoyed an unbroken development, and few of its buildings are more than a hundred years old. All too often, the city, coveted for its strategic importance, has been conquered and destroyed. Le Corbusier, too, had false expectations when visiting Belgrade in 1911 on his *voyage d'orient*. The 'gateway to the East' was not much to his liking. Later, his ideas on modern architecture were to exert a major influence here, as elsewhere.

What one can marvel at in Belgrade is the huge and dynamic transformation of a city which, since the departure of the Ottoman rulers in 1867, has striven unwaveringly for progress and prosperity. Belgrade underwent fundamental change en route from a provin-

cial Ottoman border town to the capital of Serbia. Then, in 1918, it became the capital of the much larger Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, subsequently known as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Under the influence of European trends, modernism became the predominant cultural movement. Many Yugoslav architects joined the Group of Architects of the Modern Movement, founded in Belgrade in 1928. With the creation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945, New Belgrade became a prestige project and, symbolically, the centre of the new, modern state. The city's drive to become a modern Balkan metropolis was clearly reflected in unbridled urban sprawl and often megalomaniac construction projects. Other architectural activities like urban renewal, private homes and office buildings were neglected. As a result, these fields are now the focus of intense activity, and it is thus no coincidence that they feature heavily in this tour.

In 2006, the year Belgrade was declared City of the Future in Southern Europe as part of a competition run by the Financial Times, it also became the capital of the Republic of Serbia. Many icons of modernism built by the formerly powerful state now stand empty in the recently downsized country.

Our tour is planned to take two and a half days, offering a cross-section of contemporary architecture in today's Belgrade. The first day can be done by bike or, like day two, on foot and by public transport. The third day is best done by car.

Day 1

A convenient meeting place and starting point is the central Terazije Square, and specifically the striking Palata Albanije building from 1940. From here, we enter the Dorćol neighbourhood, the original focus of commercial and public life.

First stop is the Infinity residential development (1) by Miodrag Mirković with its impressive curved glass facade. The building contains six modern apartments and allegedly derives 70 per cent of its electricity from renewable sources. An exceptional project, not only for Serbia.

A few metres away stands the Belgrade Princess (2) office development by Milan Pališaški, an example of how existing listed buildings are treated to satisfy the wishes of investors. The original villa from 1884 was totally demolished before being reconstructed with contemporary materials and extended to include three floors below ground and eight above. The concrete villa and its glass tower might be said to make an odd couple, but for this city they are quite normal.

Let's move on now to Studentski Trg, recently enhanced by Isay Weinfeld's Square Nine hotel (3). Thanks to the low-key architecture, which can be attributed to the design of Branislav Mitrović and Vasilije Milunović, who supervised the project until the shell was complete, and thanks to the intelligent choice of materials, the hotel fits so well into its surroundings that one has the impression it has always been here. As a whole, the Brazilian

architect's oeuvre reads like a continuation of the modernism so often found in Belgrade.

Let's proceed now to Kalemegdan Park and the Belgrade Fortress, where the city was originally founded. From here, after admiring the panoramic views of the river landscape and New Belgrade, we make our way down to the Nebojša Tower (4). This 15th-century fortification was also used by the Ottomans as a dungeon, and it was here that the Greek hero and poet Rigas Feraios died in the 18th century; his life and the history of the fortress are recounted in an exhibition inside the restored tower. Dejan Miljković, Jovan Mitrović and Branko Pavić created a modern interior for the tower and a plain concrete extension containing the entrance area and an exhibition space whose roof was left unfinished but which is nonetheless in use for open-air exhibitions and events.

On to the next revitalization project along the River Sava, the Concrete Hall (5) from 1937 (A10 #10, #40). The renovation of the hall by Aleksandar D. Rodić is part of a general initiative on the part of the city to upgrade this industrial area and improve the connection between the riverbank and Kalemegdan Park.

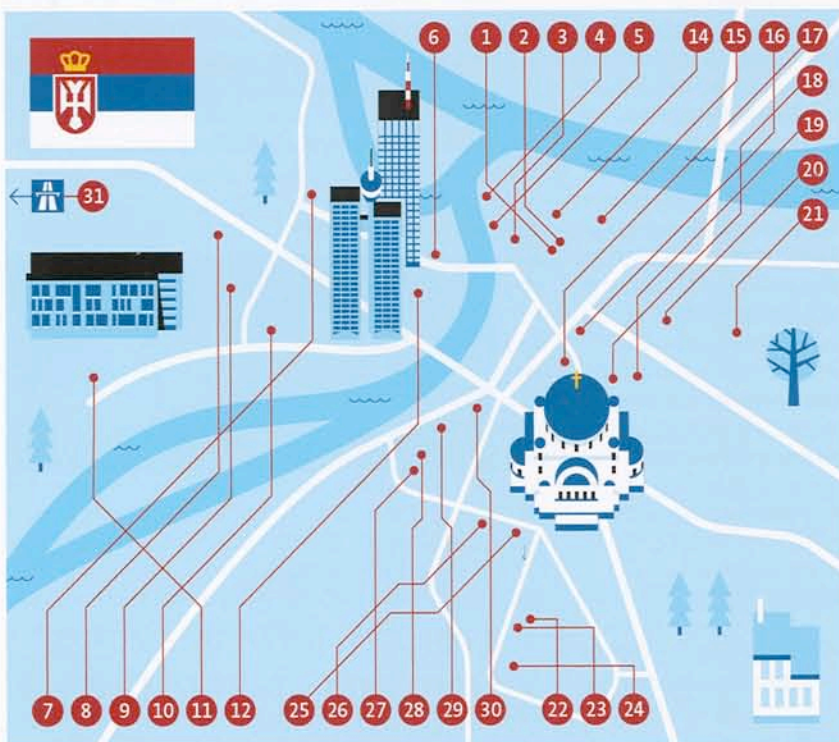
Now we pass the passenger terminal by DVA:Studio and cross Branko's Bridge to New Belgrade. Since 1948, when building began on the seventy or so rectangular blocks of New Belgrade, many of the huge plots of land have remained undeveloped. Consequently, our next stops deal with the theme of increasing urban density, for which the city has no clear concept. As a result, almost any new building looks like a foreign body against the backdrop of 20th-century concrete structures.

The 105-metre-tall Ušće Business Centre from 1965 (A10 #6) and the shopping centre at its base (6) can be seen from afar. In 1999, this high-rise block, formerly home to the Central Committee of Yugoslavia's Communist Party and later the party of Slobodan Milošević, was targeted during NATO's bombing campaign. For years, it was left in its bombed-out state, until it was finally restored by Slavija Biro and ARCVS. The shopping centre, designed by Gerardo Sannella, is the largest in the country, with 140,000 square metres of floor space. The construction of shopping malls in Belgrade only began around the turn of the millennium. The location of the Ušće mall is controversial: instead of being built on the periphery, it occupies one of the city's most attractive spots, although this puts it in line with a global trend to bring shopping malls back into the city centres.

On our way to Block 11a we pass some jewels of Yugoslavian modernism, such as the Palace of the Federation, but also post-modernist and joyfully hi-tech residential and business complexes dating from the late 1980s to the present day. Among other things, Block 11a contains the residential and commercial Maxima Center complex (7) by Milan Vujović, a pair of buildings marked by an atrium-like forecourt and facade with protruding and recessed sections as well as bright yellow elements.

The Red Stripe office building (8) by Austrian architects Vasko und Partner (A10 #40) shows what a challenge it is to build in the context of New Belgrade. It is easier not to rise to this challenge, although buildings that defy the context do have surprise effects that are well worth experiencing.

The Airport City business park (9) by Thorpe Wheatley occupies the former site of Belgrade's first airport (1922–1964). The new complex by the English architects is dominated →





1 INFINITY APARTMENT BLOCK (2011)
Architect: Miodrag Mirković, Dragan Marčetić
Address: Dobračina 8



2 BELGRADE PRINCESS OFFICE BUILDING (2009)
Architect: Milan Pališaški
Address: Dobračina 15



3 SQUARE NINE HOTEL (2011)
Architect: Isay Weinfeld, based on the design of Branislav Mitrović and Vasilije Milunović
Address: Studentski trg



4 NEBOJŠA TOWER (2011)
Architect: Dejan Miljković, Jovan Mitrović, Branko Pavić
Address: Vojvoda Bojović Boulevard



5 CONCRETE HALL (2006)
Architect: Aleksandar D. Rodić
Address: Karadardeva 2–4



6 UŠĆE BUSINESS CENTRE (2002–05) AND UŠĆE SHOPPING CENTRE (2009)
Architect: Slavija Biro (Business Centre), Chapman Taylor (Shopping Centre)
Address: Block 16, Mihajlo Pupin Boulevard 4



7 MAXIMA CENTER RESIDENTIAL & COMMERCIAL COMPLEX (2010)
Architect: Milan Vujović
Address: Block 11a, Trešnjiog cveta 9 and 11



8 'RED STRIPE' OFFICE BUILDING (2010)
Architect: Vasko + Partner
Address: Block 37, Milutina Milankovića 136 a/b



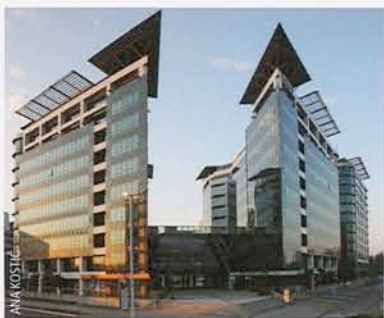
9 AIRPORT CITY BUSINESS PARK (2007)
Architect: Geoff Thorpe of Thorpe Wheatley
Address: Block 65, Omladinskih brigada 88



10 BELVILLE RESIDENTIAL COMPLEX (2009)
Architect: Milutin Gec
Address: Block 67



11 NON-PROFIT HOUSING (2009)
Architect: re.a.c.t studio
Address: Block 61, Jurija Gagarina 166A



12 SAVA CITY RESIDENTIAL & COMMERCIAL COMPLEX (2010)
Architect: DOMAA/ parterno uređenje Zoran Lazović et al
Address: Block 20



13 FLOATING HOSTEL 'ARKABARKA' (2007)
Architect: Maria Grigoropoulou, Vasiliki Akritidou, Dragan Marčetić, Boris Topalović, Vukašin Slepčević, Miodrag Zrnić
Address: Park Ušće, Nikola Tesla Boulevard



14 SUPERMARKET CONCEPT STORE (2008)
Architect: Studio Re:miks, Studio Absolute
Address: Višnjičeva 10



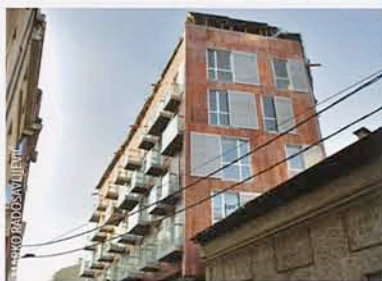
15 GALLERY APARTMENTS (2010)
Architect: Goran Vojvodić
Address: Resavska 23



16 ANNEX OFFICE BUILDING (2010)
Architect: Goran Vojvodić
Address: Resavska 23



17 NATIONAL BANK OF SERBIA (2006)
Architect: Grujo Golijanin
Address: Nemanjina 17



18 RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL (2007)
Architect: Branimir Popović
Address: Sokolska 2–4



19 RESIDENTIAL (2010)
Architect: Vanja Miletić and Irena Videnov
Address: Novopazarska 53



20 ZIRA MIXED-USE COMPLEX (2007)
Architect: Milan Dimitrijević
Address: Ruzveltova 35



21 FIVE RESIDENTIAL BLOCKS (2009)
Architect: Jovan Sarić and Ružica Sarić
Address: Dragiše Lapčevića 22



22 RESIDENTIAL (2006)
Architect: Studio plus two architects, Maša and Lav Bratuša and John Ruane
Address: Mihajla Avramovića 18a



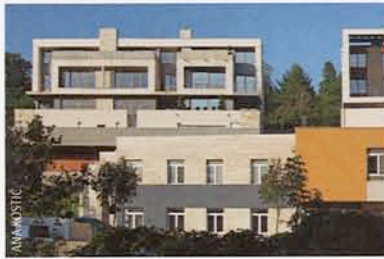
23 VILLA T (2006)
Architect: Zoran Radojičić
Address: Pivljanina Baja 1. deo 13



24 TWO RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS (2010)
Architect: Milan Vujović
Address: Pivljanina Baja 2. deo 13 and 13a



25 LEGACY ČOLAKOVIĆ, GALLERY (2010)
Architect: Zoran Radojičić
Address: Teodora Dražera 15



26 RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL (2010)
 Architect: Eva Vanista Lazarević
 Address: Teodora Dražzera 11b to 11e



27 VR, SENJAK (2011)
 Architect: DVA:Studio
 Address: Andre Nikolića 5a



28 RESIDENTIAL (2011)
 Architect: Dejan Miljković & Jovan Mitrović
 Address: Brzakova 22



29 HOME AND STUDIO (2009)
 Architect: Dejan Miljković, Jovan Mitrović
 Address: Senjačka/Svetog Nauma



30 JAZZ KLUB ČEKAONICA (1940)
 Architect: Dragiša Brašovan
 Address: Vojvoda Mišić Boulevard 17



31 MARCURA MUSEUM (2008)
 Architect: Ivan Kucina, Nenad Katić, Vladimir Macura
 Address: Zenit 1, Novi Banovci

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by symmetry and a central indoor walkway whose street furniture and food outlets succeed in bringing life into the rigorous structure.

The Belville residential complex (10) by Milutin Gec was built as a university village for the 2009 Summer Universiade. The challenge lay in making sure these units could later be sold off as apartments. The complex consists of 14 slender residential blocks with roughly 1,800 apartments and two office blocks.

The non-profit housing (11) designed by re:a.ct (A10 #32) occupies a strip of undeveloped street frontage. Running along the edge of Block 61, it stands at the feet of huge existing residential developments. Unable to create a dialogue with the surroundings via urban design the architects did so via the black-and-white street frontage that recalls the grid pattern of New Belgrade.

The Sava City residential and business complex (12) by Mario Jobst and Miodrag Trpković is located between the Hyatt Hotel and the GENEX Apartments. The complex consists of two units running at an acute angle to one another, accessed via a central entrance hall cutting diagonally across the block.

From here, it is not far to the restful riverbank at the river mouth. Level with the Palace of the Federation, one finds the Arkabarka Floating Hostel (13), a joint project by a team of architects including Maria Grigoropoulou and Vasiliki Akritidou, as well as naval architect Miodrag Zrnić (A10 #33). It is an accomplished example of the raft constructions that are popular along the rivers, used privately or as restaurants and dance clubs.

To bring the first day to a close, I recommend a visit to Zemun to enjoy a dinner of local fish specialities. After this, returning to the older part of the city, one might round off the day with a drink, for example at the Supermarket Concept Store (14) by Re:miks and Absolute. A simple interior of exposed cables and pipes, concrete floor and bare walls sets the scene for the colourful range of gastronomy and consumer goods. For those who want to go dancing, there is The Tube nightclub by Fluid:Architecture (A10 #23), located in a nuclear fallout shelter in the basement of a 1960s building.

Day 2

On the second day, we will be staying on the historical side of Belgrade and developing a feel for its topography. Our tour starts from the same meeting point as yesterday's,

passing through the bohemian neighbourhood of Skadarlija to reach the Gallery Apartments residential complex (15) by Branislav Redžić in Lower Dorćol. The building's massive volume is unusual for the inner city, while its geometry reflects the traffic situation with a curve, and breaks up the facade with framed groups of windows and loggias.

From Lower Dorćol, beside the parliament building, we can take bus 26 to get to the Annex office building (16) by Goran Vojvodić. The challenge here was to build on a plot of land 17 metres wide and 51 metres deep. To compensate this constraint, the architect took liberties with the design of the facade, giving it a glass sheath that creates an additional accessible space.

While crossing Manjež Park, we catch sight of the reflective glass facade of the new premises of the Serbian National Bank (17) by Grujo Golijanin, who won first prize in the international architecture competition in 1981–1982. The building was designed in the period of postmodernism, but was not built until 25 years later. This huge time lag was the consequence of the bloody collapse of Yugoslavia and its economy in the 1990s. Grujo Golijanin's concept is based on a stacking of volumes in relation to the lines of sight and the relationship between man and object. He was inspired by Sergei Eisenstein's principle of a 'montage of attractions'.

Passing through Slavija Square, we arrive at a residential and commercial building (18) by Branimir Popović (A10 #20), which is characterized by a slightly crooked facade clad on one side in red travertine and hung with glazed balconies on the other. The single-storey buildings at the foot of the complex, some of them 100 years old, are gradually being demolished. They show how large areas of the city looked until 20 or 30 years ago.

Nearby is a residential building (19) by Vanja Miletić and Irena Videnov. Once again a project on our tour that emphasizes the facade, trying to stand out from the straight lines of the existing street frontage by using bent glass surfaces.

Half an hour's walk from here is the Zira hotel, business, and commercial complex (20) by Milan Dimitrijević. The dynamic of the Zira is generated by the different treatment of the upper, Z-shaped section and the lower part of the building, in terms not only of form, but also of functions and facade structure. This differentiation is further em-

phasized by the recessed intermediate storey containing greened roof terraces.

We take bus 65 up through the Zvezdara neighbourhood from where there are outstanding views of the Danube. This is also where we find the functional residential blocks (21) by Jovan and Ružica Sarić (A10 #28). Each apartment has a generous view and outdoor spaces, which are integrated as much as possible by means of large windows, roof terraces, gardens and loggias.

We backtrack to Slavija Square, where we take bus 42 southwards to quieter villa neighbourhoods. The residence (22) by studio plus two architects (A10 #19) is the first on this route. Its slabs of black slate and its oval shape, which responds to the shape of the plot, also make it the most striking.

We come to the southern slope of the Lisičići Potok neighbourhood, where land has only been open to new development since 2000. Villa T (23) by Zoran Radojičić is characterized by the slotted outer walls framing its external staircase and loggias, the recessed top storey, and the black steel girders used decoratively and as enclosures.

In the two residential buildings (24) by Milan Vujović, it is not details that are significant but the overall impression. A unified image is created by emphasizing the white balustrades and terraces that run like a continuous band around the red brick facade.

At the end of the steep road, we catch bus 59 which takes us past interesting 20th-century buildings in the Banjica neighbourhood and brings us to the beginning of Teodora Dražzera Street. Here we come to the Čolaković Gallery-Legacy (25) by Zoran Radojičić, another example of revitalization by means of demolition and rebuilding, enriched with extensions and decorative facade elements.

The four commercial and residential buildings (26) by Eva Vanista Lazarević on the southern slope of the Dedinje villa neighbourhood use familiar elements: recessed storeys, full-width loggias, flying roofs, free-standing perforated external walls, but this time with a playful use of colour and materials.

Now we enter Topčider Park, once a popular destination for excursions, and climb the short but steep stretch to the Senjak villa neighbourhood. Time for a late lunch or a break for coffee in the renovated Sheher restaurant by Fluid:Architecture.

Not far from here stands the VR villa (27) by DVA:Studio. Its street facade is very intro-

verted, only opening up to the outside towards the garden. It impresses with the mellow feel of its pale travertine cladding, its clear cubic form, and its restrained design consisting solely of the colour contrast between protruding and recessed elements.

The residence (28) by Dejan Miljković and Jovan Mitrović is just nearing completion and now is a good time to visit before it is inhabited and thus under surveillance: in Belgrade's upscale neighbourhoods, one sees more security personnel and surveillance cameras than residents. The next building, a home and studio for a sculptor (29), is by the same pair of architects (A10 #34). Both buildings are characterized by a white plaster facade, protruding elements, and external walls skillfully deployed to screen off and divide up the private outdoor area.

The best place to end the evening is the roof terrace of the BIGZ building (30), the former State Printing Company of Yugoslavia and a modernist icon designed by Dragiša Brašovan in 1940. The former restaurant, which now houses the Čekaonica jazz club, boasts a fantastic view over the River Sava and the city. With the decline of the company in the 1990s, the building itself was left to decay. Its rooms are now being sublet until the building's future is decided. It is popular with artists and musicians and is quickly turning into a creative hub.

Day 3

On the third day I recommend a trip by car to the Macura Museum (31) by Ivan Kucina and Nenad Katić (advance reservations essential: +381 (0) 64 472 96 29; visiting possible only between 1st of May and 1st of October). This excursion can be combined with a visit to Novi Sad. The museum is located near the Belgrade- Novi Sad motorway, 20 minutes' drive from Belgrade. The architects view the building as a 'successful failure'. Having delivered their initial sketches and renderings to the client, they didn't hear from Vladimir Macura again until a year later, when he proudly presented the almost completed building. Macura had altered the original design in accordance with his own ideas. He became a co-designer and the project became an example of participatory design. The museum contains a rich collection of neo-avant-garde and modern works from Yugoslavia. ←

Vesna Vučinić organizes guided tours in Belgrade. Info: www.arhitektura.net