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Breaking Ground. Pioneering Women in Serbian Architecture

In the history of Serbian architecture, the time of innovation and fundamental restructuring of form begins at the end of the nineteenth century and reaches full development between the two World Wars. During that period, various socio-political factors affected Serbian architecture, creating a framework for deeper insight into distinct aspects of architecture in a broader cultural context. As a case in point, women have been present in the Serbian architectural profession since the beginning of the twentieth century, although the work of many is still not well-known. Some important steps have certainly been taken in order to reconstruct extraordinary lives and careers of a pioneering woman architect.¹

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of turbulence that led from the Principality to the 1882 Kingdom of Serbia. After the First World War, Serbia became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, in 1929 renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Set between modern and traditional identities, modernizing forces dominated the society. The status of women started to change in the second half of the nineteenth century, and it was determined by general social conditions and the right to education. In following decades that elusive position provided access to employment, economic and social independence.

The formation of the first schools for girls was allowed by law of 1844, and where such schools did not exist, girls could attend boys' schools until the age of ten.² Foreign female teachers established first private secondary schools for girls, and state sponsored secondary education started in 1863 with the opening of the High School for Girls in Belgrade. Besides providing general education, school prepared women teachers to work in primary schools which

girls attended.³ In 1883 important affirmative action law was passed, introducing six years of compulsory education for each child living in Serbia. The state supported the advanced education of its citizens at the Universities in Europe, including a small number of women. At the same time, women begun to enrol the Great School in Belgrade, at first with special permissions. In 1905 the Great School became the University in Belgrade, and since then there has been no gender distinction between students. Following that, in the period 1896–1940 there were 144 women known by name who enrolled to study architecture in Belgrade.⁴

Jelisaveta Načić is one of the highly acclaimed Serbian architects.⁵ She was born in 1878 in Belgrade, in the family of a wealthy trader Mihailo S. Načić. In 1896 she enrolled at the Technical Faculty of the Great School. She broke the ground when in 1900 graduated from the Architectural Department among the first students with a degree in architecture, and became the first Serbian woman architect. Upon acquiring her degree, Jelisaveta Načić worked as an intern at the Ministry of Construction, but after passing the license exam failed to continue employment. More specifically, military service was mandatory for a senior civil servant, and simply because she was a woman, she was denied the position. Soon afterward, she was employed at the Belgrade Municipality in 1903, where she spent her working years, and gained wide recognition from her colleagues. She also opened the path to employment of women architects in the public sector. Her most renowned work was *King Petar I Primary School* in Belgrade (1907) (fig. 1). She designed many buildings including *Tuberculosis Sanatorium* (1912, damaged in the First World War, demolished), *Saint Aleksandar Nevski Church* in Belgrade (1909–30, her design



fig. 1

was significantly changed during the interwar period), and *Saint Archangel Church* near Štimlje (1922). Načić also built number of private houses and apartment buildings. She contributed greatly to Belgrade urban development, by working in collaboration with colleagues on urban design of the *Kalemegdan Park* at the Belgrade Fortress, and the *Terazije Square*. During the First World War she kept working on the reconstruction of the bombarded Belgrade, until she was, as a civilian, imprisoned in a camp in Nezsider (today Neusiedl am See, Austria). There she met Luka Lukai (Luk Lukaj), Albanian intellectual. In the time of internment they married and in 1917 had a daughter. After the war, she briefly returned to Belgrade, then moved to Shkodër (Albania) and became completely involved in family life and her husband's political activism. Thereafter, the family settled in Dubrovnik. Jelisaveta Načić never worked as an architect again and after the death of her husband dedicated herself to raising her daughter. She died in 1955 in Dubrovnik.

Another pioneering Serbian architect was Jovanka Bončić Katerinić born in 1887 in Niš.⁶ Her father was court judge Mihailo Bončić. She began to study architecture in 1905 in Belgrade. After the seventh semester, as a state fellowship holder, in 1909/10 she enrolled to study engineering in Darmstadt. Jovanka Bončić (Bontschits) completed her four-year Diploma course in 1913 as Technische Hochschule Darmstadt's first female graduate and Germany's first female university-trained engineer.⁷ A lady engineer was a novelty, and a photo of Jovanka sitting among her male

colleagues even made front page of the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*. She returned to Belgrade and, unlike Jelisaveta Načić before her, gained a position at the Ministry of Construction as an architect. At that point, she went to Russia to marry architect Andreja Katerinić, a colleague from Darmstadt. Until 1922 the couple lived in Russia and after the October Revolution with their three sons returned to Yugoslavia. Jovanka continued to work at the Ministry of Construction. Andreja was employed at the Belgrade Municipality. Among his designs, stand out school buildings, like *King Aleksandar I Primary School* in Dečanska Street (1930, today Music School). During Jovanka's long career at the Architectural Department of the Ministry of Construction (1923–45) she was engaged in numerous architectural projects. She completed the main pavilion, *Kursalon* (1932, with architects Milan Minić and Nikolai Krasnov), and the *Mud Bath Pavilion* (1929) in Banja Koviljača. In that period architects at the Ministry of Construction specialized in field of educational facilities as state schools were built wherever they were needed. Just before the War Jovanka started to design the monumental main building of the *Faculty of Veterinary Medicine* of the University of Belgrade (1942) (fig. 2). When the war ended she resumed her work at the Ministry of Construction until 1945, when she retired. She died in 1966 in Belgrade.

Architect Milica Krstić née Čolak Antić⁸ was born in 1887 in Kragujevac, as the granddaughter of duke Čolak-Anta Simeonović. After finishing the High School for Girls in Belgrade in 1906, she enrolled at the Architecture Department of the Technical Faculty of

fig. 2





fig. 3

the University in Belgrade, and graduated in 1910. She was married to architect Žarko Krstić, whom she met during the studies. In the period 1914–41 Milica Krstić worked in Architectural Department of the Ministry of Construction, and in 1940, as a respected architect she gained the highest position, rank of inspector. Like her co-worker Jovanka Bončić, she was assigned to design school buildings, and developed a series of drafts that captured regional building traditions. Her most lauded buildings are two monumental schools in Belgrade that reflected architect's interest in equal educational opportunities for boys and girls, as well as the challenge of creating a clean and healthy learning environment.⁹ *Second High School for Girls* (1933, today Nikola Tesla Electro technical High School) was opulent building in modernized Serbian-Byzantine style, with basement, ground floor, three levels with around 250 classrooms,¹⁰ and a chapel. In the *First High School for Boys* (1938, today First Belgrade Gymnasium) (fig. 3), on the other hand, she rejected the ornament, gaining contemporary, modernist building. Her opposing design is explained in the context of varying national and modern approaches of the time. Milica's husband Žarko, as the head of sector at the Belgrade Municipality, was engaged on many projects including the *Primary School* (1928) in Bulbulder neighbourhood in Belgrade. He was army reserve engineer captain, and was killed in April 1941.¹¹ Milica Krstić-Čolak Antić died in 1964 in Belgrade.

At the very beginning of her career Jelisaveta Načić reached a milestone with third place in 1903 national competition for the

Saint George Church, the mausoleum of the Karađorđević dynasty in Oplenac. Also, she took part in the *Fourth Yugoslav Art Exhibition* (1912), as the only woman amongst architects, and exhibited her design for the *King Petar I Primary School*. Jovanka Bončić Katerinić, Anđelija Pavlović and Jovan Ranković in 1930 won the major national competition for *Ban's Palace* (built in 1931) and *Ban Administration Building* (1932) in Banja Luka.

Milica Krstić was a pioneer in public education and a leader in the campaign for gender equality. She was active member of the Architects' Club – Belgrade section of the Association of Yugoslav Engineers and Architects, who wrote articles for the daily papers and gave an inspiring public lectures about women's rights issues, or architectural exhibitions and conferences she visited abroad.

Numerous women's organisations altered social dynamics and produced changes within Serbian society. The Cvijeta Zuzorić Association of Friends of Art established in 1922 promoted cultural responsibility. Situated in the Kalemegdan park, the Cvijeta Zuzorić Art Pavilion opened its door in 1928 and set in motion a chain of exhibitions, also musical and literary events.¹² In June 1929 the Group of Architects of the Modern Movement organised in the Pavilion the *Salon of Architecture*. On that first inter-war exhibition of contemporary architecture in Belgrade among twenty-two architects/teams participated Milica Krstić and Ljubica Todorović.

Eminent women artists from Yugoslavia, Romania and Czechoslovakia gathered in 1938 *Exhibition of Women Artists of the Little Entente*, in order to emphasize shared geopolitical and cultural sphere. The exhibition encompassed not only painting and sculpture, but also architecture, and nine architects were selected from Yugoslavia. Dušana Šantel Kanoni was from Ljubljana. Ksenija Grisogono who presented villa in Dalmatia, and Zoja Dumengjić who exhibited the design of *Hygienic Institute* were from Zagreb. There also participated six architects from Belgrade. Ružica Ilić displayed the design of *Labour Building*. Desanka Jovanović, who worked in Belgrade Municipality, presented the design of *Queen Marija Primary School*. Danica Kojić exhibited the design of *Maison Particulière*, and Milica Krstić the design of *High School for Boys* in Belgrade. Jelena Minić was also from the Ministry of Construction, and presented the interior design of the *Majestic Hotel* in

Belgrade.¹³ Jelisaveta Načić exhibited the *Petar I Primary School* in Belgrade.¹⁴ Queen Marija of Yugoslavia, Queen Marie of Romania and Hana Benešová, wife of the president of Czechoslovakia were the patrons of the exhibition which proved that by the end of inter-war period, the social stands regarding professional women, including architects, have inevitably changed.

The first generation of women architects in Serbia were the pioneers of female emancipation, and their public engagement

helped to build modern civil society. Jelisaveta Načić, Jovanka Bončić Katerinić and Milica Krstić succeeded in achieving the right to education, equal employment and professional recognition. Furthermore, they still inspire other women to enter the architectural profession.

Notes:

- 1 Architect Divna Đurić Zamolo (1922-95) accomplished the *initial* historical *research* about women in Serbian architecture, including: Divna Đurić-Zamolo, "Grada za proučavanje dela žena arhitekata sa Beogradskog univerziteta generacije 1896-1940," in Aleksandar Kadijević (ed.), *PINUS zapisi 5* (Beograd: Zajednica tehničkih fakulteta Univerziteta, Muzej nauke i tehnike, 1996). Many authors contributed to the subject, and selected prior publications *will be referred to hereinafter*. For the most recent overview on the subject see Milena Zindović (ed.), *Žene u arhitekturi: Savremena arhitektura u Srbiji posle 1900 = Women in Architecture: Contemporary Architecture in Serbia since 1900* (Beograd: Centar za arhitekturu = Belgrade: Center for Architecture, 2014).
- 2 Ljubinka Trgovčević, *Planirana elita: O studentima iz Srbije na evropskim univerzitetima u 19. veku*, (Beograd: Istorijski institut, Službeni glasnik, 2003), 186-87.
- 3 By 1900, Serbian girls were attending 165 elementary schools, and by 1914 there were 12 gymnasiums, 45 craft schools, two teacher education schools, three colleges, and several private schools. As stated in Trgovčević, *Planirana elita*, 189.
- 4 Đurić-Zamolo, *Grada*, 8-12.
- 5 About Načić see also Milan Minić, "Prva beogradanka arhitekta Jelisaveta Načić," *Godišnjak grada Beograda* 3 (1956), 451-8; Olivera Nožinić, "Jelisaveta Načić: Prva žena arhitekta u Srbiji," *Zbornik za likovne umetnosti Matice srpske* 19 (1983), 275-93; Divna Đurić Zamolo, "Prilog poznavanju života i rada arhitekta Jelisavete Načić," *Godišnjak grada Beograda* 36 (1989), 149-62; Đurić Zamolo, *Grada*, 43-7; Jelena Bogdanović, "Jelisaveta Načić: The First Serbian Female Architect," *Serbian Studies* 18, No. 2, (2004), 403-11; Divna Đurić-Zamolo, *Graditelji Beograda 1815-1914* (Beograd: Muzej grada Beograda, 2011), 218-27.
- 6 About Bončić Katerinić see: Đurić-Zamolo, *Grada*, 19-21; Draginja Maskareli, "O delatnosti arhitekta Jovanke Bončić Katerinić," *Leskovački zbornik* 43 (2003), 217-22; Đurdija Borovnjak, "Arhitektura dva školska objekta Jovanke Bončić-Katerinić u Beogradu: Zgrade ženske učiteljske škole i Veterinarskog fakulteta," *Godišnjak grada Beograda* 55 (2008), 265-90.
- 7 Bončić's examination records and diploma are held at the Technische Universität Darmstadt, Archiv. Acknowledging Bončić's importance, the Jovanka Bontschits Prize is awarded to outstanding women graduates of the Department of Materials and Earth Sciences at Technical University Darmstadt.
- 8 About Krstić see: Đurić-Zamolo, *Grada*, 42-3; Snežana Toševa, "Arhitekt Milica Krstić (1887-1964)," *Godišnjak grada Beograda* 44 (1997), 95-114.
- 9 Anna Novakov, "Educating Girls: Women Architects and the Design of Three Schools in Belgrade, 1908-1938" in Jelena Bogdanović, Lilien Filipovitch Robinson and Igor Marjanović (eds.), *On the Very Edge: Modernism and Modernity in the Arts and Architecture of Interwar Serbia (1918-1941)* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014), 167-77.
- 10 "Druga ženska gimnazija koja će se na proleće dovršiti, imaće oko 250 prostorija," *Vreme*, October 19, 1932, 8.
- 11 See commemoration announcement: "Pomeni (2183) 1-2," *Opštinske novine*, May 29, 1941, 4.
- 12 Designed by architect Branislav Kojić. His wife, architect Danica Kojić née Milovanović was the interior designer. See Aleksandra Ilijevski, "The Cvijeta Zuzorić Art Pavilion as the Center for Exhibition Activities of Belgrade Architects 1928-1933," *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti* 41 (2013), 237-48.
- 13 Architect Milan Minić, Jelena's husband, built the hotel in 1937.
- 14 See also *La Petite Entente des Femmes. Exposition des Femmes Artistes des États de la Petite Entente: 1938 Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Bucarest, Cluj, Cernatuzi, Praha, Brno, Bratislava* (Praha: Orbis, 1938), 39-40.