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Bogdan Bogdanović, Builder of Illusions

Comprehending distinctiveness of Bogdan Bogdanović, the architect, has to start with the following question: who is actually Bogdan Bogdanović?

He is an architect who hasn't built houses. He has given shape to a series of sculptures, without being a sculptor.

Bogdanović has written literary essays, without being a writer of literature. He has written philosophical pieces in architectonics, without being a philosopher. Bogdanović has been writing about history of architecture and about urban sociology without being an art historian, or a sociologist either. Bogdanović was a mayor of the capital of Yugoslavia, and yet, he was not a Party member. Bogdanović's writings contain social criticism, and yet, he is not a politician. So, who is actually Bogdanović?

A starting point in finding the answer rests in Bogdanović's distinctive intimate ambiance downtown Belgrade, where he lived in the closest vicinity of Zvezda – a Belgrade square, and a very aggressive traffic knot. Bogdanović loved the city: he loved listening how it pulsates and cherished its absorbing beauty and its vivacity. For that reason, he was striving to live in the very heart of the city, however distressed that heart was by aggressive traffic along its arteries. His apartment in a building from the beginning of the XX century was customized to fit the living requirements of a respected citizen, a scientist and a professor. Spacious living areas were looking towards the street façade and were linked in a baroque manner with the main entrance. The windows were made according to the then standard: they had double casements, with some thirty centimeters of empty space in between. Mentioning of these apparently irrelevant details, however, contains a significant message: the outer casement structure was paneled from the inside with some kind of a board form, whereas the space in between the outer part of the casing and the inner window panes was filled in with assorted dry boughs and branches, bundles of reed, withered flowers and stuffed ducks. This symbolically integrated the milieu of the Danube and the Sava river islets into the intimacy of his home. By living a city life in this captivating isolation, Bogdanović formed an ambiance of peace of mind, opening space for true contemplation, for meditation and enlightenment, for creative thinking. The bookshelves overfilled with books and abundant boxes with slides have opened up a view into the entire world, while a moderate study corner with armchairs for guests contained Bogdanović's knowledge, which was likewise opened to the entire world. I was blessed to get to comprehend Bogdanović's distinctiveness from one of his armchairs for guests, which perhaps enables me to provide answers to at least some of above questions concerning architecture and urbanism.

Bogdanović is an architect by education. His comprehension of an architect is based on the antique view-of-life: an architect is a builder of illusions. Bogdanović pointed to the fact that an architect was also a stage-designer, and offered the following clarification of who an *'architecton'* actually was: *"If the Greeks deemed it required to name a skill - which they brilliantly knew and by using it they created massive master pieces – with a word containing so many meanings, than we should not find any reason to simplify and diminish that word nowadays, nor should we forget what does it offer to us in terms of building houses, cities and building of illusions – both inside the cities, about them and about us."* This is an allusion to an illusion of the entire profession, which considers itself capable of fulfilling a calling to create a creditable ecumenical ambiance, regardless of all misplaced efforts.

Therefore, Bogdanović was not merely an architect – he was an architect of illusion pertaining to a hard-to-find mystical power of architectonics in its effort to create a happy mankind.

The answer how that architectonics was imagined, Bogdanovic picturesquely described:

*“Historical city on a very wide scale in many directions fits in harmony with the rich world of forms that exist around him. But to reach such a harmony - it was not an easy job. Just look, for example, somewhere in Dalmatia, as well as how many inventions, the inventions of all the old towns, the old architectural groups, how did an old master cope with a basic question: how to incorporate elementary stereometry to of architecture to fit into the overall architecture of the city? How do material, color, crystalline mass urban structures fit into the landscape? And then, of course, how to supplement one with each other in a noble way?”*

It is noble thinking in accordance with the current theses about biomorphic architecture and agro-polis, with theses that negate a concrete desert of megalopolis, and slowly crawl to the judgement of necropolis. Bogdan Bogdanović, the architect, uses the historical truth and wisdom as a catalyst for a new harmony.

The harmony just mentioned Bogdanović did not find even in the city he was a mayor of:

*“How many times I have said so far that the city, for me, is the real city only if there is a historical personality, a psychological profile, a character, an appearance, its way of behavior and dealings with the outside world. Belgrade ... I am still reading it, but am close to finish the reading it as a good, old tattered book that has been at my hand since childhood, and where is always something added, scribbled, redesigned, although the book is still the same one. And so, I read it. I read the street facade read, read people, read human moods. I read Zemun, too, as beautiful and beloved book on the shelf of my imagination, where there is another book also called New Belgrade, which, unfortunately, and only when I have to, leaf through with the boredom as if it was a phone book.”*

It is not only about Belgrade – it is about the appearance of alienated contemporary city of all the parts of the Earth. Of course, this picturesque association is not futile: it warns, it is benevolent and approachable. At least it is not futile for the builders of illusions.

This Bogdanović's pessimism we need to complement with his understanding of the city, primarily the EU city. After he listed those precious identities, he concludes:

*“It's hard to deny that in today's world there is still a mysterious kinship among these extraordinary cities that are generously offering themselves to each other and giving gifts of the wisdom and beauty of wisdom - the only power, the only power of the present time, which is not being reduced while consumed, but it is only growing.”*

This Bogdanović's statement is possible to decipher with a simple example. Mysterious and attractive beauty of Venice is a constant flow of energy that does not diminish when being consumed: on the contrary, in time the energy is growing and the city of Venice is becoming more and more profitable market product, but, at the same time, also bigger and bigger inspiration and location of creative identity. The city presents its wisdom of existence, and the finding of that wisdom is a duty of the builders of illusions.

While appreciating the city in that respect, Bogdanović exposes a very interesting idea: he thinks about the future of Europe, as about the future of the cities, and not nations and great states. Ancient polis, renaissance cities-states of Italy or Germany are convincing proofs of the success of this urban model: the wells of the European civilizations, art, philosophy, science and even technology are cities and not nations. The question remains open whether this simple truth marks the nostalgia of the past or the

vision of the future. Bogdanović's historical model is consumed in the processes of the European reality, but that is not the proof that the model is without perspective. At least it is not for the builders of illusions.

In some moments of nostalgia and exile sorrow, Bogdanović summed up his ideas and innumerable drawings:

*“Probably for my personal reassurance I was trying in my essays, in words and picture, to look for hidden metaphors of the city, the still existing particles in the cosmos in it. I pulled them and jealously collected and mostly unsafely, unconvincingly, I was trying to tie them into meaningful graphs and to deny their long duration.”*

This auto-critical concluding remark is anyhow the feature of the conscientious thinker who can always succumb to the eternal doubt, considering that Bogdanović's tracing of the metaphor of the city forms precious knowledge for any true builder of illusions.

To understand completely the ego of BB, it is necessary to read the continuance of the previous passage:

*“And, then, as you know, just in my little area of the former world disaster came. The toy called the city was cruelly broken, and with that my and my play lost life any, and even portable meaning. For what could be still learnt, with a broken "cognitive model" ? Which is the kind of ornament and the World discerning behind the ruins of Vukovar, Sarajevo, Mostar?”*

It is a quote from the notes from 1994, published in Zagreb in 2001, in the book ‘The City and the Future’. I had a great honor to promote that book and recover the memories of the beautiful oeuvre of Bogdanović's thoughts about the City. That oeuvre is a miraculous faith in the city as a living organism created by a human, open to human and acting as a condition of existence of human. That faith in human has become true – Vukovar, Sarajevo, Mostar have resurrected from the ashes as the ancient Phoenix bird – the bird in whose reincarnation Bogdanović had immense faith in. Believed in as a grand builder of illusion.

This liveliness of the city Bogdanović expressed in a simple sentence: The City – a great animal. In the context with the quoted sentence he meditated the play with the thesis that *the play is a thought, and the thought is a happening*. And with that he retold his hidden story about the city: how to conceptualize that dreamed city of the happiness of the mankind and the beauty of living. And here is that truth:

*Where people do not know how to play out, they cannot to think their cities and their spaces. There is no possibility for a real city to happen...*

Builders of illusions, play (with) the city – that is the message of BB.