

## **Building A Room of One's Own:**

### **An Insight into the Origins of Women Architects in Serbia**

The aim of the essay to present the work of women architects in Serbia through contemporary feminist theories. It uses present research about women in Serbian architecture, their background, the institutions they worked in, their buildings, their pedagogical work etc.

The text compares some elements of Linda Nochlin "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" with the position female architects had in Serbia at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, and tries to reveal similarities and differences between positions of the women as architects ( in Serbia, at beginning of 20th century ) and women as other visual artists.

With this set as a goal, the text tries to find the connection between the women architect's background and their position as architects in Serbian society and tries to point out that the valorization of their work in past was in direct connection with the latter fact. Furthermore it draws attention to the need for a new critical reading of the work of female architects in Serbia through contemporary feminist theories.

Since an architectural art piece, as any other art piece according to Arthur C. Danto, isn't just what appears in front of the viewer, but is defined by knowledge of the entire art history and current events in the world, and their interpretations that bring it into the art world, review and valorisation of built and designed opus of female architects in Serbia at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century requires, beside creating a detailed list of projects of these female authors, also the knowledge of biographical data as well as historical and socio-cultural context in which they worked and lived.

One of the most comprehensive studies about the beginnings of female architects in Serbia is *Resources for Studying Female Architects at University of Belgrade, Generation 1896 – 1940* by Divna Djurić-Zamolo written in 1996. Authoress has made a collection of 24 cases about 24 female architects. In the Foreword, the publisher says: "Although she personally had a strong inters to create a more comprehensive view to the work of female architects, as an experienced scientist and journalist, Djurić-Zamolo has managed to avoid the trap of a priori defining a certain specific female view to architecture and art"<sup>1</sup>. Any kind of feministic approach that could possibly be useful for the analysis was completely abandoned. Although it was written at the end of one and beginning of another millennium, this work in anachronous way and parallel to all contemporary theories, creates an archive about female architects because ... "She (Divna Djurić-Zamolo) has never viewed them separately from their more dominant and outnumbering male colleagues, with whom they've made major changes in all aspects of

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<sup>1</sup>Djuric Zamolo, dr Divna, *Architectural Work of Serbian Women Who Studied Architectural Faculty In Belgrade (generations 1896 – 1940th)*, 1996, PINUS Zapisi, 5/1996, Belgrade, p. 71

our architectural profession – social, technical and aesthetical.”<sup>2</sup> There is a question of intention of woman architects study, considering that this study, except collecting woman architects and their work, doesn't question their position and their architecture/art in wider social context.

Feminist critic in Yugoslavia, also Serbia, is modelled according to west feminist theory and is mostly developed in literature, much less in visual art; in architecture, where there are no developed critical practice – there are no feminist critic at all.

In the material where we investigate woman architects in Serbia there are very few data about their biographical details. It seems not only that there are no written text, but the women architects themselves, when they were in position to be asked about these issues, didn't considered their private life and background important for their biography.

Written answers they gave on questionnaire made by scheme (personal and family data, school, professional work, positions, awards, praise and recognitions) in *Architectural Work of Serbian Women Who Studied Architectural Faculty In Belgrade (generations 1896 – 1940th)* indicated that they themselves found personal and family data unimportant<sup>3</sup>. Therefore it is a surprising fact that women architects who collected these data and wrote about their colleagues (dr Divna Djuric-Zamolo, Milica Krstic-Colak Antic) also considered them irrelevant.

In order to understand the circumstances in which the first female architects in Serbia were beginning their professional carriers it is necessary to be acquainted to historical context of Serbian society of that time. In Serbia, that was developing society in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “there were two ways for a woman to become a part of elite: the first was tied to their social status, by birth or marriage, and this way that would become a part of the traditional elite, the other was based on education that enabled them becoming qualified for a certain profession and thus becoming a member of one of the modern elite circles.”<sup>4</sup> Change of institutions and introduction of new laws were of great importance for the beginning of professional establishing of women. Not until 1846 Regulation was introduced that enabled girls a six-year education, during which they could, beside general courses, learn skills that were solely connected to females. Higher education of girls begun with the establishing of Higher Female School in 1863. in Belgrade. The first professional affirmation, as elsewhere in Europe, women gained as teachers in primary and high schools. But they could not become "state employee by decree" and thus had no guaranteed position, no right for a retirement and had much lower salaries than their male colleagues.

The real obstacle for continuing education on High School level was the absence of Grammar Schools for women, and finishing one was an admission requirement for entering University. In 1909 when the first generation finished the First Female Grammar School, higher number of women started enrolling Belgrade University. By the First

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<sup>2</sup> ibid, p.71

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> Trgovcevic, Ljubinka, *Women as a Part of Elite in Serbia in 19<sup>th</sup> century*  
<http://www.cpi.hr/download/links/7077.pdf>.

World War 10% of all enrolled students were women.<sup>5</sup> Between the two World Wars a small number of students were enrolling Department of Architecture (between 15 and 55), but in 1937 there was a notable increase: 128 students out of which 17 were female and in 1939 out of 99 students 37 were female.<sup>6</sup>

“Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists?” vs. “Are There Great Woman Architects?”

Architecture is the practice of mutual relations of art and design technique, planning and articulation between public and private living space. As it is in the same time artistic and technical social practice, the architectural analysis of practice of female architect must be approached from the standpoint of applied arts, and others, applied science, that is technique as science. This characteristic of architecture demands careful conclusion drawing in the field of architectural practice and comparing to valid thesis in visual art on the whole.

The goal of this essay, analyzing the given knowledge on the female architects in Serbia (more specifically: those women who formed architectural opus in Serbia, no matter of their origin and education) in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, is to try to apply to it the feminist theory, above all Linda Nochlin's theory. Linda Nochlin, in her distant essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artist” written in 1971, tackles the question of artistic axiology from the point that in the history of western art there are no great female artists and that “art is not free”, independent activity of specially talented individual, who is under the influence of the artist before them, and also less specific “historical social forces”. One could rather say that whole situation of creating the art work, and in the sense of artist's development and nature and quality of art work, clearly distinguished as social situation, as one of the integral elements of the wider social structure<sup>7</sup>.

One of the thesis that Linda Nochlin gave is that basic denominator which connects female artist at all is that they all, generally without difference, either had artists for fathers or were in relationship with stronger or more dominant artist. Also, according to Linda Nochlin (the omission of the great female artist in the history of art explains with depriving women of rights to create according to a nude model) role of institutions and institutional changes is one of the necessary and if not sufficient reason for success (and failure in art).

As we are not interested in the architectural work and opus alone, we will try to verify these theses in the examples of the women architects in Serbia, in the not so great number of accessible and chosen samples of their biographies, their families and marriages. One of the important factors which had an influence on some of the mentioned authors and

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> High Architecture Education in Serbia 1846-1971, Faculty of Architecture, Belgrade, 1996, p.39

<sup>7</sup> Nochlin, Linda, *Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists?* Centre for Women Studies, Zagreb, 1999, p.11

complete ignorance of others are known and not so known political facts in the different social system in Serbia/Yugoslavia after the World War II.

In the architectural profession in Serbia the curiosities are two facts. The first woman holding the diploma from Belgrade Grate School was the architect Jelisaveta Nacic and the first woman graduating from Technical College in Darmstadt was the Serb Jovanka Boncic (Technischen Hochschule in Darmstadt).

#### 1. example: the first female architect, the national pride

Jelisaveta Nacic (married Lukai, known only by her maiden name) is the woman architect about whom the most is written. In *Architectural Work of Serbian Women Who Studied Architectural Faculty in Belgrade (generations 1896 – 1940th) (1896-1941)* dr Divna Djuric Zamolo does not reveal information about Jelisaveta's family. Celebrated and everywhere mentioned as "the first Serbian female architect" after she graduated from Architectural department of Technical College of The Grate School in Belgrade in 1900 she in the barely sixteen year long architectural practice, working in the ministry of development and in the Belgrade municipality, she left behind enormous architectural opus by designing a great number of public buildings. In the Ministry of development she could not have stayed because, according to a law of the time, employee could only be somebody who served in army. From 1916 when she was sent to concentration camp and when she met and later married an activist Luka Lukai from Albania – her professional practice stopped. There are controversial data whether she did or not obtain state pension after the World War II (Bogunovic, Slobodan – Gisa, *Architectural encyclopedia of Belgrade - 19th and 20th century (II)*, Beograd, 2005 and Zamolo, dr Divna Djuric, *Architectural Work of Serbian Women Who Studied Architectural Faculty in Belgrade (generations 1896 – 1940th)*, 1996, PINUS Zapisi, 5/1996, Belgrade).

#### 2. example: Jovanka Boncic-Katerinic, the restless spirit

Daughter of a lawyer and later a judge, after the 4<sup>th</sup> year at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade she goes to Darmstadt, Germany where in 1913 she becomes the first woman who obtained the diploma in architecture at the German universities. Since 1914 towards 1922 with her husband Andrija Katerinic, architect, she lives in Austria and Russia.

#### 3. example: Origin and Politics

Ksenija Grisogono graduated in architecture in 1933 at the University of Zagreb and attended the institute of Fine Arts of Prague when she collaborated with le Corbusier. In 1938 Grisogono did the interior of Italia Cultural Institute. She was also hired as the interior design consultant for the project of the projects of British and France Embassies. She also worked on la Defance, Paris, France. She spent almost the whole career in Paris. Her father was dr Prvislav Grisogono, the minister of law in the Yugoslav Government before World War II and the former Yugoslav diplomat. The family Grisogono is one of the oldest in Dalmatia; for centuries they were active in all pursuit suitable for noblemen

of their rank, including the arts of war, ruling and judging their subjects, writing, science, and music.

In the accessible bibliography of the National Serbian library in Belgrade, in the Library of the Belgrade University and in the library of the Faculty of the Architecture in Belgrade there is no information about the works of this female architect.

#### 4. Example: father professor

Jelena Bajalovic – Kangrga graduated in 1934, and from 1935 towards 1938 she cooperated on the project on a building of The Faculty of Law with her father architect Petar Bajalovic, professor of Technical Faculty, department of Architecture.

#### 5. example: spouse – colleague

In a text about female architect Desanka Petrovic-Petkovic Ivona Fregl notes that “vast number of female architects worked together with their husbands, and on the other side, single female architects, who accomplished successful career, were originally from wealthy and socially established families”<sup>8</sup>. They, most often, assisted in their husbands studios, as in the example of Jelena Golemovic-Minic who graduated in 1914, and after 1923, when she resigned from the position in Ministry of Development, she worked with her husband Milan Minic, architect. The exception is Desanka Petrovic-Petkovic whose education was more advanced than her husband’s, so that fact can be seen as a reason for her decision not to commit herself to the profession completely and to build an independent career in architectural designing.

#### 6. example: pedagogy and encyclopaedia

In the work of *Highschool Education of Architecture in Serbia 1846-1971*<sup>9</sup> it is written that there were only 8.3% of women among active teachers at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade in 1971, 2 associate professors, 2 lecturers, 2 assistants and 2 lecturers<sup>10</sup>.

Similarly in the *Architectural Encyclopedia of Belgrade of XIX and XX century* Slobodan Gisa Bogunovic of total number of 170 architects names only 7 women whose work he concedes relevant to represent Belgrade architecture in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>8</sup> Fregl, Ivona, *Draginja Petrovic-Petkovic (1899-1995), A contribution to the Study of Woman Architects in Serbia, in Architecture and Urbanism*, no 14/15, Belgrade, 2004, p.101

<sup>9</sup> High Architecture Education in Serbia 1846-1971, Faculty of Architecture, Belgrade, 1996, p.149

<sup>10</sup> Lecturer arh. Vera Lazic is the author of the textbook about *feminine space* " Kitchen in Modern Apartment " in 1969!

## Conclusion

At the attempt to shade the light on beginnings of architectural practice of women architects in Serbia and to verify if Linda Nochlin's thesis can be applied in the valuating of their work, the conclusion is imposed that her basic thesis which could be paraphrased as "Why Have There Been No Great Women Architects (in Serbia)?" could be translated more mildly and as a litotes which a priori does not deny that there are no great female architects, but still asks "Are There Great Women Architects(In Serbia)?".

As Linda Nochlin claims that one of the reasons why there were no great female artists in the long history of art is because they were not allowed to study according to a nude model, so, one can say that in Serbian (like elsewhere) architecture there were no female architects until they were given the right to attend the high-school which was the reason to enrol university. Also at the time when the problem is considered, between two World Wars in Serbia, especially immediately after the Great War, due to a lack of male citizens, women managed to gain the positions and the profession which they would not have otherwise.

Working in architecture, which was previously male profession, women sometimes accepted particularly male characteristics in appearance and dress code. On the other hand the majority of women architects in Serbia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century kept their maiden name by adding the married name and by it shown their married status of a women engineer. Although wives and mothers they were making an effort to reject the congenial female parts which were understood, and often could not resist that what Betty Friedan calls the *lace blouse syndrome* – "a form of female rebel which makes successful woman to accept a particularly feminine clothing item"<sup>11</sup>

As in the art in general, the succession of the profession from a father to a son and even on a daughter was considered a completely natural course. However, the exceptions which exist among the great painters, sculptures, architects – to come from the families which do not duel in the same profession, or are even poor – among female painters, sculptures, architects - are extremely rare. Female architects either had a father – in this case not necessary an architect (ironically as the given data shows non had an architect for a father) – but certainly an educated and respected citizen at the higher level of a social scale, either married – in this case their were not only "in a relationship" as Linda Nochlin puts it – with a stronger and more dominant architect.

The other detail from their biographies points to the existence of a rebellious character (the example of Jovanka Boncic-Katerinic) which helped them to, although they accepted the role of the mother and a wife, to be enough brave and to manage to fight for their place in the profession of architecture.

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<sup>11</sup>Nochlin, Linda, *Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists?* Centre for Women Studies, Zagreb, 1999, p.23

literature

1. High Architecture Education in Serbia 1846-1971, Faculty of Architecture, Belgrade, 1996
2. Zamolo, dr Divna Djuric, *Architectural Work of Serbian Women Who Studied Architectural Faculty In Belgrade (generations 1896 – 1940th)*, 1996, PINUS Zapisi, 5/1996, Belgrade
3. Nohlin, Linda, *Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists?* Centre for Women Studies, Zagreb, 1999
4. Slobodan – Gisa Bogunovic, *Architectural encyclopedia of Belgrade - 19th and 20th century (II)*, Belgrade, 2005
5. Trgovcevic, Ljubinka, *Women as a Part of Elite in Serbia in 19<sup>th</sup> century*  
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6. Fregl, Ivona, *Draginja Petrovic-Petkovic (1899-1995), A Contribution to the Study of Woman Architects in Serbia, in Architecture and Urbanism*, no 14/15, Belgrade, 2004