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Socialist and Modernist Ideology in the Synthesis of Yugoslav Architecture and Art—The Case of *Kockica*

Abstract: The former Building of Socio-Political Organizations in Zagreb, now housing the Ministries of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, popularly known as *Kockica*, is analyzed as a case in which the synthesis of architecture and art became an aesthetic and spatial expression of socialist modernism in Yugoslavia. Designed by Ivan Vitić between 1961 and 1968, *Kockica* emerged within a broader cultural and political context shaped by self-managing socialism, cultural modernization, and the search for a modern representative language distinct from both the Soviet socialist realism and Western capitalist iconography. The article combines historical-interpretive analysis with an ideologically critical reading of institutional space, artistic commissions and spatial experience, reflecting the evolving social and ideological paradigms that shaped Yugoslav architecture and cultural policy during the 1960s. Its main hypothesis is that the integration of architecture, visual and applied arts, design and sculpture in *Kockica* should not be understood as decorative enrichment but as a regulatory and representational apparatus through which the ideology of socialist modernization was articulated spatially and sensorially. Special attention is given to the artworks integrated into the interior, regarded as constitutive elements of a visual language of modernity, progress, and cultural emancipation. *Kockica* appears not merely as a modernist administrative building but as a cultural and ideological artefact in which architecture and art function as a unified system of representation, while its meanings continue to be transformed in the post-Yugoslav context.

Keywords: ideology; synthesis of art and architecture; socialist modernism; *Kockica*; Zagreb; Yugoslavia.

Introduction

During the 1950s and 1960s in socialist Yugoslavia, architecture and art became central to the broader project of state modernization and to the formation of a recognizable visual identity for its society. Following the adoption of the Informbiro Resolution in 1948 and the development of self-managing socialism, Yugoslavia's cultural policy was directed toward affirming a contemporary artistic language, technological innovations, and modernist spatial and architectural ideas to articulate the ideas of progress, emancipation, and the rational organization of socialist society. Modernism

in Yugoslavia should not be understood solely as an architectural style or as the formal reception of the International style but rather as a broader cultural and political process through which the state sought to distinguish itself from both the Soviet socialist realism and Western capitalist iconography.¹ In this process, art gained prominence as a vital aspect of social life, a space where political ideas were communicated through aesthetically transformed forms, thereby influencing the symbolic economy of the socialist state. The architecture of new public institutions ceased to be merely a neutral technical and bureaucratic framework and became a symbolic apparatus that silently and indirectly encoded the state's political, social, and ideological values.

Within this evolving spatial context, one of the most significant examples of Yugoslav modernist architecture from the 1960s appeared: the former Building of the Socio-Political Organizations in Zagreb, now housing the Ministries of the Government of the Republic of Croatia popularly known as *Kockica*, designed by architect Ivan Vitić following the 1961 competition. The architecture of the building unites the formal discipline of modernist expression, constructive clarity, and technical innovations, and a complex program of original artworks integrated into the interior. Its strictly modulated façade grid, aluminum brise-soleils, and clear organization of public, semi-public, and administrative zones established an aesthetic and functional model of socialist modernism.² *Kockica* is not merely an administrative building; it is a carefully composed spatial apparatus that visually articulates a new image of the socialist state: rational, technologically advanced, culturally emancipated, and oriented towards modernity.

The artworks integrated into the interior of *Kockica*, including the murals by Edo Murtić and Zlatko Prica, the relief and sculptural works by Stevan Luketić, the tapestries of Jagoda Buić, the sculptures of Dušan Džamonja, and Raul Goldoni's glass compositions, are not approached as decorative features but as essential parts of the aesthetic and ideological narrative of the space. As Patricia Počanić notes, commissions and acquisitions of artworks for public institutions in Croatia during the 1950s and 1960s were part of a systematically organized cultural policy mechanism, in which the selection of artists was based on a combination of aesthetic criteria, modernist innovations, and political suitability.³ Artists involved in the interior artworks of *Kockica* were affiliated with or influenced by the postwar modernist avant-garde EXAT 51 and the New Tendencies movement, key institutions in the art scene, and they also carried cultural legitimacy through biographies linked to the partisan experience or institutional roles. This demonstrates that the synthesis of art and architecture served a dual cultural-political purpose: aesthetic and ideological. Consequently, the selection of artworks and artists was not solely aesthetic but also politically motivated, aligning with the cultural policy mechanisms behind *Kockica*, which represent

¹ Vladimir Kulić et al., *Modernism In-Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia* (Jovis Verlag, 2012), 32–33.

² Maroje Mrduljaš, "Kockica," *Arhitektura* 54, no. 217 (2005): 140–42.

³ Patricia Počanić, "Narudžbe i otkupi umjetničkih djela za interijere javnih institucija u Hrvatskoj 1950-ih i 1960-ih," *Peristil* 62 (2019): 179–201.

a political economy of modernism.⁴ The applied aesthetic standards reflect not only the artistic taste of the period but also the ideological aspirations of the state.

Kockica is analyzed not only as an architectural work, but also as a complex cultural-political artefact in which modernist aesthetics, state cultural policy, and the ideology of socialist development intertwine, a system of representation in which architecture becomes an apparatus of ideological mediation and the sensory presentation of power. The central research question is how the synthesis of architecture, visual and applied arts, design, and sculpture in *Kockica* operated as a spatial form of ideological representation within the Yugoslav socialist context. The main hypothesis is that the synthesis of art and architecture in this building represents a visual and spatial manifestation of the ideology of socialist modernization, in which aesthetic and political dimensions do not appear as separate spheres, but as mutually conditioned layers of a single ideological project. The analysis of such a space contributes to understanding how socialist Yugoslavia used art and architecture as instruments of cultural emancipation, political identity, and symbolic legitimation.

Theoretical framework: architecture, state, and party

In contemporary theory of architecture and space, the building is not read as a neutral material structure or merely a technical response to functional needs, but as an active agent in the production of social relations, political meanings, and regimes of perception. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that space is not naturally given, but produced through complex interactions between economic, political, and cultural practices.⁵ Space is constituted through the dialectical relation of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces, with architecture playing a key role in stabilizing and naturalizing dominant social orders.⁶ This triad of space views architecture as a normative system that organizes everyday practices, controls movement and the use of space, and produces patterns of behavior perceived as natural and self-evident. This perspective allows for the interpretation of public and institutional buildings in socialist Yugoslavia as spatial mechanisms of political representation. Their role extended beyond administration, shaping the state's experience as a rational and technologically advanced system. From this theoretical perspective, *Kockica* can be understood as a spatial apparatus of political rationality, in which institutional order is produced through architectural organization, movement, and visibility.

Michel Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* further deepens this theoretical understanding. The *dispositif*, as a heterogeneous assemblage of architectural forms, institutions, discourses, and normative mechanisms, enables space to be viewed as a technology of power that governs the subject's perception, movement, and behavior.⁷

⁴ Ljiljana Kolečnik, "Prilozi interpretaciji hrvatske umjetnosti 50-ih godina. Prikaz formativne faze odnosa moderne umjetnosti i socijalističke države," *Radovi Instituta povijesti umjetnosti* 29 (2005): 307–310.

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Blackwell, 1991), 26–34.

⁶ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 38–42.

⁷ Mišel Fuko, *Moć/Znanje: Odabrani spisi i razgovori 1972–1977* (Mediterranean Publishing, 2012), 64–65.

For Foucault, power operates not mainly repressively but productively: it organizes the field of possible actions, shapes regimes of visibility, and directs bodily practices. Architecture does not serve as a symbolic illustration of power but as its material condition, making it possible to view the interior of *Kockica* through the concept of *dispositif* as spatial arrangements that regulate movement, visibility, and hierarchies, thereby producing specific regimes of behavior.

Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses further illuminates architecture as a form of political practice. Ideology is reproduced not only through repressive means, but through institutions that operate in everyday life, shaping subjects who recognize themselves within the existing social order. In this sense, the architecture of institutions can be viewed as a significant material carrier of ideological influence and interpellation.⁸ Spatial configurations not only organize movement and spatial use but also shape how individuals relate to institutions and their symbolic authority. In the case of *Kockica*, the party and the state apparatus were not only housed within architecture but also represented and mediated through it. Architecture, artworks, materials, and spatial sequences formed a coordinated space in which the ideology of socialist modernization became perceptible as an institutional order.

By integrating Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, Foucault's analysis of the *dispositif*, and Althusser's concept of ideological apparatuses, public and institutional buildings such as *Kockica* are not merely sites of administrative and bureaucratic work, but rather spatial apparatuses through which the political rationality of socialist Yugoslavia is produced and sustained. Architecture, therefore, becomes the primary medium through which ideology is not merely communicated but actively enacted in the everyday experience of space.

Synthesis of art and architecture: idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*

The synthesis of art and architecture in socialist Yugoslavia developed as a key instrument of cultural policy in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the design of public buildings. This process cannot be understood as a decorative enrichment of architectural space, but as the conscious establishment of an aesthetic, spatial, and symbolic system in which art becomes a constitutive element of the state's political representation. The integration of original artworks into the architecture of public institutions enabled the production of a coherent cultural framework in which the ideas of modernity, rationality, and social progress were not only represented but perceptually and sensorially embedded in the space.

The concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, therefore, requires a specific modernist re-interpretation. Its broader genealogy includes Bauhaus debates on the integration of art, craft, design and architecture, as well as Walter Gropius's formulation of total architecture. However, in the Yugoslav context, synthesis did not function as a universal model of aesthetic unity. Rather, it was rearticulated within the specific conditions of

⁸ Luj Altiser, *Ideologija i državni ideološki aparati: beleške za istraživanje* (Karpas, 2009), 65–70.

socialist cultural policy, self-management, and the need to construct a new modern language and image of social emancipation. In contemporary art theory, Miško Šuvaković argues that *Gesamtkunstwerk* should not be understood as a utopian totality but rather a regulated relationship between artistic practices and social institutions, in which aesthetics operates within clearly defined cultural and political frameworks.⁹ Architecture, in this sense, does not appear as a neutral background for art, but as the spatial condition through which different artistic practices become part of a broader institutional order.

The Yugoslav model of the synthesis of art and architecture was strongly shaped by the EXAT 51 group, whose 1951 manifesto advocated abolishing hierarchical boundaries among architecture, painting, sculpture, and design. Denegri notes that the EXAT program was not exclusively an aesthetic experiment but a politically relevant platform that affirmed abstraction as the visual language of a contemporary, emancipated, and internationally oriented society.¹⁰ Within this framework, abstract art was legitimized as an appropriate form of expression for a socialist state aiming for modernity, as well as for promoting cultural distinction from both the Eastern bloc and the West. Abstraction did not withdraw from social reality; rather, it became one of the ways in which the relationship between artistic autonomy, modernization, and political representation could be negotiated. Yugoslav debates on synthesis were therefore not limited to the cooperation of separate artistic disciplines. They concerned the possibility of producing a different spatial and social order through the integration of architecture, visual arts, design, and urban thinking. This is particularly visible in Richter's understanding of synthesis, where the problem is not the additive inclusion of artworks in architectural space, but the production of an integrated spatial situation. In this sense, synthesis becomes both an artistic and ideological question: it proposes a model of space in which visual form, social organization, and modern life are mutually conditioned.¹¹

This distinction is important for the analysis of *Kockica*. The artworks integrated into its interior should not be read as later additions to an already completed architectural structure, but as elements that participate in the production of institutional space. The realization of this synthesis was supported institutionally through a system of art commissions and acquisitions for public buildings. Patricia Počanić analyses the processes of commissioning artworks in Croatia during the 1950s and 1960s as a component of a systematically organized cultural policy mechanism where aesthetic criteria were intertwined with ideological acceptability and the international visibility

⁹ Miško Šuvaković, "Umjetnost i ideologija," in *Umjetnost i ideologija: pedesete u podijeljenoj Europi*, ed. Ljiljana Kolešnik (Institut za povijest umjetnosti, 2004), 92–93.

¹⁰ Ješa Denegri, "Inside or Outside 'Socialist Modernism'? Radical Views on the Yugoslav Art Scene," in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991*, eds. Dubravka Đurić and Miško Šuvaković (MIT Press, 2003), 178–83.

¹¹ For Yugoslav debates on synthesis, see Branko Petrović, "Hoćemo li sintezu ili kompartmentalizam?," *Čovjek i prostor* 2, no. 34 (1955): 4–5; Tomislav Premerl, "Prostor i likovna sinteza," *Čovjek i prostor* 12, no. 145 (1965): 3, 8; and Vjenceslav Richter, *Sinturbanizam* (Mladost, 1964).

of artistic expression.¹² In this sense, art in public institutions does not operate independently but as part of a broader apparatus of political and cultural representation where artistic expression is employed to stabilize the modern socialist state. Jacques Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible helps to understand aesthetics as a political space that defines what is visible, perceptible, and legitimate within institutional environments.¹³ From this perspective, the synthesis of art and architecture in *Kockica* functions not as an illustration of political ideology but as its spatial and sensory expression. Aesthetic forms here generate political effects precisely because of their perceived autonomy and the absence of explicit propaganda, thereby shifting ideological meaning from the realm of narrative to spatial and perceptual experience.¹⁴

Case study: *Kockica* between ideology and memory

The Building of Socio-Political Organizations in Zagreb emerged at a time when architecture in socialist Yugoslavia became a key medium of political rationality. In the context of consolidating self-managing socialism and Yugoslavia's position between East and West, *Kockica* does not appear as a neutral administrative building but as a spatial apparatus for representing political ideology. This configuration can be understood more clearly in the context of Yugoslav "*unfinished modernisations*"¹⁵: here, modernisation is not merely an aesthetic project but also a pragmatic infrastructure for governance, development, and international positioning.¹⁶ Instead of relying on an imposing language of power, *Kockica* belongs to a modernist paradigm in which authority is stabilized through forms that appear rational, functional, and socially legible.¹⁷ Vitić's conception of modern representativeness is based on a conscious rejection of traditional patterns of political monumentality. Abstract geometry, the strict modulation of the façade, constructive clarity, and the organization of public, semi-public, and administrative zones produce a rationalized but not spectacular space of power.¹⁸ *Kockica* is thus a paradigmatic example of a 'cold' representation of ideology, in which political power and ideology are not explicitly demonstrated but are normalized through the day-to-day functioning of institutional space. Situated within a zone of intense postwar development in Zagreb, it is integrated into a network of traffic routes and urban flows, without symbolic separation from the city. This form of integration allows institutional power and ideology not to be experienced as

¹² Počanić, "Narudžbe i otkupi umjetničkih djela," 185–90.

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (Continuum, 2004), 56–60.

¹⁴ Šuvaković, "Umjetnost i ideologija," 92–93.

¹⁵ Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić, "Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism," in *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, ed. Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić (Croatian Architects' Association, 2012), 6–7.

¹⁶ Mrduljaš, "Kockica," 138.

¹⁷ Vladimir Kulić, "The Scope of Socialist Modernism: Architecture and State Representation in Postwar Yugoslavia," in *Sanctioning Modernism*, ed. Vladimir Kulić et al. (University of Texas Press, 2014), 37–45.

¹⁸ Mrduljaš, "Kockica," 142–44.

externally imposed but as a natural part of the everyday urban life. Political authority, therefore, is manifested not through distance and separation, but through a constant, yet unobtrusive, presence in the city space.

If the architecture of *Kockica* establishes the rational framework of socialist ideology, the interior is the space where that rationality is translated into sensory experience. The integration of artworks into the building's interior functions not only as decoration but also as a crucial element of a spatial system that shapes a specific regime of perception, movement, and institutional symbolism. In this context, the interior can be viewed as an ideological landscape where political ideology and power are not merely conveyed but experienced; where experience pertains not to an individual psychological state but to a publicly created atmosphere of institutional seriousness and control. The works of art within the interior demonstrate a pragmatic approach to postwar integration of architecture, design, and visual arts in municipal and republican commissions. Consequently, the interior was designed as an extension of the state discourse, not through slogans or iconography, but as a coordinated system of materials, light, color, and tactility.¹⁹ The spatial dramaturgy of the interior relies on carefully structured sequences of entry, movement, and stopping. Halls, corridors, and formal rooms are designed to evoke a sense of stability, control, and institutional seriousness. The choice of materials—stone, wood, metal, textile, and glass—fosters this effect not through decoration, but through the weight, durability, and tactile authority of surfaces. The materiality of space acts as a sensory reflection of political stability and continuity, in line with the modernist discourse of rationality and functionality. Simultaneously, interior materials also serve a pedagogical function: guiding movement, defining points for stopping and passage, and disciplining the user's body before any content is explicitly communicated.²⁰

The involvement of established artists and their works: Jagoda Buić, Dušan Džamonja, Raul Goldoni, Stevan Luketić, Edo Murtić, and Zlatko Prica, is part of a broader strategy in which abstract expression confirms the official stance on the freedom of artistic creation within an institution of the highest political significance. In this context, abstraction does not serve as an escape from politics, but as an institutionally approved language of modernity through which both cultural policy and the very system of power are legitimized.²¹ Murtić's interventions in enamel and mosaic are spread across several locations: the fountain on the plateau, the mosaic in the entrance vestibule, and the painted ceiling of the restaurant. They do not disrupt the functionalist ambiance but channel it through controlled chromatic energy. In the context of *Kockica*, such liveliness does not suggest privacy but rather indicates the stability of a system that permits intense colors without losing authority. Zlatko Prica's wall compositions act as a specific type of abstract wall—not pictures viewed from a distance but surfaces that alter the experience of movement along the architectural

¹⁹ Patricia Počanić, "Između ideje i realizacije: umjetnička djela u interijeru Kockice," *Život umjetnosti* 110 (2022): 126–27.

²⁰ Mrduljaš, "Kockica," 142–44.

²¹ Počanić, "Između ideje i realizacije," 110–25.

envelope. Stevan Luketić's reliefs in stainless steel and brass employ monumentality and reflection, shifting the 'weight' of ideology from iconography to the tactile and optical properties of material. Even when the material is 'heavy,' the relief treatment and the rhythm of modulation produce a dynamic stability within space. Dušan Džamonja's sculptural signature remains recognizable but is refracted through the architectural and spatial framework of collaboration: technical, constructive, and spatial requirements influence the form, without compromising the artist's consistency. Jagoda Buić's tapestry achieves monumentality through textile means: approximately seven meters high, predominantly red, and created by the vertical superposition of forms, producing an abstract 'totem' that imparts the interior with a sense of height without relying on vertical architectural pathos.

The key characteristic of this synthesis is its spatial integration where artworks are not treated as autonomous objects placed in space but as elements that actively participate in shaping it. Their positioning relative to architectural axes, communication routes, and gathering points influences the rhythm of movement and the hierarchy of space.²² The fusion of art and architecture in *Kockica* does not create spectacle but stabilizes the sensory experience of institutional space, where mosaic, enamel, metal, textile, glass, and design operate as a coordinated system. Abstract art, due to its lack of narrative iconography, becomes an effective language of institutional modernity: its formal apoliticality does not mean it lacks ideology; on the contrary, ideology shifts from the realm of discourse to that of sensory experience.²³

Following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the transformation of its political system, *Kockica* entered a new phase of existence in which its symbolic significance underwent a profound transformation. The building no longer serves as a central symbol of political representation but as part of the administrative and bureaucratic infrastructure of the modern state. This change does not remove the ideological layers embedded in the architecture and its interior but makes them layered and often conflicting: what was once designed as an obvious framework of legitimacy now becomes a subject of negotiation, amnesia, selective memory, and cultural reinterpretation.

In the contemporary context, *Kockica* functions as an architectural palimpsest. Spatial arrangements, materials, and artworks that once symbolized institutional legitimacy are now interpreted from a distance, through experiences of transition, depoliticization, and routine institutional practices. Artworks that were once active elements of representation now serve as archival traces of the political and aesthetic paradigms of socialist modernism. Their abstract forms allow reinterpretation and detachment but also raise questions about the contemporary understanding and social significance of such heritage. Furthermore, the fact that *Kockica* was one of the buildings of greatest political importance in Croatia makes its interior particularly sensitive: what was once justified as the freedom of artistic expression is now often viewed either as neutralized aesthetics or as burdened heritage, depending on the observer's ideological stance. This transformation highlights the broader issue of the

²² Sanja Horvatinčić, "Pogled iznutra o (ne)mogućoj sintezi Kockice," *ORIS* 110 (2018): 134–48.

²³ Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 56–60.

relationship to modernist heritage in the post-Yugoslav space. Architecture that once served as an apparatus of political rationality now becomes a site of negotiation between memory and forgetting, between aesthetic appreciation and ideological burden.²⁴ *Kockica* does not represent a fixed monument to the past but rather a dynamic field of interpretation in which history, institutional practice, and contemporary cultural discourses intertwine.

Concluding remarks: synthesis of architecture and art as mirror of ideology

The analysis of *Kockica* shows that the synthesis of architecture and art in socialist Yugoslavia was not just a secondary aesthetic phenomenon, but a key part of the process of cultural modernization and a symbolic display of political power. *Kockica* serves as a paradigmatic space in which architectural logic, artistic modernity, and the ideological goals of socialist progress do not merely coexist but are closely linked. Its significance lies not only in its status as an example of Yugoslav modernism, but also in its function as a spatial apparatus through which the ideology of socialist modernization was rendered perceptible.

Ivan Vitić's architectural language, grounded in modernist geometry, formal discipline, and the intentional absence of monumental iconography, enabled power to be naturalized through everyday spatial practice rather than displayed through spectacle. The works of Murtić, Prica, Luketić, Buić, Džamonja, and Goldoni do not serve as autonomous aesthetic objects; they are essential parts of the institutional framework. Their abstraction, materiality, and positioning within the interior produced a visual language that was simultaneously internationally legible and ideologically impactful. The political influence was achieved precisely through the seemingly apolitical nature of abstraction: ideology was shifted from the sphere of discourse into the realm of sensory experience, becoming part of perception, movement, and inhabitation.

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the transformation of the political system, *Kockica* entered a new phase of existence. What was once designed as a self-evident framework of legitimacy became a subject of selective memory, negotiation, and critical reinterpretation. The building does not represent a stable monument to the past but a dynamic field of interpretation in which different temporal and ideological layers intertwine. *Kockica* thus demonstrates that the synthesis of art and architecture within the Yugoslav socialist context cannot be reduced to a question of style or aesthetic program. It represents a form of socialist aestheticism in which aesthetic coherence serves as the symbolic capital of a social project. In this sense, the building remains relevant not as a completed modernist artefact but as an open interpretive framework, a place where socialist ideology is not only represented but, through historical ruptures and contemporary critical readings, continuously transformed and re-examined.

²⁴ Tihana Hrastar and Mia Roth-Čerina, "Rooting Art-Based Interdisciplinary Practice," *Prostor* 31, no. 2 (2023): 182–86.

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