

The Yugoslav pavilion at Expo 58

5 photographs selected: location and captions to be discussed with authors (contact: Rika.Devos@ulb.ac.be)

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The Yugoslavian pavilion at Expo 58 was a surprise to many. A breathtaking surprise: its crisp and discrete modernism framed a vibrant presentation of a young, socialist post-war nation in an elegant building situated at the border of a wooded park. At this first universal and international exhibition after the Second World War, with 43 nations present to showcase post-war progress as well as new power relations and alliances, modern architecture was embraced as a common language, albeit one with divergent dialects. At first sight, the light-footed architecture of the Yugoslavian pavilion was not an exception. Yet to the more informed eye, the coherence of the exhibition space, the floating volumetric of the building, as well as the delicacy of its detailing lent it an exceptional quality. K.N. Elnø, a renowned Belgian critic, discovered in it “an almost unearthly, genial architectonic thinking”¹ and most of the western architectural press listed this modest pavilion among the most successful of the fair. It was also the provenance of this fine piece of exhibition architecture that had triggered the surprise: if some enthusiastic accounts on Yugoslavian modern architecture were made by G.E. Kidder Smith in his 1961 “Note on Eastern Europe” at the end of *The New Architecture of Europe*, the nation was mostly off radar in international surveys on modern architecture in the fifties. Moreover, based on Kidder Smith’s remark, today, this “quietly elegant and imaginative”² pavilion could even be considered as an eye-opener for an architecture culture that was as non-aligned with Soviet policies as the nation’s political position. The surprise, however, also reveals western prejudice in the Cold War tensions which have distorted, and continue to influence, the international reception of the architecture of Expo 58. It is tempting to state, in tune with the architect and the commissioners of the building, that Vjenceslav Richter’s project testified of an intrinsic and universal architectural quality, but it remains questionable, if not doubtful, if this was the architect’s sole ambition.

The straightforward political language of the pavilion was defined by the content of the exhibition, but also, and mostly, by what the pavilion did not.

The Yugoslavian pavilion did not hold any reference to the socialist realism associated with communism. It was also tellingly located amidst the European nations and did not line up with the pavilion of the USSR, nor with its adjoining “Eastern Bloc” pavilions like Czechoslovakia³ or Hungary. It should be noted however that also these pavilions were praised for their modern

architecture, which some western critics considered as proof that they were “no longer a world on their own” although displaying an architecture that was only “quaintly modern”⁴.

With its modest volume and airy lay-out, the Yugoslavian pavilion did not cry for the visitors’ attention. Not even the 37m high *Nada* sculpture hit the eye when in front of the building. This strategy of restraint could be compared with the explicit understatements of the West-German pavilion, the first post-war official German representation following a design by Egon Eiermann and Sep Ruf⁵. Yet Richter’s restraint was not supported by a paralleling discourse of post-war diplomacy. Rather, it resulted from a sequence of design decisions inspired by both external comments and by the refining of its original concept.

For the first round of the competition for the Yugoslavian pavilion for Expo 58, organized in 1956, Vjenceslav Richter had teamed up with the architect Emil Weber⁶, with whom he collaborated regularly. Their proposal consisted out of an elevated open hall, marked by a refined steel structure which allowed the open ground floor to blend with the site, as well as the raised exhibition floor to be arranged freely. In the second round of the competition, their design was marked by engineering bravura: the open hall was now hung from a 70m high mast with the aid of a triangulated intermediate structure on top of the hall, but without further visible supports. While remarkable and daring, this kind of visually dominant engineering proposals was not uncommon in this period and the celebration of technological progress through the use of lightweight structures was even one of the major tendencies at Expo 58. Yet the proposal of Richter and Weber acquired a universally symbolic, and not so much national-political significance. Richter presented the mast as a rocket, symbol of Man’s aspiration for space exploration, a major trigger for technological innovation in order to “overcome gravity” and thus also a “symbol of these desires.”⁷ With its “foundations in the air”⁸ the bravura of the pavilion was not so much a demonstration but a signal, not of a nation that knew how to build complex structures, but of a nation that dared to imagine radically different alternatives. Richter’s and Weber’s proposal was selected, but the structure needed to be down-tuned because of the commissioners’ fear for excessive costs.

The pavilion as built had a more conventional steel structure of fifteen cruciform steel columns, carrying two cantilevering and interlocking exhibition volumes. The system of the split-levels, as well as the large openings in the exhibition floors, introduced already in the second proposal, were elaborated further. This spatial arrangement resulted in a remarkable openness and dynamic feeling in the interior space, which was reinforced by the transparency of the almost fully glazed facades and the coherent detailing throughout the building. The treatment of the columns,

painted black with white fascias, was equally suggestive of the floating of the structure, appearing as “more cables than columns”⁹. The airiness of the pavilion was increased by the large clerestory windows opening up the interior almost as much to the sky as it was open at the bottom. Clad in different types of inland wood, the curved clerestory windows introduced a sculptural play of light and texture to the highly regular black and white vertical filigree of the pavilion¹⁰. At nighttime, the various lighting elements cleverly integrated in the ceiling added a different sense of zoning to the exhibition. On the ground floor, sorts of Yugoslavian marble helped to mark the different exhibition parts without further boundaries.

The exhibition was organized in four zones or galleries, together 2800 m²: Economy (ground floor), State and Social organization (first floor), Contemporary Art (second floor), and Tourism and Nature (third floor). Richter, Weber and Srnec kept the control over the exhibition layout and showcased products and artwork in low cupboards, on light tables or on free-standing pedestals, while graphic art, collages and photographs were mounted on floor-high panels that helped to organize the space. The open ground floor, organized continuously under and alongside the hovering pavilion, was dotted with free-standing objects, both machines and sculptures, inviting the fairgoers to wander freely across the show, whilst discovering the lofty spaces above. Black *diabolo*-shaped rain pipes stood simply along the volume, as sculptures, leaving the building “unconnected” with the ground in a suggestive, low-tech solution. The architectural elements of the pavilion all were absorbed into one intelligible and coherent system of abstraction and transparency.

Vjenceslav Richter was as much an ideologically engaged architect as he was a radical modernist with a firm belief in the synthesis of arts and architecture. When working on the pavilion, his systemic approach to the design of modern space was in tune with a socialist culture in search of new expressions of self-management and regained freedom¹¹. Richter already set the tone, together with Ivan Picelj and Srnec, in diverse official representations of the new Yugoslavia, both abroad and at home. To those familiar with these installations, the abstract language of the 1958 pavilion was not a surprise, but a refined and consistent continuation, that would find further fertile soil in the following years. However, the “purity, qualitative division of space and psychological modesty”¹² of the pavilion’s architecture as underlined by the official exhibition leaflet of the Yugoslavian pavilion, found little resonance in the architectural showdown of the world’s fair. Yet irrespective of the heavily ideological lens of the Cold War that had colored the reception of the pavilion, the pavilion did find a remarkable second life after the closing of the

fair. It was rebuilt as a catholic school in Wevelgem and has been classified as a monument in 2005.

¹ K.N. Elnó, *De Expo 58: planning, architectuur en vormgeving*, in “Streven”, 1, October 1958, p. 8.

² G.E. Kidder-Smith, *The New Architecture of Europe*, Pelican Books, Harmondsworth 1962, p. 323

³ The Czechoslovakian pavilion especially could count on the enthusiasm of both the public and the jury of the fair’s architectural challenge. See: R. Devos, *The architectural challenge*, in Id. *Modern at Expo 58. Discussions on post-war architectural representation*, Ph.D. dissertation, Faculteit Ingenieurswetenschappen, Ghent 2008, pp. 259-260.

⁴ *Architecture at Brussels: festival of structure*, in “Architectural Record” 123, June 1958, p. 163.

⁵ V. Kulić, *Between Wars, Between Blocs: Yugoslavia at Expo 58*, in R. Devos, A. Ortenberg and V. Paperny, eds., *Architecture of Great Expositions 1937-1959. Messages of Peace, Images of War*, Ashgate, Surrey/Burlington 2015, p. 189.

⁶ Painter Aleksandar Snrec also collaborated in the pavilion, see: op. cit., p. 182

⁷ Citation from Richter’s explanation, as quoted in: M. De Kooning, *Het ruimteveer van Vjenceslav Richter. Het paviljoen van Joegoslavië*, in R. Devos and M. De Kooning, *Moderne architectuur op Expo 58. Voor een humaner wereld*, Mercatorfonds/Dexia, Brussels 2006, p. 296.

⁸ V. Richter, *Selective biography – an attempt to analyse authenticity*, in M. Susovski, *Richter Collection: the Vjenceslav Richter and Nada Kareš-Richter Donation to the City of Zagreb*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb 2003, p. 193.

⁹ M. De Kooning, *Het ruimteveer van Vjenceslav Richter. Het paviljoen van Joegoslavië*, in R. Devos and M. De Kooning, *Moderne architectuur op Expo 58. Voor een humaner wereld*, Mercatorfonds/Dexia, Brussels 2006, p. 297.

¹⁰ The sculptural effect of this ceiling later found its echo in the textured ceiling of the Villa Zagorja (1964).

¹¹ V. Kulić, *Between Wars, Between Blocs: Yugoslavia at Expo 58*, in R. Devos, A. Ortenberg and V. Paperny, eds., *Architecture of Great Expositions 1937-1959. Messages of Peace, Images of War*, Ashgate, Surrey/Burlington 2015, p. 181

¹² *Joegoslavië. Tentoonstelling Brussel 1958*, official exhibition booklet, p. 12.