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## **Polarisation of Expressive Tendencies in Serbian Architecture at the Beginning of XXI Century**

**ABSTRACT:** The subject of this research includes specific examples of extreme tendencies of architectural expressiveness, present in Serbia in the past fifteen years (after 2000). The term 'extreme tendencies' in architectural expressiveness refers to the group of expressive characteristics of architectural creation, which are the consequence of creative tendency to achieve maximal simplicity (minimalist tendency) or maximum dynamizing (expressionist tendency) of the architectural composition. The focus of the paper is critical analyses of expressive characteristics of referent architectural objects and cause-and-effect links with socio-political circumstances present in Serbia from the 1990s, i.e. since disintegration of SFR Yugoslavia. Unlike other countries in the region (Croatia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, etc), which have gone through the period of post-socialist transition under different and less dramatic circumstances, expressive examples of architecture in Serbia have been polarised and appeared in extreme manifestations (expressionism and minimalism). The paper draws a general conclusion that polarization of expressive architectural examples emerges in the period of transition and under conditions of extreme socio-political and economics changes.

**KEY WORDS:** extreme expressiveness, minimalism, expressionism, architecture, transition, Serbia.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The term expressiveness is one of the key terms in architecture and it refers to an attribute or a set of characteristics of one architectural work, which establish a specific relation between architectural expression and the consumer, i.e. the audience that the structure communicates with. (ALFIREVIĆ 2011; 2012a; TOŠOVIĆ 2004; ROBINSON 2007) Whether an architectural work will be perceived and characterised in a certain way, i.e. what attributes will be ascribed to it in

the perception process, will depend to a high extent, among other things, on psychophysical state, perception and affinity of the viewer, which is primarily the focus of research of psychology of art. In the field of empiric research of expressiveness in architecture, important findings were achieved in research carried out by Slobodan Marković and Đorđe AlfIREVIĆ, (INSTITUT ZA PSIHLOGIJU I LABORATORIJA ZA EKSPERIMENTALNU PSIHLOGIJU 2012) where it was established that there were four main categories of expressiveness and that majority of respondents showed that examples of expressiveness were polarised in two completely different visual categories. These two categories were named for research purposes ‘choleric – sanguine’ and ‘phlegmatic – melancholic’ expressiveness.<sup>1</sup> The findings of this research are important because they indicate a high level of respondents’ agreement in perception and critical evaluation of experiencing architectural objects, as well as the presence of two antipodes in architectural creation – expressionistic and minimalist tendency, which represent extreme aspects of architectural expressiveness. (ALFIREVIĆ 2012a) On the one hand, there is a group of architectural creations with distinct energetic and aggressive character (mainly expressionistic, Hi-Tech and deconstructivist objects), while the other group includes minimalist and extremely abstract solutions (examples of Modernism and minimalism). The paper deals with the issue of expressiveness in architecture, which formed a scientific foundation for further research of correlation of socio-political and economic circumstances and expressive categories in architecture. The topic of polarisation of expressive examples in architecture, which can be perceived in Serbia in the period following the disintegration of SFR Yugoslavia, has not been discussed in scientific and professional literature, and its significance lies in possibility of establishing clear relations between expressiveness in architecture, its social and political role and the context of post-socialist societies in transition. The aim of research was to check the validity of hypothesis which claims that polarisation of aspects of architectural expressiveness becomes more evident in the period of transition of a society and strong economic segregation of population.

### SOCIO-POLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCES IN SERBIA AFTER 2000

In order to understand and prove polarisation of expressive phenomena in Serbian architecture, it is necessary to have an insight into causes, i.e. social, political and economic circumstances which led to extremisation of architectural tendencies. By the end of the 1980’s, according to Aleksandar Ignjatović, Serbian society was exposed to a complex process of social and political transformation, torn between its attitude to its own tradition and current ruling ideologies, a system of values and the vision of national future. (ŠUVAKOVIĆ 2010) The rise of ethnic nationalism as an antipode to the communist regime, after a series of tumultuous events at the beginning of 90’s, led to escalation of conflicts and the civil war, followed by dramatic disintegration of SFR Yugoslavia. At the beginning of the 1990’s SFR Yugoslavia was faced with enormous changes: a) the collapse of communist ideology, b) more visible ethnic conflicts

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<sup>1</sup> Although research confirmed four expressive categories (‘choleric’, ‘sanguine’, ‘phlegmatic’ and ‘melancholic’), only two most extreme ones were evident in respondents, since most of them did not manage to notice subtle differences in manifestation of ‘choleric’ and ‘sanguine’ on the one hand and ‘phlegmatic’ and ‘melancholic’ on the other. Examples of ‘choleric-sanguine’ expressiveness showed the following characteristics: aggressiveness, rudeness, complexity, disaggregation, playfulness; while examples of ‘phlegmatic-melancholic’ expressiveness were defined by the following characteristics: lack of deformity, relaxation, methodical approach, harmony and clarity.

and c) the crisis of economic and political system, all contributing to the disintegration of former SFR Yugoslavia, changes in socio-political systems, the rise of national feelings and the creation of new ethnic states. Authoritarianism became one of the key determinants of the new national state of Serbia. (LAKIĆ 2010) After several years of political, economic and social crisis, accompanied by ethnic conflicts and the civil war, the last years of the twentieth century left Serbia transforming from authoritarian to the new, but still not adequately ordered democratic society. Transition from socialism to capitalism has been and still is burdened by numerous problems. In economic terms, the segregation between rich and poor segments of the population has been more and more evident. The politics is governed by personal interests of individuals as opposed to more general (state) interests, which to a great extent contributed to the feeling of mistrust in the political system and the state institutions. Another evident fact was the emergence of controversial businessmen or 'tycoons', acting as investors of important architectural creations, with the help of criminal groups. At the same time they acquired and enjoyed political support. (JOVANČEVIĆ 2010) Dissatisfaction with poor economic and socio-political circumstances led to total lack of value systems and moral principles and increasing individualisation of the population and their focusing on the family and their personal interests. (GOLUBOVIĆ 2005; 2006) The problem of radicalization of life principles among the population stemmed from mistrust in the state and political structures, while on the other hand, economic problems and poor living standard became fertile ground for autocracy, limiting moral principles of the citizens in their attitude to the society, cities and living environment. (GOLUBOVIĆ 2005) Ten years after the 5 October changes in 2000,<sup>2</sup> it can still be felt that Serbia, disappointed by democratic government which did not keep their promises, is turning towards more radical political options, sceptical that the society will soon experience the end of the crises and more visible changes in the near future. (GOLUBOVIĆ 2005) The manifestation of these turbulent socio-political changes in architecture is primarily visible in narrowing scope of expressive options, the emergence of more radical approaches to design and their polarization towards extreme creative tendencies.

## EXTREME CREATIVE TENDENCIES IN SERBIAN ARCHITECTURE

The reasons for emergence of extreme creative tendencies in Serbian architecture can be found in different aspects of social, political, economic and cultural context. They appeared on several occasions in history, (KADIJEVIĆ 1990; 2012; 2013a; 2013b) but the phenomenon of their polarization became more evident by the end of the twentieth century. It is noticeable that extremization of architectural authorship, more creative and innovative solutions, most often appear at times when adequate cultural circumstances are established, thus initiating avant-garde creative work. (AKCAN 2002) By analysing the creative tendencies in Serbian architecture at the beginning of twentyfirst century, one can notice several particularly strong tendencies towards extreme creations, grouped in two main categories: a) the tendency of using architecture as a status symbol, as a means to manifest the material status, social class or power, and b) the tendency towards visual asceticism, with an aim of aesthetisation of

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<sup>2</sup> After tumultuous events of October 5, 2000 the authoritarian regime of the socialist president Slobodan Milošević was overthrown and democratic opposition came to power.

the functional minimum within the frame of sub-standard economic abilities, or by imitating world trends in architecture.

#### A) Tendency of using architecture as a status symbol

At the beginning of the first decade of the XXI century, in unstable circumstances of political upheaval and poor economic situation, very few investors in Serbia were in a position to invest their fast accumulated wealth in representative architectural objects and secure social prestige in this manner. The architects made full use of this urge, because it was in their interest to find a reliable investor and materialise their creative expression. Building objects on exclusive locations was an indication of successful business operations and prestige. The first significant objects of this kind were Head Offices (or ‘palaces’) of different companies and banks, as the most accurate representation of social circumstances in which they were built, as a way of manifesting the social status. (RISTIĆ 2009) The word ‘palace’ is an inadequate term for this kind of object, but the word itself demonstrates the tendency to present building in the most representative way. In the last decade of the XX century, a series of similar objects were built in Belgrade: ‘Zepter’ Palace, ‘Kristal’ Palace, ‘Progres’ Palace and ‘Zora’ Palace. One of the last examples among palaces built in Belgrade is ‘Zora’ Palace (Fig. 1). Expressionist character of the building is the consequence, on the one hand, of specific conditions of sharp-angled location of the object, and on the other hand – of the energetic creative expression of the architect Spasoje Krunić, who has shown a similar artistic approach on several occasions. The building itself represents a visual metaphor of the ship, anchored at Slavia square (a city square in Belgrade) which once was a swamp. (ALFIREVIĆ 2012b) In the heart of mainland Serbia, at Ravna Gora, Krunić also designed a memorial building.<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 2). Without strict conventions stemming from its surrounding, the object is perched on the top of the hill and reflects the free (irregular) form. Non-standard expression was achieved by breaking and decomposing primary architectural structure, creating, from the terrace in the centre of the object, a view of the picturesque Ravna Gora landscape. The main creative power of the author’s expression was achieved by versed compositional set of skewed walls and perforated stone walls, bringing particular freshness and authentic architectural appearance of the object. (JEVTIĆ 2004: 181–182; PEROVIĆ 2003: 22) A specific example of expressive architecture from this period is head office of ‘Pink TV’. (Fig. 3) The architect, Aleksandar Spajić, incorporated all characteristics of a TV company into a complex and sophisticated technological structure of the building, whose expressionistic character undoubtedly reflects the dynamics of a successful media house. (MITROVIĆ 2012: 57) The building was purposefully designed to stand out from its immediate surroundings so that no passer-by or visitor is indifferent to it. (ALFIREVIĆ 2013) After successfully completing the construction of ‘Zepter’ Palace, in 1997 in Belgrade, architect Branislav Mitrović once again intrigued the Serbian public by building the head office for ‘HVB Bank’ in Belgrade. With its position in the protected zone of the very centre of the city and its vicinity to one of the most important churches in Belgrade (Saborna Crkva), the building of HVB Bank attracts attention by its extravagant appearance, domineering the centre

<sup>3</sup> Memorial building is dedicated to Dragoljub Draža Mihajlović, Serbian general in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, one of the resistance leaders against Nazi occupators in the WWII.



Fig. 1. 'Zora' Palace, Belgrade (S. Krunić, 1994–2005), photo: Đ. Alfirević



Fig. 2. Memorial building, Ravna Gora (S. Krunić, 1998–2000), photo: Đ. Alfirević

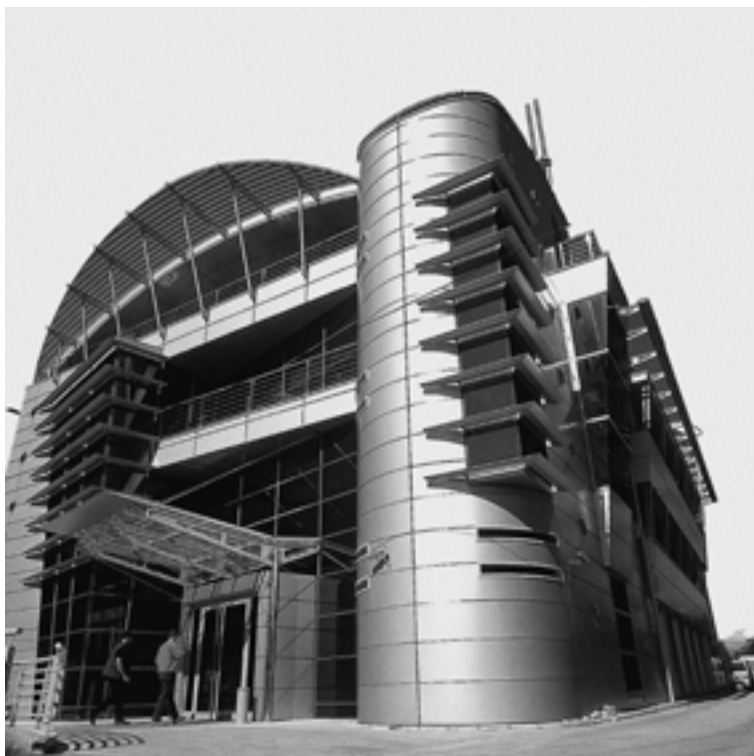


Fig. 3. 'Pink TV' building, Belgrade (A. Spajić, 1998–2001), photo: Đ. Alfirević



Fig. 4. Head office 'Metals bank', Novi Sad (D. Marušić, M. Marušić, 1999–2008), photo: Đ. Alfirević



Fig. 5. Head office 'Kreativni centar', Belgrade (M. Čanak, 2000–2002), photo: Đ. Alfirić



Fig. 6. Head office 'Novoluks', Novi Sad (Z. Bulajić, 2004–2005), photo: Đ. Alfirić

of the old city. Powerful and protruding steel awning cuts the space in a dramatic manner and clearly defines the upper limit of the street profile. Dynamics of the spatial layers at the front facade was created as the consequence of tendency to adapt to shifted regulations of the surrounding objects. Taking into consideration that it was done in luxurious materials, according to Milica Vujošević and Marko Stojanović, the building suggests to its clients the feeling of security and represents the status and power of the bank. (MAKO, ROTER BLAGOJEVIĆ, VUKOTIĆ LAZAR 2012: 118) Head office of 'Metals Bank' in Novi Sad (Fig. 4) by architects Darko Marušić and Milenija Marušić, draws its emphasised expressivity from contextual conditions of the location. Dynamic, wavy membrane of outer facade follows the curve of street regulations, while in its frontal part, on the street crossroads, the building opens towards outer space, thus forming sharp-angled edge of side segments, formed by cutting and dividing the building into two separate parts. Although designed in neo-modernistic style, the building has an expressionist character with primary architectural structure, reflected in the dynamic treatment of facade surfaces, wedge edges on the corners and wavy steel eaves, pervading the upper part of the building and connecting it to the lower part. (MILAŠINOVIĆ MARIĆ 2007) An unusual step forward from the previously mentioned objects is the head office of the publishing house 'Kreativni centar' from Belgrade. (Fig. 5) The building presents, in a very attractive way, a specific, almost lucid approach to publishing industry, which this publishing house is famous for. The architect, Mihailo Čanak, designed the concept of the complex as thought-out series of stage

props, which, just like the theatre stage sets in their dynamic, lively shapes and positions in space, introduce the visitor to the heart of the building and prepare him to meet the world of children's books, which the publishing house mainly deals with. A historian, Zoran Manević was of the opinion that the building of 'Kreativni centar' represents a rare mix of distinct opposites, i.e. 'expressive minimalism'. (MANEVIĆ 2002a; 2002b; 2007; MILAŠINOVIĆ MARIĆ 2002) A similar starting point can be seen in the example of head office of 'Novoluks' in Novi Sad, (Fig. 6) as the architect Zoran Bulajić, emphasised the domineering character of corner house with sharp, slanting blades of glass surfaces ripping the air. The largest area of the facade, similar to a crystal, is made of irregular glass membrane, with surfaces slanting at different angles and inclining in their upper parts from inside out. The main idea of the architect Bulajić was to set a new city landmark, which, opposed to undistinguished and heterogeneous surroundings, would dominate in its dynamics and emphasised expressiveness. (ALFIREVIĆ 2013) A rare example of expressionism in sacral architecture of Serbia is the chapel at the Orlovača cemetery in Belgrade. The author Mirjana Lukić suggestively and boldly dealt with the topic of continuity and changeability, and we could say that she successfully materialized the idea that life does not end in the chapel and the surrounding objects where people bidding their last farewell to the deceased gather, but rather that life continues in some other form. The wavy, flower-like form of the chapel is designed as the starting point of various curved flows, all leading to the centre of the chapel and rising towards the sky, thus symbolising the flow of life. (LUKIĆ 2007) At the beginning of the second decade of the 21 century there was a progressive rise in expressive tension in Serbian architecture, so we can notice tendencies which represent blatant examples of deconstructivistic influence from Europe and the world. The most significant creations designed in deconstructivistic manner are the office building 'Office park B23' in New Belgrade (Fig. 7) and the residential building 'Infinity' in Dobračina street in Belgrade. (Fig. 8) What all this proves is that the emergence of expressive tendencies immediately after



Fig. 7. Office park B23, Belgrade (M. Dimitrijević, 2010–2013), photo: Đ. Alfirević



socio-political changes was almost a generally accepted reaction by architects (who were in a position to create these objects), while at the same time it served the purpose of emphasising the social status and the financial strength of investors. All the given examples show clear use of elements characteristic for extreme forms of expression in architecture, such as: skewed and slanted walls, deep, sharp eaves and roofs, segmentation and facade layering, as well as other elements used in order to achieve ideological domination and visual exposure of buildings in space.

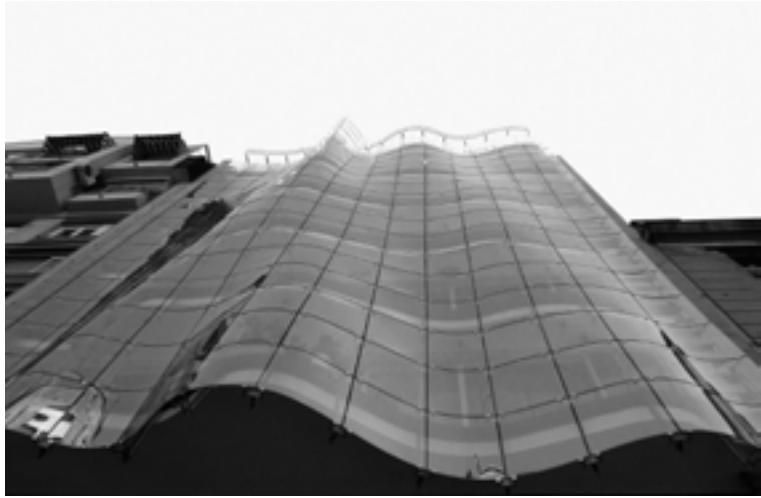


Fig. 8. Residential building 'Infinity', Belgrade (M. Mirković, 2011–2013), photo: Đ. Alfirević

#### B) Tendency towards visual asceticism in architecture

Unlike previous examples, when architects were given an option of freely expressing their architectural visions, as the needs of investors for emphasising social status matched the architects' desire for expressive work, there is a whole series of creations where the author's expression externalized in the opposite, but not less expressive approach. The tendency towards minimalist extreme has deep roots in Serbian architecture, considering that the conceptual postulates of Modernism dominated as the most significant approach to architectural planning in the twentieth century in Serbia. (BLAGOJEVIĆ 2003) After two decades of the presence of Post-Modernism, by the end of the XX century, Serbia showed once again an interest in utilitarianism and simplification of forms. On the one hand, the tending of most architects towards simplification and minimalism was accompanied by harsh economic and socio-political situation in the country, while on the other hand the phenomenon of illegal and unauthorised construction emerged. Illegal construction phenomenon in Serbian architecture began in the 1990s, as a way of materialization of revolt, personal needs, but also as the result of citizens' obstinate wilfulness. They copied the behaviour of the political elite and found no obstacles in irresponsible attitude to public space and society by building residential and other objects ignoring any town-planning schemes and construction documentation. From this 'conflict' of aesthetic attitudes of architects, the needs of the population and dramatic social and other circumstances, sophisticated examples of minimalist aesthetics emerged. Residential object in Kumanovska street in Belgrade is one of the first examples, after 2000 to exhibit the reduction in the form of architectural expression. The architect Branislav Mitrović focused

his previous contemplations of expressiveness in architecture on the facade, dividing it into two different spatial layers. The tendency to employ the process of simplification is evident in using planar expressiveness in a simple, almost rudimentary composition of the object. Using the playful shifted sliding facade panels, which adapt flexibly to the needs of the user, as well as by introducing the light and shadow through basic construction elements of architectural expression, Mitrović stresses a pure, simple and different approach to architecture, which he defined at numerous architectural competitions in Serbia and abroad. (MITROVIĆ 2007) Mitrović used a similar approach in designing the temple of Holy Mother of God in Knjaževac. Although the Serbian Orthodox Church has a rather conservative attitude in terms of canon laws related to construction of new churches (the prevailing opinion is that the churches should be built in tradition of historical objects, or the so called Serbian-Byzantine-Morava tradition and in accordance with strict canon laws from the past), the author identifies the idea of the object with the monasterial and spiritual simplicity which characterises the orthodox church. The contours and the form are identical to house archetype or the first Christian churches, because this creates the visual and mental link with the past, with something familiar and recognizable. Minimalist approach in design of this sacral object and previously mentioned residential building in Kumanovska street, will set a pattern for Mitrović's further thoughts and author's expression in his future works. The crucial moment for emergence and presence of minimalism in Serbian architecture occurred after UN Habitat initiative to organize several architectural competitions focusing on the topic of social and non-profit housing, (LAZOVIĆ 2009) which resulted in first constructed objects in Valjevo and Belgrade. Although the requirements limited the expressiveness of architects, the decision to construct objects as minimalist, rudimentary forms and to show expressivity in playful composition approach in definition of the facades proved to be successful. In the middle of the first decade of XXI century the first objects of public character were built, making use of minimalist spirit: office building 'Tekstil' in Užice and museum 'Macura' in Novi Banovci. Both examples show evident tendency to extreme simplification and reduction of the building to simple, cubic form of harmonious proportions with the use of smooth materials. The most representative example of the minimalist tendency in Serbian architecture after 2000 is the building of hotel 'Centar' in Novi Sad. (Fig. 9) The object was built at a central location, across from the building of the National Theatre and communicated with it in a subtle way. The leading idea of the team of MIT architects was to build a recognizable but unassuming object, which made them focus on providing the counterbalance for the void in space through strength and geometry of the Serbian National Theatre. The object was built as a transparent, web-like shape in space, showing maximal transparency of the membrane while at the same time preserving the strength and compactness of the volume. An important contribution in popularization of minimalist tendencies in Serbian architecture was given by architects Dejan Miljković and Jovan Mitrović with house-atelier of sculptor Mrđan Bajić in Belgrade. (Fig. 10) Their specific approach employs skilful combining of two poles of expressiveness (similar to previously mentioned 'Kreativni centar' building by Mihailo Čanak) thus managing to successfully unite expressionist composition and minimalist materialization of the object. One of the last examples of the minimalist tendency, created at the end of the first decade of the XX century is the cultural centre 'Terra Panonica' in Mokrin. By means of geometry and the division of the facade, the object relies



Fig. 9. Hotel 'Centar', Novi Sad (MIT architects, 2008–2009), photo: Đ. Alfirević



Fig. 10. House-atelier, Belgrade (D. Miljković, J. Mitrović, 2008–2009), photo: Đ. Alfirević

on traditional construction and represents modern interpretation of authentic rural objects. All mentioned examples represent the reflection of architectural aspiration towards simple and recognizable aesthetization, in order to achieve high aesthetic level and quality of architecture with very modest financial means. All of the examples share characteristic use of simplified form, ‘ascetic’ lack of ornaments, colour neutrality and absence of sophisticated technological construction process.

## CONCLUSION

From all these illustrations we can draw the conclusion that Serbian architecture in the first decade of the XXI century showed numerous examples of expressive architectural creations, which, in spite of very dramatic social, political, economic and cultural circumstances, were in accordance with modern tendencies of world architecture. (LAZOVIĆ 2009) Unlike ordered socio-political systems and economic circumstances, when the scope of expressive possibilities is much wider, (LIANGYONG 2000; HADDAD 2009) creative tendencies of Serbian architects, along with circumstances in which architectural creations were achieved in, had as a consequence the distancing of expressive characteristics and their polarization into two extreme forms: a) expressionist and b) minimalist. When the chronological order of architectural creations is analyzed, it is evident that the design and construction at the beginning of the first decade of XXI century included objects created primarily as the result of expressionist tendencies, while the end of the first decade was marked by minimalist tendencies, with gradual appearance of transitional shapes. It can also be noticed that expressive creative tendencies of some architects, on the one hand worked in favour of the investors eager to stress their social status through architectural presentation, and on the other hand, groups of architects competing for their own promotion, researched the limits of asceticism and minimalism in architecture, as part of their authentic expression and very often within the limited budgets of their clients. Unlike other countries in the region (Croatia<sup>4</sup>, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, etc.) (RUPNIK 2011; BLAU, RUPNIK 2007; KUZMANIĆ 2005, VAIS 2012) which went through the period of post-socialist transition in different and less dramatic circumstances, expressive architectural examples in Serbia emerged in extreme forms (expressionism and minimalism), which led to overall conclusion that polarization of expressive architectural examples can appear in the period of transition, during extreme socio-political and economic changes.

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<sup>4</sup> The period of architectural experimenting in Croatia after the disintegration of former Yugoslavia did not only include response to investors’ requests, but also redefined conceptualization of architectural practice and creation of institutions like the Association of Croatian Architects, which enables experiments and innovation in practice and created an ambience for new critical discourse.

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ПОЛАРИЗАЦИЈА ЕКСПРЕСИВНИХ ТЕНДЕНЦИЈА У СРПСКОЈ АРХИТЕКТУРИ  
ПОЧЕТКОМ XXI ВЕКА

Резиме

У овом раду се разматрају карактеристични примери екстремних тенденција у архитектонској изражајности, који су настали у Србији током последњих петнаест година (након две хиљаде година). Под појмом *екстремне тенденције* у архитектонској изражајности се мисли на скуп експресивних карактеристика архитектонског дела, које се јављају као последица стваралачке тежње ка максималном поједностављењу (минималистичка тенденција) или максималном динамизирању (експресионистичка тенденција) композиционог склопа. Тежиште рада представља критичка анализа експресивних карактеристика референтних архитектонских објеката и узрочно-последичних веза са друштвено-политичким околностима које се одвијају у Србији од почетка деведесетих година двадесетог века, тј. од распада СФР Југославије. За разлику од других земаља у региону (Хрватска, Словенија, Румунија, Бугарска и др.) које у другачијим и мање драматичним околностима пролазе кроз период постсоцијалистичке транзиције, изражајни примери архитектуре у Србији су поларизовани и јављају се у екстремним појавним облицима (експресионизам и минимализам). У раду се изводи општи закључак по коме се поларизација експресивних архитектонских примера јавља у периоду транзиције у ситуацијама екстремних друштвено-политичких и економских промена.

Кључне речи: екстремна експресивност, минимализам, експресионизам, архитектура, транзиција.