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**Humanist Architecture of Socialist Yugoslavia**

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# **Making Home(s) in Displacement**

Critical Reflections on a Spatial Practice

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*and Hilde Heynen*

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# Refugee Shelters done Differently

## Humanist Architecture of Socialist Yugoslavia

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### Introduction

[...] there are no [too] big or [too] small themes in architecture, the size of buildings has no influence on architectural experience, building traditions are inexhaustible source of inspiration for new designers, landscape is the prime factor in artistic determination of work of architecture. (Mitrović, 1971, p. 6).<sup>1</sup>

“Architectural miniatures”, to use the words of Mihajlo Mitrović himself, which are similar to miniatures in music, painting or sculpture, can send powerful messages and have far-reaching cultural impact. There is no idea too pertinent, nor ideology too grand that cannot be conveyed through the smallest of architectural forms, prudent materialisation or carefully designed detail. This chapter is dedicated to one such example; in it I will demonstrate how big ideologies, global geo-political aspirations and, by no means less important, an innovative approach to humanitarian architecture all manifested themselves in the design of one single building: the United Nations’ shelter for foreigners in Banja Koviljača, formerly in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, today in the Republic of Serbia. It is certainly a unique example that is a product of its time and unrepeatable set of circumstances, so much so that, it can be argued, it cannot be classified as a refugee *shelter* at all.<sup>2</sup> The most recent refugee crisis, however, unequivocally confirmed that it is one. But instead of presenting this building as an anomaly among refugee shelters, in this chapter I will present it as an exemplar of successful international cooperation and a humane approach to homemaking for displaced people from which many lessons for the design

of refugee shelters can be drawn. In terms of the chapter's structure, I will start with the local (i.e. nation-building in Socialist Yugoslavia) and global (i.e. cultural exchange between the "three worlds") geo-political contexts in which the building came to be set, the motivation and reasoning for its construction, followed by the discussion of the design itself and the impact it made, before I conclude with the most recent developments – namely, its being part of the Eastern Mediterranean refugee route – and lessons for the future.

In Yugoslavia, just as in the rest of the world, modernism, modernisation and, by extent, modern architecture had a powerful political agenda. From the dawn of its days at the end of the Second World War, Socialist Yugoslavia's nation-building was supported by the intense spatial production that was supposed to be the face of the new modern state (Blagojević, 2007; Kulić, Parker & Penick, 2014). The country's new capital, New Belgrade, was built from scratch according to the principles of CIAM, reflecting the ambition of the Yugoslav Communist Party to assume one of the leading roles in the newly established world order. The decades-long project followed a well-established pattern of construction of new capital cities – the erection of new ministries, governmental institutions and other "representative" buildings – in an effort to break the link with the ideologically inappropriate past (Vale 1992), echoing similar processes that were happening in many African countries at the time following their newly gained post-colonial independence (Avermaete, 2010; Beeckmans, 2014, 2018).

The architectural and political nation-building gained a completely new dimension following the political rift between Josip Broz Tito and Joseph Stalin in 1948 which led to the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the communist bloc under the dominion of Soviet Union (Lampe, 2000; Ramet, 2005). This historic event, as it turned out, opened the door for a young socialist nation politically and culturally to reinvent itself on its own terms. In the decades that followed the country developed a unique system of self-management (in Serbian, *'samoupravljanje'*), branded by many modern-day historians as "soft" socialism or even "socialist democracy" (Stojiljković & Ignjatović, 2019), which also had substantial ramifications for architectural and urban production. The totalitarian rule by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, with Tito as its undisputed leader, intertwined self-managing industrial production with a lavish lifestyle that drew its inspiration from the capitalist West (Kulić, 2009a). This state of "in-betweenness" required, and indeed produced, an architectural style that was "capitalist in form and socialist in nature": in its formal appearance it had to be distant from the aesthetics of socialist realism, traditionally associated with the Soviet Union, while simultaneously embodying the "progressive ideology" of the Party (Kulić, Mrduljaš & Thaler, 2012).

A solution was found in the creation of a specific kind of “Yugoslav” modernism characterised by a high level of professional independence, individualism and creative freedom to search for original architectural expression. Architects drew inspiration from the local building traditions, often modernising and re-interpreting elements of vernacular and religious architecture (Grabrijan & Neidhardt, 1957; Alić, 2013a, 2013b). This alchemy may seem unnatural, given the unfavourable status of religion and nationalist determinants in the eyes of communist ideology, but, according to Stojiljković and Ignjatović (2019), it was allowed because

The main concepts of [Yugoslav structuralist] architecture were seen to give a plastic and visible expression to the Yugoslav Marxists’ ideas of socialism as completed naturalism, a dialectical relationship between the universal and the individual, between different pasts and unhistorical essences, and between society, nature, and culture. (p. 872)

These ideas were considered progressive even by the global standards of the time, which comes as no surprise considering how enthusiastically Yugoslav architects tried to be in sync with the global architectural scene by gorging on contemporary architectural literature coming from both Eastern and Western spheres of influence (Kulić, 2009b; Štraus, 1991).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the social status of architects was so elevated that they were considered one of the main drivers of social change and economic growth, even to the point that the construction of modern forms at the expense of vernacular architecture was often used as a substitute for actual modernisation of the country (Herscher, 2010).<sup>4</sup>

Another defining historical moment for the development of the Yugoslav socialist project was the founding conference of the Non-Aligned Movement held in Belgrade in 1961, at the zenith of the Cold War. The movement was seen as a third, neutral alternative to the two confronting political and ideological paradigms, the Eastern and Western blocs (Avermaete, 2012). The Yugoslav political leadership quickly realised that non-alignment could be used as an opportunity to position itself as an unofficial leader of the “Third bloc”, spread its international influence and even act as a cohesive element in a deeply polarised and divided world. Many socialist countries saw clear benefits to such an alliance, first of all, in conquering a huge, underdeveloped market that ranged from South America, through Africa, to far East Asia.<sup>5</sup> Łukasz Stanek (2020) underlines the economic logic of non-alignment by arguing that, far from being “an ideological smokescreen or a utopian vision”, the world socialist system functioned primarily as “an existing reality of foreign trade”. Architecture, large building corporations and architects who operated across the national borders

played no small roll in achieving these ambitious goals.<sup>6</sup> But, as shown in Stanek and Avermaete (2012), this engagement was far from unilateral and comprised solely of export-import projects. Instead, it created a “contact zone” where all sides involved were influenced by the reflexive cultural exchange, while the formation of large state-controlled construction firms, the exchange of expertise across disciplines, and the practicalities of micro- and macro-politics completely shattered and redefined the traditional dynamics of architectural practice.

In Yugoslavia, the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement started a series of events that had an enormous effect on economic, cultural and – by translation – architectural production in the country. Their high status within the Non-Aligned Movement gave Yugoslav construction firms such as *Energo-projekt* and *Mašinoprojekt* a privileged position when bidding for commissions in developing countries. This, in turn, gave the Yugoslav regime a convenient platform from which to spread and promote its political and ideological agenda of “brotherhood and unity” well beyond the state’s borders (Sekulić, 2016; Mitrović, 1995). Architects who worked in those firms exported their idea of socialist modernist architecture all over the world, but at the same time were influenced by alien traditions, limitations of available resources and local know-how. All of this caused the cultural exchange to bloom, broke down the boundaries between European and non-European architectural traditions, and produced unique specimens of modern and postmodern architecture both in Yugoslavia and elsewhere.

But also, as recently argued by Herscher (2019), “modernism in architecture can be understood as, among other things, an attempt to reorganize architecture according to some of the imperatives that also organized humanitarianism” (p. 25). Yugoslavia, at the time, did not have systematically built, large-scale refugee shelters on its own territory and, to the best of my knowledge, it did not have much (if any) experience in building refugee shelters elsewhere, so it would be far-fetched to claim any systematic development of humanitarian architecture or its causal influence on the Yugoslav “modern(isation) project”. However, Yugoslavia was surely aware of the “post-World War II emergence of an international humanitarian regime” (Siddiqi, 2017), and in this new political climate, one can assume, wanted to position itself as a part of the progressive world. This, of course, raises the question of the nature of the humanitarian aid Yugoslavia could offer at the time, as this aid was not rooted in any kind of actual necessity; rather, one could argue, it was the result of surplus resources caused by the stellar rise of Yugoslav GDP in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Reflecting on Hannah Arendt’s (1951) assessment of the nature of humanitarian aid, Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi (2013) argues that there are two basic questions we should be asking: “[t]he first has to do with the political nature of the not-for-profit gesture. The second has to

do with the political nature of gestures born of excessive abundance” (p. 14). She goes on to conclude that “both support the will toward the monumental, that is, a sublime response to crisis. These celebrations of – and memorials to – the humanity at the core of the aid gesture often result in built form” (ibid.).

The motivation to build a refugee centre in Yugoslavia in 1960s, and especially the monumental architecture of the building, would neatly fit this interpretation. First, it was not clear at that moment who exactly would be the refugees the centre would be hosting; the client was the United Nations, not any ethnic or national group in particular. In fact, instead of the urgency that usually accompanies the design and construction of refugee centres, this project was veiled from the start with a thin layer of elitist—architectural and political—prestige. In the same way that Yugoslavia was buying political relevance on the world map with this project, the architects involved were motivated by a desire “to operate with political relevance and thus realize the promise of modernism, expanding their remit into the realm of the social sciences [...] in order to achieve its problem-solving potential” (Siddiqi, 2017, p. 369). The result is “a fiction of architecture as an art of equality in which ‘the same design approach’ subtends the shelters of refugees and the refuges of the tax sheltering class” (Herscher, 2019, p. 27).<sup>8</sup>

## Refugee shelters done differently

As mentioned above, meaningful collaboration between Non-Aligned countries went far beyond the creation of a joint political platform and hollow promises of solidarity; from the economic perspective, non-alignment created a huge global market that awaited exploitation. This went hand-in-hand with high levels of cultural and educational exchange, such as large numbers of foreign exchange students who attended Yugoslav universities without paying fees and vice versa. It also became common practice to help allies in need by sending humanitarian aid or taking refugees from conflict areas into dedicated shelters.<sup>9</sup> These reception centres were built specifically for the purpose of hosting displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers. The quality of those places was exceptionally high, both in originality of architectural expression and applied building standards, such that it was not possible to distinguish them from social housing or even leisure facilities in whose vicinity they were usually situated. In all fairness, the number of refugee shelters built in Yugoslavia was not so high that their construction would impose a burden on the state budget, and the number of displaced people who found a home in those facilities was purely symbolic in the first years of (and even decades after) their opening.<sup>10</sup> What





**Figure 1.** Map of temporary reception centres and permanent (stationary) refugee centres in Serbia in 2018. Source: <https://www.azilsrbija.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Mapa-izbeglickih-centara-u-Srbiji-2018-11-10.jpg>

was at stake here was not the disaster relief, but the international reputation of the state, so the architects who designed them did so with special care, seeing them above all else as places to display and promote local cultural heritage as a way of inciting transcultural exchange.

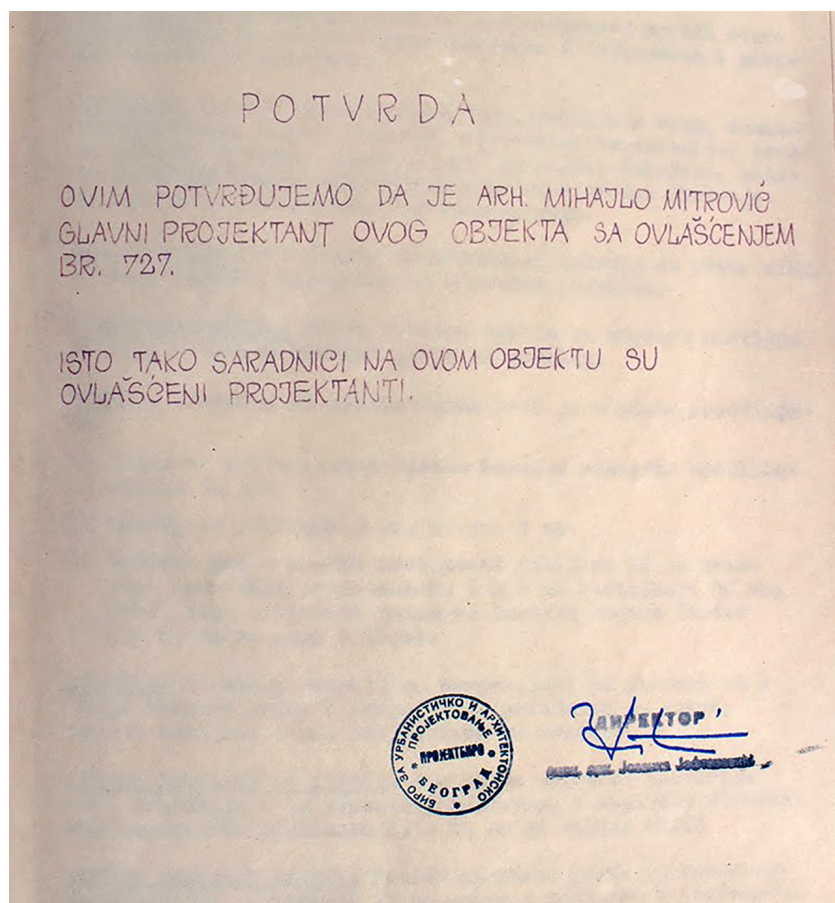
The United Nations' shelter for foreigners in Banja Koviljača (sr. *Prihvatilište za strana lica u Banji Koviljači*, or, *Stacionar OUN u Banji Koviljači*, Fig. 2.), as it was officially called, was designed in 1964, only three years after the Non-

Aligned Movement was formed.<sup>11</sup> As indicated by its name, it was financed by the United Nations, although specific details of this arrangement, at least at the moment, remain unknown. Yugoslavia was a founding member of the United Nations, highly regarded at the time, therefore it would not be so far-fetched to assume that this project served as part of the Yugoslav leadership's efforts additionally to strengthen straighten its international reputation, and position itself among the leaders of the new 'Free World'. Looking at the history of the UN-HCR of that period, the 1960s (when this project was commissioned) was the time when "the institutionalization of humanitarian architecture and planning expertise occurred in multiple frameworks [...] By the mid-1970s, state-based, private, and academic initiatives together contributed the fine grain of analysis to a growing professional culture concerned with relief and disaster" (Siddiqi, 2017, p. 374).<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly the United Nations' shelter for foreigners in Banja Koviljača can be interpreted as part of these efforts. Formally, the carrier of the project was the Federal Ministry of the Interior Affairs (in Serbian, *Savezni Sekretarijat za Unutrašnje Poslove*), which in all formal documents was called the "investor".<sup>13</sup> This was standard practice at the time as all refugee shelters and asylum centres were under the direct jurisdiction of this Ministry.

The architect of this particular edifice, Mihajlo Mitrović (1922-2018), was the founder and lead architect of the small architectural practice in Belgrade called "Projektbiro" (Fig. 3.). But, despite his abundant experience as a practising architect, he never worked for large construction firms on international commissions.<sup>14</sup> His only international experience came shortly after his graduation, in 1950, when he spent one year in France and Denmark as a fellow of the United Nations, which in hindsight might have helped him land this commission. In the 1960s, by the time he was in his 40s, he had proven his talent for

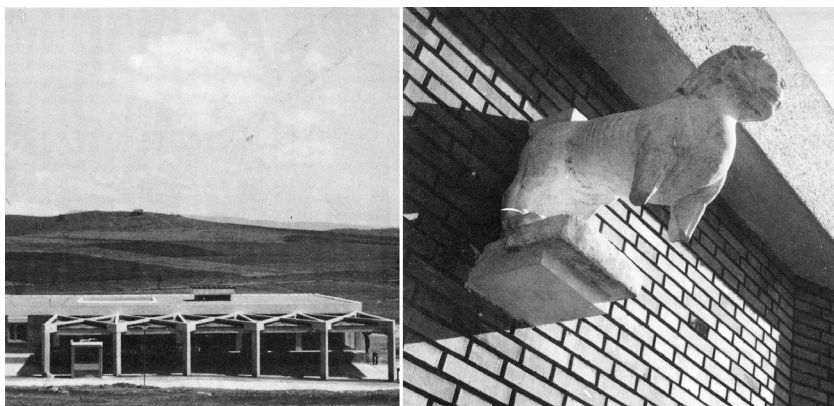


**Figure 2.** United Nations Refugee centre in Banja Koviljača. Architect Mihajlo Mitrović, 1964, a) in 1966 (source: Mihajlo Mitrović: *izložba arhitekture, Muzej primenjene umetnosti Beograd, 13-25. april 1971*), and b) in 2018 (source: [http://arhiva.kirs.gov.rs/docs/azil/Centar\\_zazil\\_Banja\\_Koviljaca.pdf](http://arhiva.kirs.gov.rs/docs/azil/Centar_zazil_Banja_Koviljaca.pdf)).

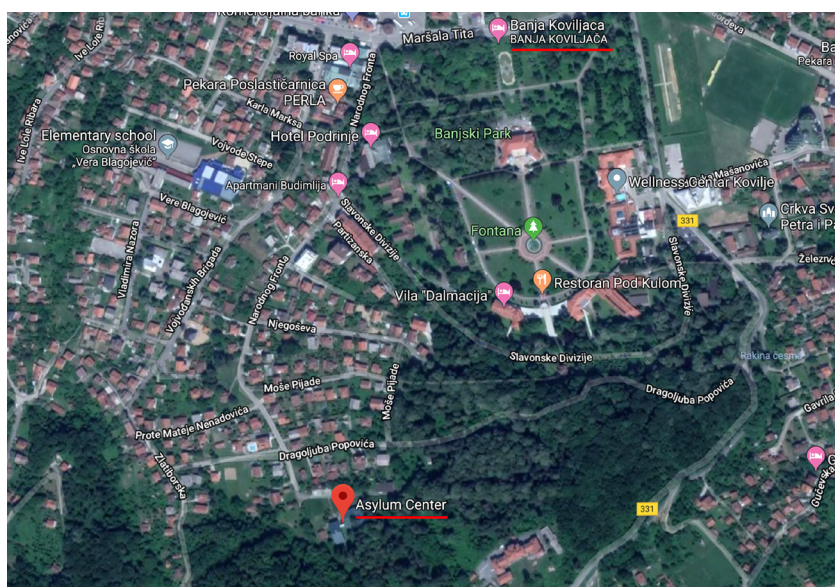


**Figure 3.** Official document from “Projektbiro” Belgrade stating that Mihajlo Mitrović is the main author of the building (source: Inter-Municipal Historical Archive in Šabac, Serbia).

designing architectural “miniatures” – as he referred to those buildings himself – tucked away in a natural setting and rich with traditional motives. Constantly playing with symbolic readings of sculptural and decorative elements in architecture, Mitrović possessed particular sensitivity for the power of architecture as a mediator in helping people in transit to become acquainted with an unfamiliar context. That same year he designed a customs house at the Gevgelija border crossing, a modern building with strategically placed sculptural motifs taken from local monasteries (Fig. 4.).<sup>15</sup> He saw this building primarily as a place where “tourists entering the country would get the first-hand information about cultural sites they are about to encounter just down the road” (Staničić, forthcoming).<sup>16</sup> In his work Mitrović aspired to transform those places of continuous stress and estrangement into places of meaningful cultural contact



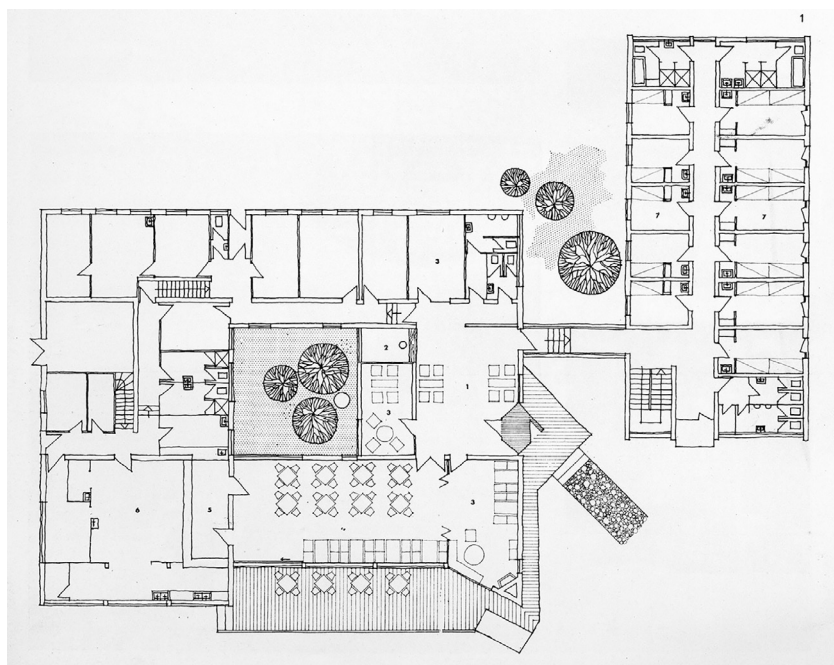
**Figure 4.** Customs house at Gevgelija border crossing, North Macedonia. Architect Mihajlo Mitrović, 1965 (source: Mihajlo Mitrović: izložba arhitekture, Muzej primenjene umetnosti Beograd, 13-25 April 1971).



**Figure 5.** Position of the refugee centre (at the map marked as “Asylum Center”) next to the Banja Koviljača (source: Google Maps).

between the hosts and the people coming from abroad, whatever the reason for their visit might be. His inclination towards semiotics of folklore and traditional motifs (unlike that of his contemporary, Bogdan Bogdanović, whose symbolism was often described as too abstract and even surreal) was particularly useful for this, although in the late stage of his career this tendency often morphed into open nationalistic outbursts.<sup>17</sup>





**Figure 6.** United Nations Refugee centre in Banja Koviljača. Architect Mihajlo Mitrović, 1964. Ground floor plan (source: *Mihajlo Mitrović: izložba arhitekture, Muzej primenjene umetnosti Beograd, 13-25 April 1971*).

Just as with the custom house in Gevgelija, the design of the shelter in Banja Koviljača draws its inspiration from the surrounding picturesque terrain from which it grows organically. Banja Koviljača is one of the most luxurious spas in Serbia, only a couple of kilometres from the Serbian-Bosnian border, and the refugee centre is at the very edge of the spa complex (Fig. 5.).<sup>18</sup> The architect himself vividly explained his key concepts by stating that “with its forms and materials, the edifice succumbs to the mighty colors and silhouettes of the beautiful park and the forest that hover above” (Mitrović, 1971, p. 8).<sup>19</sup> The small building of only couple of hundred square metres in area, and with only 120 available beds, consists of two tracts (dormitory and a restaurant) joined with a narrow and enclosed passage connection (Fig. 6.). These tracts are covered with low-slope twin roofs that lie on massive wooden beams (Fig. 7.). The use of intertwined wooden elements, and especially wide overhanging eaves, is reminiscent of Serbian old building traditions, most famously in the construction of medieval wooden churches and concurrent vernacular architecture. The façade is composed of large window surfaces combined with wall canvases coated in local ‘broken’ stone. In his monograph on the work of Mihajlo Mitrović, Aleksandar Kadijević writes that what gives this building its charm



**Figure 7.** United Nations Refugee centre in Banja Koviljača. Architect Mihajlo Mitrović, 1964. Detail of the façade (source: *Mihajlo Mitrović: izložba arhitekture, Muzej primenjene umetnosti Beograd, 13-25 April 1971*).

is precisely this “combination of contemporary industrial and natural materials” (Kadijević, 1999, p. 60). In a broader Yugoslav context, such traditional-to-modern transgressions were not rare occurrences; modern reinterpretations of elements of Oriental architecture, for example, were present in the work of Juraj Neidhardt and Dušan Grabrijan (1957) and Andrija Mutnjaković (Stojiljković & Ignjatović, 2019), revealing the complexity and depth of the interconnection between the socialist political and architectural agendas. The dominant architectural motif, immediately visible from every possible angle, is the tall chimney with its open, pyramidal capital piece (Fig. 8.). It clearly marks the most important room of the entire complex: as in old, traditional Serbian houses, there is a large, multifunctional living and dining room with an enormous triangular hearth in its most protruding angle. This room is the epicentre where all day-to-day activities happen; where people gather, talk, play and dine. In the Serbian building tradition the hearth represents the inexhaustible spring



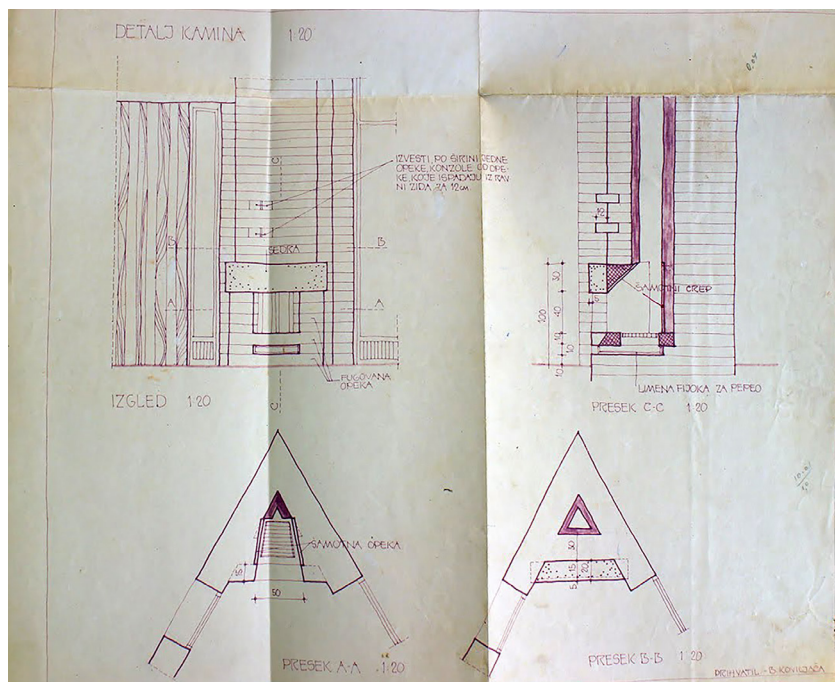
**Figure 8.** United Nations Refugee centre in Banja Koviljača. Architect Mihajlo Mitrović, 1964. Its appearance today (source: [http://arhiva.kirs.gov.rs/docs/azil/Centar\\_zazil\\_Banja\\_Koviljaca.pdf](http://arhiva.kirs.gov.rs/docs/azil/Centar_zazil_Banja_Koviljaca.pdf)).

of (the building's) energy and life, so Mitrović invested a significant amount of attention in designing its details and in carefully collecting various natural and artificial materials (Fig. 9.).

The living/dining room is clearly the most important space in the entire complex, as it is the only one that receives natural light from both sides – because of a glassy and open atrium in the centre of the edifice (Fig. 10.). Although essentially modern in its architectural expression, the architect rooted this modernity in traditional elements that are abundant in this part of the country.

Mitrović's idea of homemaking for displaced people, therefore, was to recreate warm atmosphere of local traditional houses that, in his view, would invite displaced people to become familiar with indigenous culture and explore local "hidden treasures" even further. This approach, one could argue, lies in stark opposition to the modern-day design, organisation and positioning of refugee shelters, where shanty design is being implemented on purpose to prevent displaced people taking root or, at very least, feeling like at home (Akšamija, 2021). This was recently also pointed out by Siddiqi (2013), who noted that "camp architecture acts to communicate a fleeting existence in time. Architectural signs of permanence socially threaten host countries, signal a protracted state of displacement for refugees, and politically complicate the activity of humanitarian stakeholders" (p. 16). In the most extreme examples, such as the Al Azraq Refugee Camp in Jordan, refugees are even banned from planting any kind of vegetation on camp soil, as it is perceived as both figuratively and literally taking roots (Staničić, forthcoming). Even the most recent efforts to make the humanitarian architecture more *human* do not forego its essentially ephemeral character (Herscher, 2017; see also Laue, 2013).<sup>20</sup> The fact that





**Figure 9.** Detailed drawings of the fireplace/hearth, the centrepiece of the entire refugee centre. Architect Mihajlo Mitrović, 1964 (source: Inter-Municipal Historical Archive in Sabac, Serbia).

Mitrović's building managed to achieve the warmth of a home through quality design, while at the same time being a permanent, firm construction showcases the high standards of humanitarian architecture advocated by Socialist Yugoslavia and welcomed by the United Nations at the time.

The appraisals from both the local architectural guild and high UN officials the edifice got right after its inauguration further support this. An article published in the local newspaper, *Glas Podrinja*, stated that "the most beautiful building in this part of the country has been built", crediting designers and construction workers alike for its great success (Fig. 11.).<sup>21</sup> At the opening ceremony, Sadruddin Aga Khan, then the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (and not to be mistaken for Aga Khan IV, the founder of the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture), acknowledged the unusual but rational architecture of the refugee centre (Mladenović, 1983, p. 6). In a letter he personally received from Sadruddin Aga Khan (June 10, 1966), Mitrović testifies that Aga Khan "feared the possibility that refugees might decide to stay in this shelter voluntarily longer than they supposed to" (ibid.), words that could be interpreted even as surprise at the shelter's hominess and high quality archi-





**Figure 10.** The dining/living room. The interior today (source: [http://arhiva.kirs.gov.rs/docs/azil/Centar\\_zazil\\_Banja\\_Koviljaca.pdf](http://arhiva.kirs.gov.rs/docs/azil/Centar_zazil_Banja_Koviljaca.pdf)).



**Figure 11.** Scan of a newspaper article entitled “Završen hotel Ujedinjenih Nacija”, *Glas Podrinja*, 22 September 1966 (source: Inter-Municipal Historical Archive in Šabac, Serbia).

tectural design. Mitrović was particularly proud of these words (in the interview I had with him he mentioned them several times), which proves that this was precisely the effect he was aiming for.

The building's unique design did not go unnoticed among Yugoslav planners and architects – although it appears that the function of the building was not relevant for them to evaluate. In 1967 the building won the prestigious *Borba*

award for architecture on the level of Republic of Serbia (Alihodžić, 2015). The jury offered the following rationale for its decision:

The Refugee Centre in Banja Koviljača [...] represents a significant contribution to our architecture. This building is characterised by well-balanced masses and expert usage of authentic materials, as well as by the emphasis put on the texture of wall surfaces. Mitrović uses local materials and, by exploiting their unique features for the design of external as well as internal spaces, achieves authentic architectural expression. The composition of basic volumes is skilfully embedded in the ambiance through terrain modelling and respect of the surrounding natural values. The simple but functional scheme is enriched by the [perceived] 'mobility' of volumes that accurately interpret the content of the interior. Mitrović achieves the particular and exceptional quality of the building through the artistic treatment of architectural details [...]. (Unknown, 1967, p. 15).<sup>22</sup>

The appraisal does not mention the humanitarian purpose of the building, nor does it try to raise its significance to the international level, which could have been expected considering the prominent investor. By winning the award on the Republic level, the project automatically won the nomination for the Federal (Yugoslav) *Borba* award on behalf of the Republic of Serbia. There it was again shortlisted but lost in the final round of voting by a narrow margin (the jury voted 5:6) to the elementary school building in Kočevje, designed by the architect Jože Kreger (ibid.). The *Borba* award brought national publicity to the project, whose design was later reproduced in many architectural books and journals, especially the ones that focus on the opus of Mihajlo Mitrović.

The construction of the Refugee Centre in Banja Koviljača marks the time when Yugoslav architects were undoubtedly aware of the potential and importance of an international presence and transcultural exchange. Just a few years earlier, Yugoslavia's participation in Expo 58 in Brussels with the pavilion designed by Vjenceslav Richter had demonstrated not only the richness of cultural production in Yugoslavia, but also its high regard in international circles (Kulić, 2012b). What followed were decades of prolific activity of Yugoslav construction firms abroad, when the international style in Yugoslav architecture sprouted. The exchange of expertise and exposure to diverse cultures quickly redefined styles and geographies of architectural production on both sides of the Iron Curtain (Avermaete & Stanek, 2012). Some of the well-known examples that later came about as a result of these activities include the House of Yugoslav-Norwegian Friendship (today, the House of Serbian-Norwegian Friendship) in



**Figure 12.** The House of Serbian-Norwegian Friendship in Gornji Milanovac. Architect Aleksandar Đokić, 1987 (source: [www.gornjimilanovac.rs](http://www.gornjimilanovac.rs)).



**Figure 13.** The residence of the Iranian ambassador in Belgrade (source: [www.beobuild.rs](http://www.beobuild.rs)).

Gornji Milanovac, designed by Aleksandar Đokić in 1987, wherein design elements of traditional Norwegian ships are combined with local building traditions (Fig. 12.), and the residence of the Iranian ambassador in Belgrade with its triangular concrete canopies (Fig. 13.). More or less successful, these buildings, in their effort to bridge different worlds, managed to redefine the concepts of local, regional, European and global architectural heritage, resulting in what Beekmans called a “transnational housing vernacular” (Beekmans, this volume, p. 7).



**Figure 14.** Asylum centre in Bogovađa (source: [http://arhiva.kirs.gov.rs/docs/azil/Centar\\_za\\_azil\\_Bogovadja.pdf](http://arhiva.kirs.gov.rs/docs/azil/Centar_za_azil_Bogovadja.pdf)).

As for the refugee centres in Serbia, those that managed to come close to the high standards set by Mitrović's work are rare, but their quality and humanitarian approach to design are still much higher than in their global counterparts. The one that is worth mentioning is perhaps the refugee centre in Bogovađa, but the comparison between the two is hardly possible considering the lower quality of construction and basic usage of traditional elements in the latter case (Fig. 14.). In other cities in Serbia refugee centres are either adapted hotel buildings (such as hotel "Berlin" in Sjenica) or administrative buildings of former factories (such as former furniture factory "Dallas" in Tutin).<sup>23</sup> The Refugee Centre in Banja Koviljača showed that creativity and beauty are possible, even necessary, in this unseemly field of architectural production. Although the scale on which it operated is miniscule compared to refugee shelters close to actual conflict zones, it demonstrated the power of architecture to transform unfortunate social circumstances, such as displacement and segregation, into an opportunity for meaningful cultural contact. In the context of humanitarian architecture in Yugoslavia, Mitrović's design can be seen as trailblazing considering the fact that one decade later, in the 1970s, "organisations such as Oxfam and Care supported a rethinking of camp and shelter architecture to one which takes locally available resources and the refugees' origin into account" (Laue, 2013, p. 19). The Refugee Centre in Banja Koviljača also stands in stark contrast to the minimal architecture of modern-day refugee shelters that "limits the capacity of refugees to build their own spaces and their own lives" (Herscher, 2019, p. 27). By adopting the high-design approach to humanitarian architecture, Mitrović actually managed to resolve the tension between development and humanitarian relief which, in architectural terms, has pitted 'dwelling' against 'shelter'. According to Herscher, "each raises the stakes for expertise differently: the former by en-



nobling the shared mission of architecture and humanitarianism, and the latter by reducing it to functionalist, instrumentalized science" (*ibid*). By blurring the clear-cut distinction between dwelling and shelter, between refugee shelter and refugee camp, Mitrović actually managed, however intuitively, to bridge this gap.

### Post scriptum

It should be noted that in this complex network of foreign and domestic actors, the one actor who did not play any role in the construction of the shelter is the "migrant-as-architect". The shelter was designed without any input from migrants themselves, without even knowing who the end-users or their actual needs might be, hence completely depriving refugees of their spatial agency. In the first few decades after its opening, the refugee centre in Banja Koviljača operated almost quietly, mostly by welcoming small numbers of asylum seekers from South America (Chile), Africa and, in the late 1980s, from Eastern Europe (namely, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania). The current director of the Centre, Robert Lesmajster, testifies that, at some point, the centre was even used as a holiday resort for the employees of the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>24</sup> The centre was finally put to test in the 1990s during the Yugoslav wars and subsequent refugee crisis (Jovanović & Rudić, 2011). Between 1991 and 2006 it sustained a surge of refugees from neighbouring Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo which exposed its most notable flaw—the lack of capacity to accept large numbers of people.<sup>25</sup> The structure, which was built to host no more than 120 residents, often hosted two to three times that number. Years of heavy usage left visible marks on the structure, such that it had to be refurbished in 2006 with the financial support of the UN-HCR. The Serbian government decided to establish the Asylum Centre in Banja Koviljača on 6 December 2008, following the passage of the Asylum Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia no. 109/2007) and the Regulations on Housing Conditions and Provision of Basic Living Conditions in Asylum Centres (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia no. 31/2008).<sup>26</sup> The passing of these regulations was one of the preconditions for Serbia to join the "white" Schengen list.

During the most recent refugee crisis, Serbia was part of the so-called 'Balkan route' (that is, the 'Eastern Mediterranean Route') that saw refugees coming from the hot conflict regions of the Middle East, Africa and South Asia on their way to the European Union (Philippou, 2020). Different national politics on refugee acceptance and the subsequent erection of border fences created bottlenecks in some Balkan countries, most notably North Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia, forcing refugees to live unwillingly in one place for a longer period of time. According to Katz (2016), "the call 'No camp!' reflects the refugees' personal and political demand not to be stopped and suspended in dreadful conditions for

unknown periods of time in places they did not wish to come to” (p. 19). At the peak of the migrant crisis in 2011 the refugee shelter in Banja Koviljača hosted somewhere between 1,000 and 2,500 people (depending on the source), more than ten times the capacity of the centre. People were sleeping outside the shelter’s walls in the back yard, but also in the spa’s public park and city bus station, which inevitably led to some friction with the local population (Rudić, 2014). It could be argued that the problem with the local population appeared when the migrants started “making homes in displacement”, that is, when their effort to form an “infrastructural citizenship” (Lemanski, 2019) was recognised and made visible.<sup>27</sup> The reception of refugees among locals worsened after a series of incidents (in which only a handful of those refugees were *not* in fact the victims of crimes), inciting street protests organised by local citizens. Refugees were not happy about being transported here either, because it seemed like a huge detour from their usual route through to the North of Serbia and Hungary (although this perspective changed significantly when Hungary closed its border with Serbia, so that refugees had to take alternative routes through Croatia and Bosnia).

Since then, the situation has only slightly improved. The Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia reports a steady inflow of refugees that go through the centre, about 1,000 per year (at the moment, only 38 people are living there), but still some local organisations demand the permanent closure of the refugee centre and its removal from the spa. The building, whose purpose was to welcome foreign friends in need and serve as a bridge between cultures in the overall national climate of hostility and bigotry, turned into the major source of intolerance and segregation. In today’s climate of EU Member States’ hostility towards refugees that include severe ‘pushbacks’ via the Balkan route (intercepting ships in the Mediterranean Sea, raising barbed wire fences along the Serbo-Hungarian boarder, police brutality exercised in Hungary and Croatia), it is questionable whether “the warmth of a home” can be achieved solely through one good shelter. I would argue that it is not (only) the quality housing that provides the sense of dwelling and home, but the social, political and cultural climate that makes refugees feel welcome.

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## Notes

1. Author's translation.
2. As we will see later in the text, in local literature this building is referred to as a 'shelter', 'centre', 'infirmity', 'station', 'accommodation', even a 'hotel'. This raises bigger questions of what a refugee shelter actually is, from both the functional and architectural/compositional points of view. The way this building was conceptualised, built and ultimately used does not help the discussion—it serves as temporary and emergency accommodation for displaced people, but the quality of construction and the sheer scale of the building make it clear that this is not a temporary structure. The shelter-centre dichotomy will resurface a few more times in this chapter, reinforcing the conclusion that the building actually belongs somewhere in between these two categories.
3. This was also confirmed to the author in several interviews with prominent Yugoslav architects, such as Mario Jobst (Belgrade, 31 August 2019) and Mustafa Musić (Belgrade, 3 January 2020).
4. This aggressiveness also had some negative effect on the overall social tolerance in ethnically diverse and historically charged society, which famously backfired in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s through ethnic and territorial homogenisation. For the discussion of this see Staničić (2017).
5. The map of Non-Alligned Movement member states can be found here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-Alligned\\_Movement#/media/File:NAM\\_Members.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-Alligned_Movement#/media/File:NAM_Members.svg)
6. The literature on this topic has grown exponentially in recent years, with the already established opus of Łukasz Stanek, Tom Avermaete, Hilde Heynen, Haim Yacobi, Vladimir Kulić, Dubravka Sekulić, Luce Beeckmans and many others. Furthermore, specialised journals such as *Architecture Beyond Europe* (<https://journals.openedition.org/abe/?lang=en>) are particularly focused on transnational cultural exchanges in the field of architecture. Special thanks go to Luce Beckmans for this reference.
7. This was between 1948 and 1965, on average a whopping 8.5 per cent per year.
8. The architecture of this edifice, as we will see later in this chapter, closely resembles social housing built all over Yugoslavia at the time.
9. Yugoslavia was on both the giving and receiving ends of humanitarian aid. The most cited instance is the global effort to rebuild the city of Skopje (today in North Macedonia) after the 1963 earthquake.
10. Serbia alone today has five permanent (stationary) centres with a total capacity of 1,700 people (Fig. 1.), while Croatia and Slovenia have two (capacity 700 people) and four centres (429 people), respectively (source: <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/serbia/types-accommodation>). Despite all my efforts, I was unable to find out what the overall number of such shelters built in the the whole of Yugoslavia was, nor how many of them were financed by the United Nations.
11. Building permit No. 9204/64 was issued on 24 September 1964 by the Municipality of the local town of Loznica, but the submitted construction plans are missing. Ljubisav

Rašović, archivist of the Municipality of Loznica, suspects that they were lost during the 2006 reconstruction (interview with the author on 9 January 2020). I managed to locate later additions to the plan, such as building permits for a boiler-room auxiliary building (no. 06-1870/1) and a permit for the surrounding landscape (no. 06-4526/1-65) in the Inter-Municipal Historical Archive in Šabac, Serbia. Here, I want to thank local architect and activist Marko Gavrilović for all his help in gathering the data.

12. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (also known as the United Nations Disaster Relief Office, or UNDRO, the predecessor to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). See Siddiqi, 2017.
13. The contractor was local construction firm “Zidar”. All relevant documents that I managed to find in the local archive in Šabac in fact come from this firm. Very little—almost nothing—is preserved in the Municipality of Loznica archive. This actually points to the chronic problem in architectural scholarship in Serbia, which is the lack of a proper archival culture and practice. The municipality of the city of Loznica which issued the construction permit is obliged by law to keep the project in its archives. However, at the time of my inquiry only a few pages remained, mainly installation drawings. Employees testify that the documentation was ‘borrowed’ by someone in 2008 during the reconstruction of the building and never returned. It was not possible to find out who ‘borrowed’ it. When it comes to private archives of architects, only recently did we start seeing signs of increased awareness regarding the preservation of original drawings. A systematic and institutionalised architectural archive on a national level, unfortunately, does not exist.
14. A short biography of Mihajlo Mitrović, in Serbian, is available here: <http://aas.org.rs/mitrovic-mihajlo-biografija/>.
15. Today, Gevgelia lies on the border between Greece and North Macedonia. Mitrović’s custom house was destroyed in the early 1990s.
16. The sites he had in mind were primarily Serbian Orthodox monasteries; other religions and ethnicities were conspicuously absent. When, during our interview, I asked him about the motifs from mosques or catholic churches, having in mind the multiculturalism of the Yugoslav population, he just waved his hand. Interview with the author held in Belgrade on 17 July 2014.
17. For example, after the NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999 he designed a residential building on Takovska Street with a sculpture of an eagle above the entrance “looking” towards the ruins of the bombed Radio Television of Serbia building nearby.
18. The selection of this particular spot also remains a mystery. Although very picturesque, Banja Koviljača is relatively far (some 150 kilometres) from Belgrade, the administrative centre of the country, and reaching it by car is not an easy task.
19. Author’s translation.
20. I wish to thank anonymous reviewers for this reference.



21. Interestingly, the title of the article is „United Nations *hotel* completed“ (author's translation and emphasis). See N.M., „Završen hotel Ujedinjenih Nacija“, *Glas Podrinja*, 22 September 1966.
22. Author's translation.
23. Source: [http://www.kirs.gov.rs/wb-page.php?kat\\_id=205&lang=2](http://www.kirs.gov.rs/wb-page.php?kat_id=205&lang=2)
24. Interview with the author conducted on 9 January 2020.
25. Data available at <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/serbia/conditions-reception-facilities>
26. Source: [http://arhiva.kirs.gov.rs/docs/azil/Centar\\_za\\_azil\\_Banja\\_Koviljaca.pdf](http://arhiva.kirs.gov.rs/docs/azil/Centar_za_azil_Banja_Koviljaca.pdf)
27. It should also be noted that this had not previously been a problem with refugees from the region (most of whom spoke Serbian) or, before that, with refugees from Eastern Europe who were white and came in much smaller numbers.

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