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Jelisaveta Načić: The First Serbian Female Architect

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In the entire history of architecture, few female architects are recognized by name. Jelisaveta Načić (1878–1955), the first woman architect in Serbia, is among these select few. Upon acquiring her degree in architecture from the Great School (Visoka Škola) in Belgrade in 1900, Načić worked on several municipal buildings in Belgrade and elsewhere, some of which have remained architectural landmarks in Serbia to the present day. Načić worked on the twentieth-century urban re-design for the so-called “Big Kalemegdan” in Belgrade and designed King Peter I Elementary School in Belgrade (1905–18). Jelisaveta Načić was also engaged in the design and execution of several ecclesiastical buildings, such as the churches of St. Alexander Nevsky in Belgrade (1909–30) and St. Archangel Michael above Štimlje in Kosovo (1920–22). Her design for the mausoleum of the Karadorđević dynasty at the church of St. George at Oplenac in Topola, was selected in a national competition in 1903. Načić’s résumé also includes a number of private houses and apartment buildings. Among these are the residences of Mr. Marko Marković, at 45a Gospodar Jovanova Street in Belgrade; Colonel Božidar Krstić’s residential buildings at 2 Šafarikova Street and at 3 Đure Daničića, both built in Belgrade in 1904; and the first comfortable apartments built for the working-class in the Balkans, at Radnička Street in Dorćol in Belgrade (1911), to name just a few.

Apart from a short overview of Jelisaveta Načić’s somewhat unusual private and professional life, which was presented in *Godišnjak Muzeja grada Beograda* by Milan S. Minić in 1956,¹ Načić’s architectural projects and their place within Serbian architectural development since 1900 are generally understudied and have yet to be adequately addressed by architectural historians. Without offering an extensive survey of the subject, this paper will focus on some aspects of Načić’s life that are virtually unknown to the English-speaking world. Focusing on her training and architectural opus, while shedding light on her personality, the paper will attempt to partly contextualize

¹ Milan S. Minić, “Prva Beogradjanka arhitekt—Jelisaveta Načić,” *Godišnjak Muzeja grada Beograda* III (1956): 451–57.

Jelisaveta Načić and her accomplishments within Serbian architecture of the early twentieth century.

Jelisaveta Načić was born in 1878 in Belgrade, Serbia. In 1896 she enrolled in the Technical School of the University of Belgrade, known at that time as the Great School. In 1900 she graduated with a degree in architecture as the first Serbian woman architect. She was the first woman ever to enter the Belgrade Technical School. It is worth noting that she was also among the first architects to graduate from the Great School.

Before the 1900s, artistically gifted young men who had previously earned engineering degrees in Belgrade were sent to study architecture abroad through grants from the young Serbian state; they started their careers upon their return to the homeland. The Hattısharif Decree of 1830 issued by the Ottoman *Sublime Porte* certified that internal self-government was granted to Serbia, which had been under Turkish rule for several centuries. The cultural renewal that followed the emergence of Serbia as a sovereign state in 1830 steered the country away from Turkey and its feudal political system. The political reorganization of the country, based on West European principles, influenced the development of architecture during the second half of the nineteenth century as well. Many architects were sent to study in Vienna, Karlsruhe, Zurich, and other Central European centers, where they became familiar with non-Ottoman architectural models. The first Serbian architect to work in Belgrade was Konstantin Radošević, who came to Belgrade in 1842.²

The international recognition of Serbia as an independent state at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 paved the way for the “Europeanization” of architectural models. The entire concept of Serbian architecture after the 1870s was marked by liberal cultural nationalism and the statehood development of the Kingdom of Serbia, which in turn was part of the wider European romantic movement, similar to the gothic revival in Western Europe.³ Due to an extensive and systematic study of Serbian medieval heritage dating from before the Turkish conquest (1457)—conducted by Dragutin Milutinović (1840–1900) and Mihailo Valtrović (1839–1915) under the auspices of the Serbian Learned Society (*Srpsko Učeno Društvo*) in the 1870s and 1880s—a number of architectural designs in the period from 1900 to the 1930 (especially those of ecclesiastic buildings) were based on Morava school church designs. They were also set into an urban environment in the construction that followed con-

² Branko Vujović, *Beograd u prošlosti i sadašnjosti* (Belgrade: Draganić, 1994), 54–55.

³ For specific details see Aleksander Kadijević, *Jedan vek traženja nacionalnog stila u srpskoj arhitekturi (sredina XIX—sredina XX veka)* (Belgrade: Građevinska knjiga, 1997), passim. Also Branislav Pantelić, “Nationalism and Architecture: The Creation of a National Style in Serbian Architecture and Its Political Implications,” *JSAH* (March 1997): 16–41.

temporary Central European patterns.⁴ The special features of these Belgrade architectural creations from the first half of the twentieth century grew in importance since they followed by no more than fifty years the first regulatory plan that would transform Belgrade from an Ottoman town into European urban environment. From 1867 to 1887 the first plan for Belgrade made after West European models was carried out by Emilijan Josimović (1823–97), a professor at the Great School and the first Serbian urban planner.⁵

There is no record of modern architectural creations by Serbian architects until the 1870s, when the first generation of Serbian-born architects returned from their studies abroad to establish their practice and educate the first generation of architects in Serbia. A number of them attained positions in the Ministry of Buildings (Ministarstvo Građevina) and in the Department of Architecture of the Great School.⁶ Therefore, at the age of 22, Jelisaveta Načić was not only the first female architect in Serbia but also one of the first architects with a degree from the Architectural Department of the University of Belgrade.

Upon graduation in 1900, Načić started her career as a draftsman in the Ministry of Buildings. Two years later she passed the required qualifying state exam and was appointed as the city architect of Belgrade. At that time, it was customary that only those who had finished obligatory military service could get a position in a state office. Since women did not serve in the army, her appointment set a precedent.⁷ Because of the extensiveness and significance of her work, Načić acquired the role of city architect for practical purposes, although this was not reflected in her title.⁸

The first project by Jelisaveta Načić was the design for the Small Kalemegdan in Belgrade after the preliminary drawings made by her former professor, Dimitrije T. Leko (1863–1914). At the same time, she got the opportunity to design the monumental staircase and fountain in the so-called “Big Kalemegdan.” The stairs on the access to the river Sava, made of green stone and done in the Baroque style, are still in existence. Unfortunately, the fence with flower vases along the main promenade executed in the Secession style did not survive World War I.⁹

⁴ Kadijević 32–35.

⁵ Vujović, *Beograd u prošlosti i sadašnjosti*, 54–55.

⁶ Zoran Manević et al. eds, *Srpska arhitektura 1900–1970* (Belgrade: Muzej savremene umetnosti, 1972), 132.

⁷ Minić, 451–57.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

In 1905–06 Načić designed her masterwork—King Peter I Elementary School, which is located at 7 King Peter Street, in the vicinity of the Cathedral of St. Michael (1845) in the heart of Old Belgrade.¹⁰ The school remains one of the most important and successful examples of Serbian public architecture at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was erected east of the church, on the foundations of an older building constructed as a school in 1826.¹¹ Since 1846, the old building had served as the first Belgrade library. In 1905, after the Decree of City Hall, work on the new school building designed by Načić started. Built in the Neo-Renaissance style, the school is a two-story corner building with the main entrance turned towards the intersection and opened towards the urban fabric. The main façade is monumental, with rich plastic decoration around the arched door and windows on the first story, and with a balustrade-like roof finishing.¹² The design was done under the influence of Professor Dragutin Đorđević (1866–1933), with whom Načić studied in Belgrade.¹³ Therefore, it is not by chance that the architectural idiom of the King Peter I School is closely related to the school designs for Valjevo Gymnasium (1905) and the Third Belgrade Gymnasium (1906), done by Đorđević.¹⁴ To the best of my knowledge, there are no known explicit references to the design process and building construction of King Peter I School, but according to written reports, the first students entered the school in 1918, immediately after World War I. In 1923, the first basketball game in Belgrade took place in its schoolyard.¹⁵ The school has changed its name seven times during its history. (It was most often called King Peter I School, which was its name from 1925 until 1945, and from 1993 on.) For forty years, from 1952 to 1993, it was known as Braća Ribar Elementary School.¹⁶

Another important design by Jelisaveta Načić is the parish church St. Alexander Nevsky, known as the Dorćol Church. During the Serbian-Turkish War (1876–78), a Russian volunteer corps led by General Michael Grigorovich Chernayev brought a mobile tent church dedicated to the Russian prince St. Alexander Nevsky. After the war, the tent church was given to the inhabitants of the Dorćol quarter in Belgrade. In 1877 a modest church dedi-

¹⁰ On the Belgrade Cathedral, see Branko Vujović, *Saborna crkva u Beogradu* (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1996), *passim*.

¹¹ Vujović, *Beograd u prošlosti i sadašnjosti*, 182.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Minić, 451–57.

¹⁴ Manević, 132.

¹⁵ Zorica Guzina, *Tajne Beograda* (Belgrade: Skupština grada Beograda, Sekretarijat za informisanje, 2001), 247–48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

cated to St. Alexander Nevsky was erected at the corner of Dušanova, Dubrovačka, and Skenderbegova Streets. Beginning in 1891 the tent was moved from one place to another¹⁷ and the municipal authorities made plans for a new, bigger church to be built. Jelisaveta Načić designed the new church at the intersection of Dušanova, Dositejeva, Francuska, Skenderbegova, and Radnička (today known as Đure Đakovića) Streets. The preparation for the building of the present church started in 1909 and construction began in 1912. However, the process of building was slow due to the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and World War I. Before the wars, only the stone skirting and the four monolithic granite piers for the main dome were erected. The church was finished in 1928–29 and consecrated in 1930.¹⁸ It follows the triconch plan with apses that are semicircular in the interior and three-sided on the exterior. Along with the typical plan, the rich architectural polychromatic façade decoration recalls late medieval churches that belong to the so-called Morava School, whose idiom has been traditionally accepted as specific to the Serbian local milieu.¹⁹

Using a similar architectural idiom, Načić designed the small church of St. Archangel Michael, built on a hill above Štimlje in Kosovo Polje. The church was built between 1920 and 1922 from Načić's designs on the foundations of an older church. Naka Spasić, the president of the Knjeginja Ljubica Association, was the patron of the church, which commemorated Serbian soldiers who had died during World War I.²⁰ Next to the church was an orphanage for girls. The church was thoroughly renovated in 1977. Unfortunately, during the war of 1999, the church was desecrated and set on fire by Kosovo Albanians, while its frescoes were destroyed in the presence of the British KFOR troops.²¹

Among eighteen participants in the national competition for the mausoleum of the Karađorđević dynasty at the church of St. George at Oplenac in Topola in 1903, Načić's design was selected by the competition committee.²²

¹⁷ From 1891 to 1894 the church was in the Cathedral, from 1894 to 1902 in St. Sava's Center, from 1902 to 1915 in a school in Dorćol, from 1915 to 1920 in the Cathedral, and from 1920 to 1930 in a school in Dorćol.

¹⁸ Vujović, *Beograd u prošlosti i sadašnjosti*, 172–73.

¹⁹ The term "L'école de Morava" was coined by Gabriel Millet, *L'ancien art serbe: Les églises* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1919), ch. 3, 152ff. Since 1919 the term has been used in architectural history for the architectural accomplishments in both medieval and early modern Serbia, although there are recent indications that the meaning and significance of such terminology deserve revising.

²⁰ Minić, 451–57.

²¹ Kosovo—Desecrated Monuments <http://www.kosovo.com/crucified/churches/ch71.html> (Accessed 08/2002)

²² Kadijević, 73.

A requirement of the competition was that the church be designed in the so-called Serbo-Byzantine style.²³ The ultimate realization of the church according to the designs of Kosta Jovanović reveals that by the beginning of the 1900s the majority of architects in Serbia were trained to build churches according to Byzantine and Serbian prototypes and followed their structural, formal, and decorative patterns consistently, which rationalized the adopted liturgical practice. Načić's design for the mausoleum was once again executed in a manner similar to her other churches. Apart from nationalistic aspirations that buildings designed in the Morava School idiom may have raised at the threshold of the twentieth century, Vojislav Ristić was the first architectural historian who related the centralized triconch plan and circular and square forms of Morava churches to the development of urban centers,²⁴ which indeed could be an adequate answer for the urban development in Serbia at the time.²⁵ Be that as it may, a proper architectural history of the period, which should deal with issues of specific anachronisms, such as the revival of the medieval idioms in twentieth-century Serbian and Balkan architecture, still remains to be written.²⁶

Jelisaveta Načić worked on residential architecture as well. The first comfortable working-class apartments built in the Balkans were constructed for the workers of the communal service in Belgrade in 1911. These were erected in Radnička Street in Dorćol (Belgrade) and were designed by Načić.²⁷ She was also engaged in the creation of several private residences. Only one of these has survived, and it can still be seen in Belgrade—the residence of Mr. Marko Marković, the former Belgrade bookseller, built at 45a Gospodar

²³ Posed by Millet and widely accepted by subsequent scholars, the generalized concept of the “Serbo-Byzantine Style” in architecture relates to a local emulation of Constantinopolitan models by Nemanjićs and their later noblemen during the late middle ages. See Millet, *L'ancien art serbe: Les églises*. However, the term is used for later architectural idioms as well. On the competition for the church at Oplenac and its requirements, see Miodrag Jovanović, *Oplenac: Hram svetog Djordja i mauzolej Karadjordjevića* (Topola: Centar za kulturu, 1989), 25–51.

²⁴ Vojislav Ristić, *Moravska arhitektura* (Kruševac: Narodni muzej, 1996), 55–56.

²⁵ Branislav Pantelić is of the opinion that the adoption of the Morava church model was due to extreme nationalistic aspirations. However, he does not provide an adequate explanation for why churches built by Nemanjićs, the first and most honored Serbian royal lineage that could recall a national past perhaps even more effectively, were not taken as a model. See Pantelić, 16–41.

²⁶ The pioneering work by Kadrijević, *Jedan vek traženja nacionalnog stila u srpskoj arhitekturi (sredina XIX—sredina XX veka)*, just touches upon them without going into a detailed survey on the subject matter.

²⁷ Minić, 451–57.

Jovanova Street, which dates from 1904.²⁸ The residence was built in the style of neo-Renaissance classicism that appealed to the taste of the contemporary Serbian prosperous middle class. Unfortunately for architectural historians, a duplex house, the residence of Colonel Božidar Krstić at the corner of 2 Šafarikova Street and 3 Đure Daničića Street, which was also built in the classicist style, was replaced by a skyscraper in the second half of the twentieth century.²⁹

Among the buildings built by Načić that were destroyed by wars or devastated by time is the hospital for tuberculosis patients in the Vračar quarter of Belgrade. This was the first hospital of this kind erected in Serbia. A brick factory in the Prokop quarter of Belgrade was also constructed from Načić's designs. Both structures were heavily damaged during World War I.³⁰

Ambitious and extensive work by Jelisaveta Načić was interrupted by World War I. During the Austrian occupation of Serbia, Načić worked predominately on repairs of ruined buildings in Belgrade. In 1916 she was arrested by Austrian soldiers and interned in the concentration camp Nežider in Hungary. In the camp she met Luka Lukaji, an Albanian intellectual and patriot, whom she married after the liberation in 1918. They lived in Skadar shortly after World War I, but in 1919 they were expelled by Italians who occupied Albania. Finally, in 1923, as political emigrants, they settled in Dubrovnik. Lukaji died in Dubrovnik the same year. Until 1916, when she was only thirty-eight, Načić was actively engaged in the architectural scene of Belgrade and Serbia. Unfortunately, the experiences of World War I and the concentration camp, as well as her marriage, disrupted her professional work. Upon moving to Dubrovnik, she devoted her life to her husband and their child. As an architect and a patriot, she was granted a pension by the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia shortly before her death.³¹

Jelisaveta Načić remains noteworthy as the first Serbian female architect, even though she worked actively for only twelve years before World War I. Being trained by the architects from the generation of the 1870s, Načić belongs to the first generation of Serbian architects whose historicizing architecture turned toward a search for a national statement in Serbian architecture as well as toward contemporary architectural developments. She created a number of valuable and significant architectural works in post-Ottoman Serbia. A number of buildings from her architectural opus outlived the destruction of

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ About details from the private life of Jelisaveta Načić, according to oral testimonies by her contemporaries Đura Bajalović and Joca Obradović, see Minić, 451–57.

the wars ravaging the Balkans for more than a century. Načić's work represents an important episode within modern architectural development in Serbia that establishes cultural ties with Central Europe. It certainly deserves to be studied in more detail in the future.