

## ROMANTIC VISIONS vs. REJECTION OF IDEAL RECONSTRUCTION

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### **Abstract**

*Almost half a century after Romanticist fervor dwindled, a highly distinguished Serbian architect and architectural historian, Aleksandar Deroko, infused it with new life in his theoretical and design oeuvre. Significantly contributing to the history of 20th century architecture in former Yugoslavia, Deroko merged romanticist deep appreciation of history with the rationality of modern design methodology. Rastko Petrovic, a Serbian poet, diplomat, and art critic was Deroko's faithful companion during his theoretical wanderings and ventures to the remote parts of the Balkans. The architect and the poet were both children of their own age. They personally knew Guillaume Apollinaire, James Joyce, Picasso, and were close to the Parisian Dadaist circle. On the other side, their approach to the study of the past deeply resonated with a romantic sentiment. Deroko's particular methodological approach to architectural history and design was based on the deep understanding of tradition and on supposition that it is possible to accumulate knowledge of the elements of good design.*

*This paper employs the example of the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade, one of the largest Orthodox churches in the world, to explore the relations between Deroko's romantic visions and ways of using tradition in the construction of modernity. Furthermore, the role Petrovic's ideas played in development of Deroko's design methodology will be examined. The writer's novels and their content will be discussed to explain the union of romantic vision of remote, unapproachable medieval monasteries, with strong rationalism and realism in approach to preservation and protection of historical monuments. The paper will investigate contemporaneity of an argument that Deroko's methodological approach to architectural history does not recognize innovation as a virtue, and raises the question that each epoch is characterized by a complex set of conflicting and harmonizing tendencies simultaneously.*

**Keywords:** Between History and Avant-Garde, Aleksandar Deroko, Rastko Petrovic, Saint Sava's Church.

## Introduction

Set in the years between the two World Wars, this paper tells a story about three protagonists. The first protagonist was an architect – widely appreciated, yet overlooked. The second one was a poet – an avant-garde author in love with the past. The third was a building – an edifice seminal within the context of a nation’s tradition, yet widely criticised as anachronistic. The story takes place in Belgrade, the capital city of a complex socio-political entity, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, better known under the name it officially carried since 1929 – the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The complex, contrasted natures of the three protagonists illustrate the broader circumstances of the interwar period. The architect, the poet, and the building were genuine children of their time, yet, caught between the siren call of history and the demands of the *Zeitgeist*, they belonged to none. However, looking back, the accomplishments of the three shine bright on the horizon of Serbian creative history. The work and wide contributions of the architect, Aleksandar Deroko (1894-1988), have gained traction recently; the poet, Rastko Petrović (1898-1949), is recognized as a prominent member of Serbian interwar intelligentsia; and the building, the Church of Saint Sava, is considered as one of the important symbols of Serbian national identity, and amongst the most striking architectural features of Belgrade.

Addressing the dual natures of Aleksandar Deroko, Rastko Petrović, and the architecture of the Church of Saint Sava, the paper explores the ambiguous understanding of the history and modernity in the interwar period. The Church of Saint Sava is a major topic from 20<sup>th</sup> century Serbian architectural history, and as such, it has attracted scholarly attention (Pesic, 2005). This paper is the first to explore the influence Petrović and Deroko’s relationship, as well as the influence of their individual approaches to the questions of history and modernity had on the architecture of the Saint Sava’s Church. In response to the conference topic, the paper will discuss the architecture of Saint Sava’s Church in the context of conflicting notions of the architect’s romantic visions of the past, his rejection of ideal reconstruction, and his functionalist approach to design. Finally, exploring the period’s debate on the designs for the Saint Sava’s

Church the paper will illustrate the duality of the local acceptance of the architecture of the Modern Movement.

### **Caught between History and Avant-Garde: Aleksandar Deroko and Rastko Petrovic**

First, to introduce the Architect and the Poet. Aleksandar Deroko was a prolific character from Serbian architectural history (Manevic, 2008; Bogunovic, 2005; Jovanovic, 1991; Korac, 1991; Medakovic, 1988; Bogdanovic, 1981). Architect, scholar, University lecturer, heritage worker, painter – to name only some of his interests – Deroko's achievements were imprinted on Serbian 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture. His active nature, inquisitive mind, and unpretentiousness resulted in a unique charisma that was adored by the students and respected by his peers. Rastko Petrović was a Serbian poet, writer, diplomat, literary and art critic. Having survived the Albanian Golgotha – the retreat of the Serbian army and a great number of civilians before the German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian armies in the First World War – at the age of seventeen, Petrović graduated from high school in Nice, and studied law in France. He is considered to be one of the most important and most influential Serbian writers in the period between the two World Wars.

Rastko Petrović was occupied with the stories of origin, with the Slavdom, its mythology and first sources of Serbian culture and art and his first books clearly show this obsession. He was a poet of strong Dionysian sense of life, moving between excruciating and devastating extremes - from the cheerful, sensual dissolution of the Slavic pagan paradise in *Burlesque of the God Perun* (Petrovic, 1921) full of eroticism, love, and free love - to the dark atmosphere of destruction, violence and death in some poems of *Revelation* (Petrovic, 1922). In the world of old Slavs - Rastko's permanent obsession, in Serbian folklore and in Serbian medieval art and literature - he sought for sources for Serbian autochthonous poetic reconstruction. His tendency for the synthesis between modernity and tradition and the cosmopolitan and national spirit was unseen and extremely brave.

Deroko and Petrović met in 1919. Deroko notes the encounter fondly in his autobiography:

"We met on his return to Belgrade, after the World War I and Rastko's studies in Paris. He came from Paris thrilled by the legends of ancient Slavs ... and the vision of medieval Serbian art not only in terms of architecture and fresco painting, but also of the old literature, poetry, folklore epics ... as well as everything inherited, recorded and preserved until today through stories, fairy tales, songs, costumes, jewellery. Rastko studied with enthusiasm medieval Serbian art with Professor Gabriel Millet in Paris ... and he wrote at that time *Burlesque of the God Perun*. I was in similar mood at that time. I was also obsessed with the magic of the old art ... Soon the two of us together eagerly went to see and experience it all close up." (Deroko, 1983, 2013; pp. 128-9)

Together, Rastko and Deroko travelled "for hours through the mountains and the waters," roaming the massifs of Serbia in search of the hidden monasteries. The two meticulously documented every detail from the monuments of the past. However, their interest in these edifices went beyond archaeological fascination. Believing that it was the only way to "really experience," they would always spend the nights in a monastery, or behind the walls of an old fortification (Deroko, 1983, 2013). Rastko and Deroko would sit in the darkness of these ancient buildings for hours, silent, immersed in an ecstatic experience of the past. Looking back at these years, Deroko notes that, at that time, the two truly believed that they did not create art, but only experienced ecstasy, asserting that it was the emotion that was important, not the art! (Deroko, 1983, 2013). The introspective contemplations of history, and the conversations held "in those darkened walls of their past," influenced them both, leaving a specific mark on their creative work.



**Figure 1.** Aleksandar Deroko and Rastko Petrovic, two friends drawing each other under the Petrova Church. (Popovic, R. (1984). *Deroko i drugi o njemu*. Beograd: Turisticka stampa, p. 37).

In the second half of the 1920s Deroko and Rastko replaced the wanderings across the isolated wilderness of Serbia with the bustling streets of Paris. Graduating from the School of Architecture at the University of Belgrade, Deroko was awarded the French national scholarship. He arrived in Paris in 1926 to study under Professor Gabriel Millet at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes* (Deroko, 1983, 2013). Rastko was already there to greet Deroko and introduce him to the very core of the Parisian avant-garde, discussing Surrealism, Dadaism, and other progressive concepts with Charles Despiau, Maurice de Vlaminck, Pablo Picasso, and Le Corbusier (Deroko, 1983). In the time to come, Deroko wrote at length about their time in Paris. The two visited Parisian museums regularly, passionately and tirelessly. They did not desire to see everything, but only the pieces worth the experience, since “being excited” and discovering the artist’s intention were of the utmost importance to them (Deroko, 1983, 2013).

Recalling the memories of his dearest friend at that time, Deroko noted that while their Parisian company was drawing a moustache on Mona Lisa, Rastko preferred the great masters of the past. Though the poet had a deep appreciation of modern art, he preferred Ingres. Rastko was devoted to the classic values of art, without desire to experiment with oddities that ruled over Fine Arts at that time (Deroko, 1983; 1987, 2014). The same tendencies were visible in Deroko's designs.

### **Romantic Visions versus Rejection of Ideal Reconstruction: Ambiguity behind Deroko's Design Activity**

Sharing in Rastko's obsession with the past, Deroko was passionately involved in the preservation of architectural heritage. From the very beginning of his career, he put his life in the service of heritage protection (Deroko, 1987, 2014; Deroko, 1932): taking a theoretically developed methodological approach to heritage problems (Deroko, 1987, 2014; Deroko, 1933; Deroko, 1932); discussing preservation techniques; and contributing to the education in the field of heritage protection. As a student, Deroko was a member of expeditions surveying the rich, often uncharted architectural heritage of Serbia. "Not a path, nor a smaller pathway to the monastery" was an unavoidable feature of these field trips, or better, field adventures. For example, to reach a monastery from a town or a city, they would often travel by a simple timber carriage to the nearest village. The rest of the distance had to be covered on foot, jumping over the wooden fences between the estates – which was often frowned upon by the owners (Deroko, 1987, 2014). Finally arriving on a site, they did not have any adequate equipment at their disposal. However, despite all the difficulties, these expeditions collected a lot of important data. Discussing the choice between restoration or conservation, Deroko maintained that Viollet le Duc "ruined Avignon". Deroko asserted that there was no simple solution to this problem. However, in the case of Serbian medieval cities he insisted that attempting to reconstruct completely what was destroyed would be wrong: "What does not exist anymore, even if it is known exactly what it looked like, still should not be

reconstructed again. The best is to preserve what still exists and protect that from further deterioration." (Deroko, 1950, p. 206).

Deroko's deep appreciation of history and a pragmatic approach to heritage issues permeated his design philosophy. Often stressing the necessity to respect a certain past epoch and its heritage, Deroko believed in learning from architectural history. Deroko called on architects to appreciate their past, underlining that history should be neither forgotten nor rejected. Cultural heritage should serve as an inspiration, as a refreshment, or as an encouragement to the poetic idea with its naivety and deep sensibility. However, Deroko insisted that the architectural past should never serve as a source of direct imitation! (Deroko, 1987; 2014). Well aware of contemporary Modernist achievements, and personally acquainted with Le Corbusier, Deroko remained unconvinced by their rhetoric. Like the Modernists, Deroko believed in ethical categories, such as architectural honesty. However, he asserted that art need not progress. According to him, instead of the pursuit of progress in architecture there should be just different ways of expression and different values (Deroko, 1987, 2014). And, in Deroko's mind, there was hardly a greater value in architecture than function. He maintained that vernacular architecture was an archetype of functionality, a result of a specific set of geographical and climatic conditions. Deroko remained highly critical of the Modernist use of standardized elements regardless of the building's conditions. Deroko's was a functionalist approach to design (Deroko, 1987, 2014). According to him, the role of an architect was to provide a quiet corner amid the general bustle of streets, squares, and "transport nodes". Interestingly, Deroko attempted to approach the contemporary architectural production from the point of the occupant – as a layman, not as a specialist, nor an urban planner. Though he stressed his belief in the necessity of artistic freedom and personal appreciation for modern art, Deroko often reminded his readers that the common people were the ones who inhabited the products of architecture and urbanism; they must look at them every day and every hour. With the motto "freedom is great, but so is the risk" Deroko insisted that architects do not own architecture (Deroko, 1987, 2014).

Similarly to the Modernist proponents, Deroko often discussed the concept of *Zeitgeist*. He advocated that a work of art inevitably expressed the epoch and society which produced it. However, a monument always tends to last long, possibly eternally (as, for example, the pyramids), so it must not be tied only to the ephemeral taste of the current fashion. According to Deroko, the principles of architectural functionality, stability and timelessness were closely associated with human existence. He often reiterated that the universal principles of functionality, harmony, stability, were in accordance with the fundamental objectives of any significant human creation. In every major culture they were selected as a means and a guarantee of social relations, peace and stability – and were recognizable manifestations of common moral as well. Respecting the purpose for which a building was constructed, the geographical conditions, and materials, Deroko maintained that “good taste” – perceived as “common sense” – was the basic condition for any work of art (Deroko, 1974; Deroko 1981; Deroko, 1983; Deroko, 1987, 2014). Deroko’s recipe for good architecture would follow the scheme: successful idea – one that suits the purpose/fits the function – expressed with the right measure and good taste. As a result, great works of art are those which live even beyond their time, and remain relevant in all times (Deroko, 1987, 2014; 1985). Deroko occasionally mentioned the word “spirit” in the positive sense in his writings, obviously believing in spiritual continuum between different historical periods because this process has always been essential for vigour and inventiveness in architecture. He was never interested in a clear chronological classification of architecture, but in the basic characteristics of its development. This brings us to the conclusion that Deroko was advocating the “spirit” or “spirituality” in architecture which exists regardless of the time and place of its erection.

### **The Church of Saint Sava: The Debate**

Stretching throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the full history of the construction of the Saint Sava’s Church remained an intricate narrative – one that, however, is of lesser importance for this paper. Relevant is the debate which arose following



the final decision to construct the building after unified designs by Bogdan Nestorovic and Aleksandar Deroko.<sup>1</sup> Published in the period's press, the opinions of noted architects and artists are a source for the exploration of various issues; for example, the complex questions of national identity which were an unavoidable consequence of the endeavour to construct a grand Serbian Orthodox structure in the capital of the heterogeneous multinational political society of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. However, in this paper, the focus is on the formal criticism of the architectural solution for the Saint Sava Church. Responding to the conditions put forward by the 1926 competition, architects Nestorovic and Deroko designed a centrally planned edifice, in the Serbian-Byzantine tradition. Shaped like a Greek cross, the structure is covered with a large central dome, supported by four pendentives and flanked on each side by a system of four smaller domes and lower semi-domes.

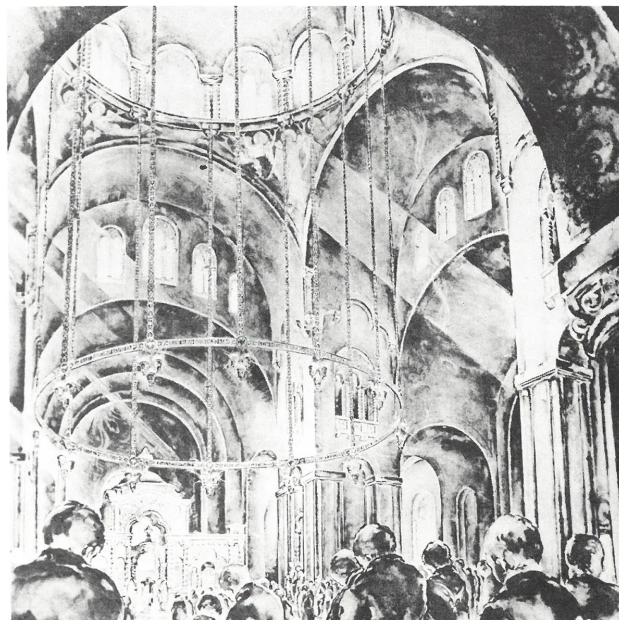


**Figure 2.** Deroko, Saint Sava Church, a centrally planned edifice in the Serbian-Byzantine tradition, competition drawing (Jovanovic, Z. (1991). *Aleksandar Deroko*. Beograd: RZZZSK, p. 66).

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<sup>1</sup> Architect Bogdan Nestorovic won the first prize in the competition for the Church of Saint Sava design, held in 1926. Deroko also competed, and his design was also highly commended (and bought) by the Church of Saint Sava Construction Committee. In 1932 the Committee invited Nestorovic and Deroko to prepare a joint, final project. Deroko was primarily responsible for interior design and sculptural ornament.

The criticism of Modernist architects was sharp – they maintained that a new competition should be organised, one that would not set any stylistic demands. Architects such as Brasovan asserted that the Church design should employ novel architectural forms, ones that were expressive of today (Brasovan, 1932). Other were not as radical. The Krstic brothers and Zeljko Tatic recognised the need for the traditional architectural forms, yet they were uncertain of which precedents would be appropriate – the Byzantine, or those from the Serbian medieval repertoire (Krstic, 1932; Tatic, 1932). In his commentary on the designs, Ivan Mestrovic called for a Yugoslav national style (Mestrovic, 1932), and the famous architectural theorist Milutian Borisavljevic asserted that an international competition should be organised, given that a Serbian architecture had yet to be developed (Borisavljevic, 1932). No matter their various solutions to the problem – Modernist, traditionalist, or internationalist – it is obvious that these architects were unified in their dissatisfaction.



**Figure 3.** Deroko, Saint Sava Church, interior - a Greek cross covered with a large central dome, competition drawing (Jovanovic, Z. (1991). *Aleksandar Deroko*. Beograd: RZZZSK, p. 65).

The client, however; the layman that Deroko cared so dearly about – in this case, the Serbian Orthodox Church – loved the designs (Djuric, 1932; Serbian

Patriarch, 1932). The positive reactions by the patron stood the test of time. When the construction of the Church resumed in 1985-86 – after it had been interrupted by the Second World War and the dominant ideological position of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for decades – the designs by Nestorovic and Deroko were modified only slightly.<sup>2</sup> The building remains to this day one of the most imposing structures in Belgrade, and perhaps the grandest building erected for the Serbian Orthodox Church. Deroko noted that two guiding principles were followed in designs for the Church of Saint Sava – the imperative of functionality of planning, and the monumentality of space and form (Deroko, *Vreme*, 1933). Looking back at the start of construction, Deroko commented on the challenges of designing a functional space for 10.000 people, which was done with reference to the *Architects' Data*, the seminal handbook by Ernst Neufert. Deroko also noted information about the thirty meter diameter of the dome, making an obviously important comparison with the dome of St. Sophia in Constantinople. Although the size is not necessarily associated with monumentality in Deroko's opinion, the complete appearance and size of the St. Sava's church obviously were of utmost importance (Deroko, 1987; 2014). Responding to the 1932 criticism, Deroko asserted that the Modernist approach, with their demands of reductionist forms made of steel, concrete and glass, could not be even considered in relation to design of a monumental Orthodox church. Insisting that the rich tradition of sacred architecture must be taken into account when designing a building such as Saint Sava's Church, Deroko remained loyal to the idea of architectural purpose (Deroko, *Vreme*, 1932; Deroko, 1983, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> When the building of the church continued in 1985-86, most of its already accepted concept stayed the same; its architecture can be said to be from the years when the project was first approved and when the construction began. The decision to resume the construction of the church did not revive the debate of the 1930s.



**Figure 4.** Nestorovic and Deroko, Saint Sava Church, final joint project (Jovanovic, Z. (1991). *Aleksandar Deroko*. Beograd: RZZZSK, p. 67).

## Conclusion

Deroko's approach to architectural history – and design – was forged during the wanderings across the wilderness of Serbia. The ecstatic experience of past monuments, shared with his most trusted companion, the poet Rastko Petrovic, resulted in a special bond with architectural past. Rastko was inspired by ancient Slavic mythology, and his romantic visions of the history influenced Deroko. Deroko approached the history of architecture with a belief that it is possible to accumulate knowledge of the elements of good design. According to Deroko, there was much to be learned from past architectural experience. Deroko continually insisted that history should serve as a source of inspiration – not imitation, rejecting the notion of ideal reconstruction. He was interested in discovering the way anonymous builders of the past approached the process of design – how they understood the basic concepts of function, space, architectural details and the way they were modelled. Deroko passionately explored the formal qualities of historic buildings, trying to decipher their mutual influences and further transpositions.

A specific attitude toward history and historical periods, as well as the idea of the "spirit of the times" was a common thread in the writings and work of Aleksandar Deroko. It seems that Deroko did not believe in the idea that an architect, and an artist in general, should strive to an ideal progress, nor work under the direct command of "his time". He deeply believed in constant transformation of architecture, architectural elements and its details, independently of the previous ideas. However, these ideas were always present, since the beginning of this world, because humans simply learn from each other, correcting old mistakes and making new ones for next generations to correct. The idea that human nature can change so profoundly and transform over time that a man of one time is unrecognizable to a man from another time was obviously completely alien to him. In contrast to the majority of his contemporaries who accepted the Modernist ideas of a novel approach to architecture, while categorically rejecting any other, Deroko did not believe that any period can be simplified. Instead, he maintained that each epoch is characterised by a complex set of conflicting and harmonizing tendencies, acting simultaneously.

The rejection of ideal inspiration was visible in Deroko's devotion to functionalist design solutions. Deroko's design for the Church of Saint Sava supported the traditional principles of architecture, primarily related to the functionality and stability of buildings as a universal precondition for good architecture. Deroko did not recognize innovation as a virtue. Instead, he was interested in the pursuit of universal forms that are valid for all times. Deroko insisted on the lasting quality of architecture that goes beyond the lifetime of its builders. For Deroko it was important that architecture successfully meets the demands of construction in different political systems, cultures and geographic areas, standing the test of time as a "canon" that plays a real role in any culture and offers standards of excellence.

## Acknowledgments

This paper is part of an ongoing project devoted to Aleksandar Deroko at the Faculty of Architecture at Belgrade University, that includes preparation of the special issue of SAJ (Serbian Architectural Journal), expected to be published in 2018. I would like to express my gratitude to Branko Mitrovic for initiating my interest in the problems presented in this paper, and the original stimulus to write about Deroko. We should like to express our gratitude to Graeme McConchie for his help with the written English of the article.

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