

EUROPEAN CONTEXT OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE “NAFTA-GAS” BUILDING IN NOVI SAD

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ЕВРОПСКИ КОНТЕКСТ АРХИТЕКТУРЕ ЗГРАДЕ НАФТА-ГАС
У НОВОМ САДУ

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Abstract

The architectural and urban significance of the “Nafta-gas” building in Novi Sad is analyzed within the broader European context. Situated along Liberation Boulevard, a prominent urban axis, the building symbolizes post-modernist tendencies in late 20th-century Serbian architecture. Designed through a public competition in 1985, the building reflects the era’s socio-political aspirations, blending monumental and modernist elements. Influenced by postmodern architectural principles, the structure juxtaposes mass and transparency, employing advanced construction techniques and high-quality materials. The paper traces its evolution from conceptual design to partial realization, emphasizing its role as both a symbol of transformation and a focal point within Novi Sad’s urban landscape. The challenges of preserving postmodernist heritage amidst evolving urban contexts are critically addressed, underscoring the need for systematic protection of such landmarks. The study highlights the building’s dual nature: as an innovative design of its time and as a reflection of complex socio-economic conditions in Serbia during the 1990s.

Keywords: postmodern architecture, urban transformation, Novi Sad, Yugoslav architecture

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Архитектонски и урбанистички значај зграде „Нафта-гас“ у Новом Саду анализиран је у ширем европском контексту. Смештена дуж Булевара ослобођења, значајне градске осе, зграда симболизује постмодернистичке тенденције касног 20. века у српској архитектури. Пројектована кроз јавни конкурс 1985. године, зграда одражава друштвено-политичке тежње епохе, комбинујући монументалне и модернистичке елементе. Под утицајем принципа постмодерне архитектуре, структура спаја масивност и транспарентност, користећи напредне технике градње и висококвалитетне материјале. Рад прати њен развој од концептуалног пројекта до делимичне реализације, наглашавајући њену улогу као симбола трансформације и жаришне тачке у урбаном пејзажу Новог Сада. Критички се разматрају изазови очувања постмодернистичког наслеђа у контексту еволуирајућих урбаних захтева, истичући потребу за систематском заштитом таквих знаменитости. Рад наглашава двоструку природу зграде: као иновативни дизајн свог времена и као рефлексију сложених социо-економских услова у Србији током 1990-их година.

Кључне речи: постмодерна архитектура, урбана трансформација, Нови Сад, југословенска архитектура

Introduction: Formation of the Main Novi Sad Boulevard

The urban formation of October 23 Boulevard renamed Liberation Boulevard in 1991 [Bulevar oslobođenja], carried out during the second half of the 20th century, was followed by the construction of commercial, residential, and public buildings. The construction and development of Liberation Boulevard is still ongoing, and its construction is significant for the city of Novi Sad as a unique feature of the city's social, political, and economic contexts. The development of urban and architectural thought in the northern province of Serbia, Vojvodina, could be traced through Boulevard construction as it represented a cut aimed at placing a new dominant social class in the focus of urbanization and is the most radical transformation of Novi Sad's urban matrix (Jović et al., 2023: 4), marking through

the old city core (Škorić et al., 2016: 777). This signified the transition from individual housing on clearly demarcated urban plots to collective multi-story residential buildings in social ownership (Jović, 2019: 9).

From its inception the boulevard has served as the central thoroughfare and the new city linear center, which, due to its dimensions, plays a key role in the transformation of the city as outlined in the general urban plans of 1950, 1963, 1974, 1985 and 1994, and later plans of the 21st century. Liberation Boulevard stretches from the Railway Station to the "Freedom Bridge" (Fig. 1). The boulevard was built with the aim of increasing activity and improving traffic connections in the city area, while also optimizing the space and generate economic profitability. Today, it is one of the busiest streets in Novi Sad, flanked by numerous business, public, and residential buildings.

No other research has been conducted on the buildings along Liberation Boulevard, except for the aesthetic analysis of public buildings by Nemanja Radusinović in his Ph.D. thesis (Радусиновић, 2018), as well as the research by Ilija Gubić and Nebojša Antešević on the residential architecture of Novi Sad through the "Borba" Award presented at the 2023 exhibition and catalogue (Губић, Антешевић, 2023). There, Gubić and Antešević show two residential buildings along Liberation Boulevard: the residential and commercial building by Slavko Županski (1943-2015) built in 1973, and the residential and commercial building by Slobodan Kuzmanović (1948) built in 1985.

The "filling of the space" around the boulevard followed the construction of the Railway Station by architects Imre Farkaš and Milan Matović from 1960 to 1964. From each post-war generation of Novi Sad architects, most prominent architects designed buildings along the Boulevard: Sibin Đorđević (1926-2013), Aleksandar Kelemen (1924-2012), Pavle Žilnik (1920-2006), Miodrag Lozić (1934-2022), Zora Mitrović-Pajkić (1927-2021), Milan Matović (1936-2002), Blagoje Reba (1938-2002), Dušan Krstić (1938-2013) and others (Mitrović, 2021: 42). In the last decades of the 20th century, several new buildings along Liberation Boulevard changed the image of the socialist boulevard into a thoroughfare surrounded by modern architecture. At the edge of Limanski Park, one of the most imposing buildings in Novi Sad was built, the "Nafta-gas" office building, a significant visual and spatial benchmark for both the city and Liberation Boulevard.



Fig. 1. View of Liberation Boulevard in 1968, partially constructed through the city core. The upper right shows the area where the „Nafta-gas“ building was later built (Source: URBIS).



Fig. 2. Appearance of the formed Liman and preparations for the construction of the „Nafta-gas“ building at the intersection of the People's Front and Liberation Boulevard (Source: URBIS).

The planning and development of the Liman city district, located in the southeastern part of the city - along the southern part of Liberation Boulevard on the left bank of the Danube, is especially important for the urban development of Novi Sad, particularly in the decades after World War II (Ромелић, 1999). The development of the floodplain area along the Danube River, which began with the creation of embankments for the needs of railway construction in the 19th century, continued in the interwar period with subdivision for the construction of single-story houses and industrial facilities. After the World War II, this sparsely populated and marshy suburb developed into a modernist residential area. Through land-filling operations, the area was reshaped to accommodate a university town

and residential buildings with park areas and accompanying facilities such as schools, childcare centers, and healthcare facilities. The first high-rise buildings were built in the 1960s, and then parts of the housing areas were formed in several stages (Fig. 2). The residential blocks in all four zones have similar urban-architectural solutions – an open-block concept with residential buildings of different heights around surrounded by paths and green areas with urban furniture. Several authors and teams of authors, mostly from Novi Sad based architecture companies, are responsible for the design of the residential buildings, while in terms of construction, the application of the then new IMS system of prefabricated construction dominated (Губић, Антешевић, 2023: 28).

The Design Solution for the “Nafta-gas” Building Through a Competition

On October 23, 1985, in Novi Sad, the Working Organization for Exploration and Production of Oil and Gas “Nafta-gas”, announced a tender for conceptual urban-architectural designs of a business-administrative block along Liberation Boulevard. Such a format—a competition organized by an important public stakeholder following a transformation propelled by a changed relationship between infrastructure (the railway) and the urban fabric—was also quite popular in western Europe, as exemplified by the Forum des Halles in Paris (1979) or, years later, the Garibaldi Isola district in Milan (1992). The competition was of an invitational nature (Букајлов, 2011: 47) and eight state design organizations were invited to it. However, under Yugoslavia’s prevailing laws, five more companies collected tender documents (DaNS, 1986: 3). After 2.5 months, 12 works were submitted to the competition organizers. The jury comprised Boško Petrov (President), Miloš Savić (Vice President), Ivan Antić, Miroslav Krstonošić, Dušan Prodanović, Jovan Vulić, Marko Janjić, and Dragoljub Cvetković. The jury unanimously selected the awarded and purchased works.

The first prize was awarded to Aleksandar Keković (1939-2018), Zoran Županjevac (1944-1993), and Ivan Pantić from RO “Energoprojekt

- Design” from New Belgrade (Fig. 3); the second prize went to Milan Mihelič (1925-2021) from Ljubljana, Slovenia, who submitted a work on behalf of the AB “Arhitektonski biro” (Fig. 4); the third prize went to Slavko Županski and Miroslav Grujić (1941) from the Institute for Physical Culture Project Bureau Novi Sad, while two special awards went to Gruja Golijanin (1941), Slobodan Maldini (1956) and Mustafa Music (1949-2024) from “Investbiro” from Belgrade, as well as Spasoje Krunic (1939-2020), Dimitrije Mladenović (1936-2024), and Blagoje Reba from “Investprojekt” and “Vojvodinainvest” from Novi Sad.¹

¹ In correspondence with architect Slobodan Maldini, dated August 30, 2023, the authors of the paper learned that an invitation to participate was sent to Branka Lancoš-Maldini, Slobodan Maldini’s wife, who then invited her husband, who in turn invited Mustafa Musić, his colleague from the Meč group. Recognizing the ambitious nature of the project, they approached the “Invest-biro” with a request to finance the competitive project. The then-director of “Invest-biro” accepted to fund the competition, and delegated Gruja Golijanin in front of the company to take part as a team member. In the correspondence, Slobodan Maldini notes that the first-prized team, namely Aleksandar Keković, “made abundant use of the architectural elements of the competition project” of the “Invest-biro” team during the preparation of the contractor’s project. DaNS also writes about the first prize winners: DaNS (1986: 2).

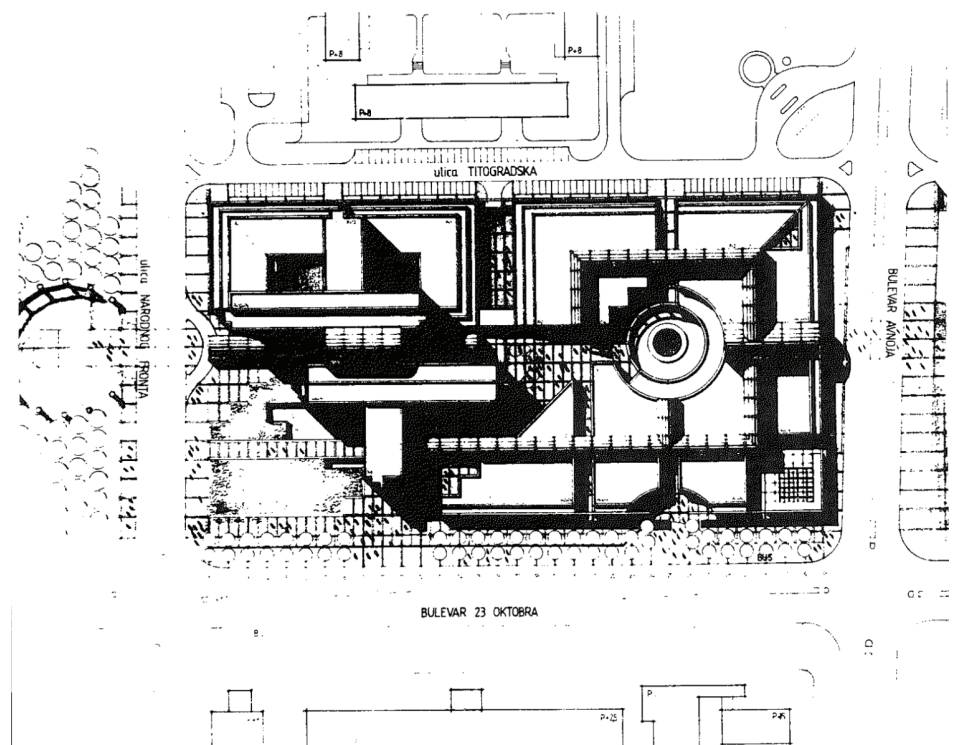


Fig. 3: The situation plan for the first prize-winning solution by architects Keković, Županjevac and Pantić (Source: DaNS, 1986: 2).

After the announcement of the results, an exhibition showcasing the competition entries was curated by Gordana Đilas² (Fig. 4 and 5). Both city's political representatives and Ivan Antić spoke at its opening. A discussion involving the jury, experts, competition participants, and the general public.

One of the authors of the project, Aleksandar Keković³ said in media interviews that the metaphor of a building is a gate. Namely, he told the daily newspaper that medieval towns were entered via a bridge over a canal and through a gate, and Novi Sad's entrance at "Liman" lacked a gate in a spatial and psychological sense—Keković further explained in the competition project.⁴ Conception of architectural form imbued meaning is a distinctive trait of postmodern architecture, Charles Jencks writes in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (Jencks, 1981: 40): "People invariably see one building in terms of another, or in terms of a similar object; in short as a *metaphor*."

The authors of the project, Aleksandar Keković, Ivan Pantić, and Zoran Županjevac, had an associate Sava Forkapić, who collaborated on the interior design alongside Keković, while the static calculation was done by Sava Vukelić. In the conceptual phase, the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture and

"Energoprojekt" participated in the development of the project, with the latter working on the elaboration of the project. The contractors were "Neimar" from Novi Sad, "Integral" from Subotica, and "Energoprojekt" from Belgrade (Perović, 2003: 390). The architectural significance of this megaproject, the "Nafta-gas" office building, is further evident through the presented sketches (Fig. 6) by the lead author where the volumes and functions are analyzed. The architect's quick and strong strokes define his sketches, visibly noting consideration of various segments of the building, such as the glass "dome".

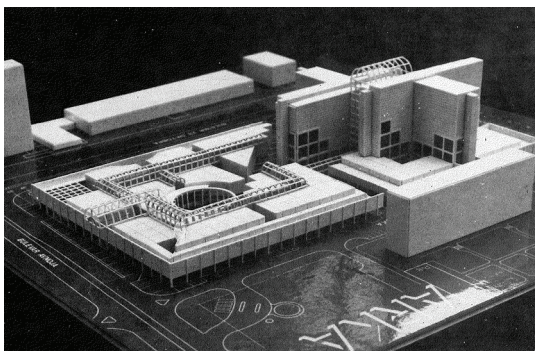
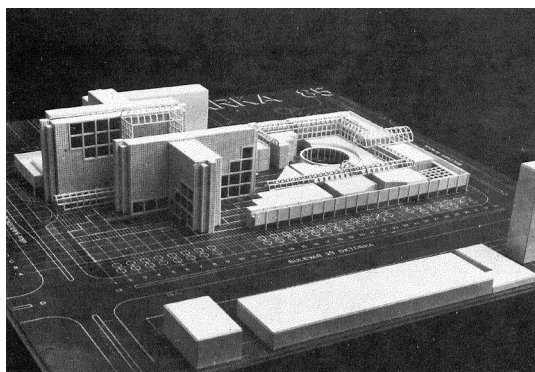


Fig. 4 and 5: Photographs of the mock-up of the first prize-winning work by the authors Keković, Županjevac and Pantić (Source: Legacy of Zoran Županjevac).

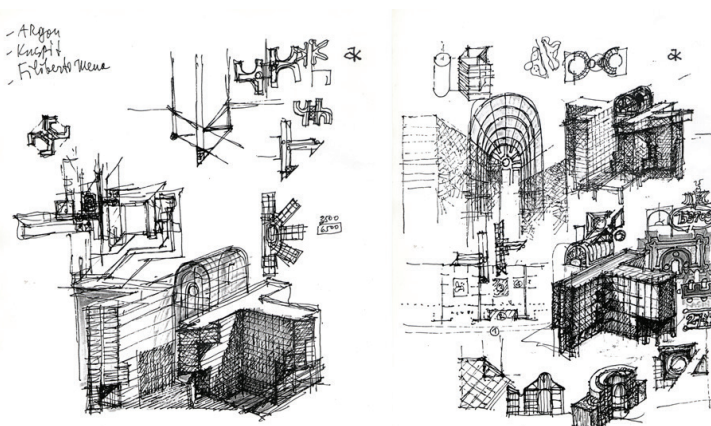


Fig. 6: Architectural sketches by Aleksandar Keković (Source: Archive of Aleksandar Keković).

² The exhibition was opened in the hall of GSC "Vojvodina" by Boško Petrov, president of the Municipal Assembly of the City of Novi Sad, and chair of the jury. The vice president of the jury was Miloš Savić. More in ANONYM. Exhibition of competitive works, DaNS, 7 (1986: 3).

³ It is noteworthy that Zoran Županjevac died in Zimbabwe before the construction was completed, while Pantić lived in Zimbabwe in the 1990s, and Keković was the only one of the authorial team to have access to local media. In a conversation with Larisa Županjevac Nikolić, an architect and daughter of Zoran Županjevac, we learn that Keković was the team leader in the internal organization of Energoprojekt and signed as the first author of all projects under his leadership, while Županjevac and Antić worked mostly on the competition project.

⁴ In her book *Novi Sad from house to house*, Donka Stančić writes about her meeting with Keković in July 1998. In an interview he shared the questions that guided him during the design of the building: Is it possible to give faceless space? Is it possible to gather the scattered? Can a building give spirit to a place that lacks one? Can one house contain and radiate the city? Can the character of the selected spatial forms and their arrangement in space soothe a place that exudes the power of desolation and arrogance? (Stanić, 2017: 572).

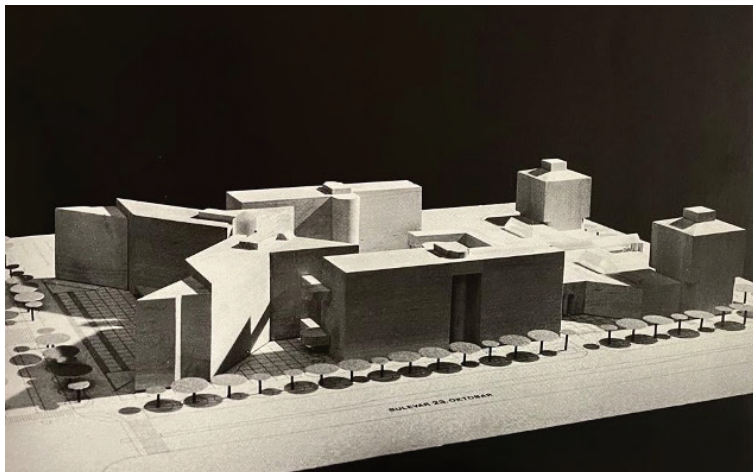


Fig. 7: The second-placed awarded competition solution by the architect from Ljubljana, Milan Mihelič (Source: Stane Bernik, Milan Mihelič, 2011: 185).

The second prize-winning work is significant for researchers, because its author, Milan Mihelič, designed a building considered one of the best projects in Novi Sad - the "Stoteks" department store. His solution for the "Nafta-gas" building a closed block with an imposing inner courtyard accessible through the ground floor. While Mihelič plans the main entrance towards Limanski Park, he accentuates the central parts of the buildings towards all the surrounding streets. Bridges at the first-floor level support communication between the blocks. The ground floors are partially passable and connect the block's inner and outer spaces. Colonnades and other covered areas were designed to connect public open spaces outside and inside the block (Fig. 7).

Construction of the First Prize-Winning Project "Nafta-Gas"

The construction of the "Nafta-gas" building began in 1989, but was stopped in the early 1990s, due to inflation, international sanctions and the general situation in Yugoslavia (Serbia) at the time was later continued and partly completed in 1998;⁵ however, the project was not fully completed as initially planned. The part towards Cara Lazar Boulevard - today's Mercator building - was not built. There is a fountain at the corner of Liberation Boulevard, which separates the building from

the public open space in front. On the ground floor there is an empty amphitheater on the side of Liberation Boulevard, as it is not used, which further reinforces the sense of the building's inaccessibility. It is possible that had the building been fully completed - if an additional block with a square, promenade, and shops had been built as outlined in the project - it could have enhanced its connection with the public. Today, the Mercator shopping center sits on the plot where a part of the "Nafta-gas" building was supposed to be built. Although it offers similar contents, is not visually compatible with the neighboring building and additionally contributes to the feeling of its isolation.

The "Nafta-gas" building is a complex architectural form with a developed base consisting of several facing volumes connected by a glazed vault, as well as an annex on one side of the building. Such a conceived form with raised volumes extending on four sides relates to the surroundings both structurally and conceptually.

The widespread volume composition creates the effect of megalomania or hypertrophied structure, which was uncommon at that time (Mitrović, 2016: 37). The building, dominating with its form, and above all its height, significantly affects the perception of its relationship with the surrounding environment. Among the most impressive parts of the building is the glass dome that connects two opposite volumes. With its steel construction, it rises both vertically and structurally from the main facade, making a stark contrast of mass and anti-mass. (Fig. 8 and 9)

The functional scheme of the building was built to accommodate various contents while striving to create a pleasant interior in the newly built environment by incorporating natural elements such as water, greenery, and light (Nedučin, 2014: 165). The base reveals that opposite the main entrance to the hall, secondary entrance was designed, and this precisely defines the central communication of the building, the meeting place of the two buildings of the complex. The user needs are reflected in the diversity of the base; the main amphitheater and conference hall have large antechambers - foyers, serving as gathering places. Pure parallelepiped bodies rise from the geometrized base, interconnected by modulated architectural connections, particularly emphasized by the covered glass corridor (Mitrović, 1995: 42).

⁵ The building was officially opened by Slobodan Milošević. The building was completed and put into operation in October 1999, on the fifty-fourth anniversary of the liberation of Novi Sad from fascism.



Fig. 8 and 9: Aerial view, buildings under construction (left) and almost completed buildings at the end of the 1990s (right) (Source: URBIS)

In the basement, garages on two levels, a restaurant with a kitchen for 2,000 users, and cold rooms are planned. On the ground and first floors, there are congress halls, meeting rooms, and offices, while the upper floors house offices with a total area of 36,000 square meters.

The facades of the building's solid volumes are based on the ratio of "full" and "empty" fields, arranged in a regular grid. (Figs. 10 and 11). This arrangement of the massive wall (full) and window openings (empty) on the facade, according to the already established grid, is transformed into enlarged glass surface. With their cascading arrangement, they form the impression of the opening of the building at the ground floor level, where the object symbolically approaches the observer and users, and where monumentality turns into openness, close to man (Радусиновић, 2018: 138).

The design team's articulated aspiration to use current, high-quality, and expensive materials, as well as an impressive volume to create an imposing object and a distinctive symbol of power, is perceived entirely as the theme of this office building. It is a complex architectural work that simultaneously exudes solidity and transparency, hinting at new processes in architecture. The experienced character of this work as a reliable, safe, and yet transparent building, a fundamental part of the state's economy, serves as a symbol of a transformational process that introduces transparency into monumentality, with the aspiration of making a contribution and achieving the betterment of society (Радусиновић, 2018: 138).

Built during an economic crisis in the country⁶, the building, which incorporates creativity, knowledge, and the most expensive materials, has certainly earned its place as a symbol of the social and political organization of the society that raised it in the greatest crisis in the country's recent history (Радусиновић, 2018: 138). The facade exemplifies the geometric spirit of late modern architecture, clad in "Buchta KerAion" ceramic plates from a German manufacturer, with dimensions of 60 x 60 x 0.8 centimeters, glued on four sides and reinforced with a mesh on the back, mounted on an aluminum structure, and additionally fixed with steel clamps.⁷ The contractor was "Neimar" from Novi Sad.⁸ The facade reveals a modular system approach with the 60 x 60 module as the guide for its design. Accordingly, the openings and windows are visibly aligned with the joints of ceramic tiles. The window openings are closed with two types of imported reflective and toughened enameled glass.

⁶ The estimated cost for the construction was 95 million US dollars, but by 1998 it had been significantly increased due to delays in the completion of the works. (Stančić, 2017: 574)

⁷ Donka Stančić states that the facade ceramics were a "strong desire of Keković" (Stančić, 2017: 575). Some examples of postmodern architecture in Vojvodina can be found in Gubić's works on Imre Merkovec (Gubić, 2022: 119-127), and in the text by Gubić and Putnik Prica on Ranko Radović's buildings in Vojvodina (Gubić, Putnik Prica, 2022: 38-46).

⁸ Exchange of emails with Dragica Klanac from NIS from August 28 to September 1, 2023.



Fig. 10 and 11: A corner building with an accented fountain as an urban, ground-floor benchmark (Source: Authors)

Despite the prevailing economic challenges the company did not refrain from using the most expensive materials both in the construction and interior decoration of the building. The multi-purpose hall and the main amphitheater were covered with wooden panels.⁹

⁹ Perhaps the greatest indicator of the building's opulence during the crisis is reflected precisely in those transit spaces such as corridors, foyers, and waiting rooms. Architect Miodrag R. Jovanović (1942) used a large number of decorative ceramics in the interior. The staircase to the ground floor has two postmodernist designed massive columns that contribute to the overall impression of a positively designed interior. In her book, published in several editions, *Novi Sad from House to House*, Donka Stančić writes that in addition to Miodrag R. Jovanović, the interior project involved Mila Bačić and Blagoje Reba - according to whose ideas, quality designed furniture, joinery, Murano glass for partitions and light fixtures were procured from Italy (Stanić, 2017: 576).

Dijana Milašinović Marić praised the building, writing that the “Nafta-gas” office building with its form, finishing, functional solution, disposition, and overall impression of harmonious architectural forms that radiate internal strength, articulates that space of the city, giving it a focal point. Along with the landmarks of Novi Sad, such as the Banovina Palace or Tanurdžić Palace by architects Brašovan and Tabaković, this building is one of the spatial features that give and build the physiognomy of Novi Sad - particularly Liman (Milašinović Marić, 2000). Mihajlo Mitrović describes the building as an architectural symbol of a giant with a portal character that emphasizes the entrance to Novi Sad (Mitrović, 1995: 42). Vladimir Mitrović writes that “the huge and complacent building remained cold and inaccessible throughout its existence, symbolizing the undemocratic political system that erected its monument. All problems related to the maintenance and operation of this facility will be evident only in a few years. It is absurd that this kitsch and rich building will remain a symbol of probably the most difficult period in the country's history” (Mitrović, 2021: 23).

Conclusion

The authors Keković, Županjevac and Pantić seized the opportunity to create a modern symbol of its era in the given space with the 50,000-square-meters “Nafta-gas” office building. A significant change in the social image of the country, as well as the once intractable problems of everyday life are symbolically reflected in the newly built buildings

of the 1990s. The phenomenon of megalomania in this period characterizes both in residential buildings - which often receive a hypertrophic construction, with five or six floors and numerous roof additions - and in certain public buildings. The most prominent example is the "Nafta-gas" building, which overshadowed the neighborhood with its enormous size (Mitrović, 2016: 37-38).

During the 1990s, there was almost no investment in public office buildings, except for the investment of approximately \$100 million in the construction of the monumental administration building for "Nafta-gas" in Novi Sad - and the question arises whether, from the aspect of the socio-economic circumstances that marked the nineties of the last century of that decade, it was justified (Mitrović, 2016: 37-38).

Today, no institution in Novi Sad keeps the competition entries or winning designs from this pivotal design competition for the city of Novi Sad. Neither does the Novi Sad Archive nor "Nafta-gas" have the project. Participants in the judging and curation of the exhibition of works also do not have the designs in their personal archives,¹⁰ they were not published in *DaNS* magazine when they were announced. Thus, this work represents a significant contribution to the research of contemporary architecture of the 20th century in Novi Sad, Vojvodina, Serbia.

The legacy of postmodernist architecture marks the transition from the rigid norms of modernism to a freer, more eclectic approach to the design of buildings and urban spaces. A key feature of postmodernism is the unfettered creativity fueled by the combination of different styles, elements, and motifs. Architects "played with tradition", often quoting and referencing historical forms and phenomena, in innovative and modified ways. This is a peculiar trait of post-modern architecture aligns with what architectural historian Kenneth Frampton defined as "critical regionalism" in his seminal essay - to counter the modern dominance of the visual with a post-modern sensitivity towards the 'tactile', hence towards what is closer to us—ultimately developing an architectural language more 'respectful' of locality and less generic and global (Frampton: 1983). Frampton's essay,

first published in 1983, spread from the US to Europe in the following years, influencing the global architectural scene.

In Novi Sad, such interpretations are noticeable in the buildings of architect Branislav Mitrović, where he refers to the medieval architecture of Serbia, but also in the buildings of Milenija and Darko Marušić on Liberation Boulevard, which refer to a somewhat more regional style and building materials. This practice has resulted in architecturally significant buildings that often challenge and intrigue the professional public and citizens. However, the systematic practice of protection and preservation of postmodernist architecture in Serbia remains lacking, primarily due to the low interest of the public and professionals in this type of buildings. Internationally, this practice is different as evident in London's SIS Building, built between 1983 and 1994, and designed by Terry Farrell or Espace Léopold, built between 1989 and 1995, to host the offices and sessions of the European Parliament in Brussels.

The history and design of the "Nafta-gas" office building resonate, to a certain extent, with what Sophie Dars and Carlo Menon described as a "Corporate Arcadia," in their exhibition about the unusually detached and corporate-like architecture erected in Brussels for the newly formed European institutions. "While in the 1970s and 1980s the architectural debate was rich in proposals and counterproposals, in the 1990s the built reality took over by sheer numbers," Dars and Menon write in the introduction to the exhibition (Dars and Menon: 2017). These were architectures of 'quantity'—both in terms of dimensions and cost—which affirmed their presence within the existing urban fabric not by a fine weaving of its thread, but rather by their sheer magnitude. "Due to their size and presence in the city, all these buildings have a public dimension, while their inside is mostly inaccessible" (Dars and Menon: 2017). The same could be said of the "Nafta-gas" office building, with the difference that in Brussels these monumental buildings collectively dominate the urban fabric, and offer no possibility of undoing or resistance. Their presence, in other words, is irreversible: "Neither old enough to be 'history' nor recent enough to be still vivid for the public, these buildings have already been absorbed into the city's incoherent whole" (Dars and Menon: 2017). This is not the case of Novi Sad, where the "Nafta-gas" building stands alone. Hence the question raised by this work: can a postmodernist building in Novi

¹⁰ In a correspondence dated August 28, 2023, with the architect and urban planner Gordana Đilas, who was the curator of the exhibition on awarded works in 1986.

Sad, like the "Nafta-gas" office building, be protected, and is there a need for it?

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