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## THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY HOUSE OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA AND THE SPACE IN FRONT OF IT AS A SYMBOL OF THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF POWER

### *Abstract:*

The National Assembly House of the Republic of Serbia, in Belgrade, is a monumental public building, which has, from the very beginning of its existence, represented basic political and cultural interests and preferences. It has remained the visual paradigm of Serbia's national course and sovereignty to this day. It has had great importance throughout its history. This paper deals with the use of the premises of the National Assembly and the image of the Assembly being developed in the state repository. In the service of various ideological determinants, the House of the National Assembly has been recognized as an architectural symbol that has often been conquered by the authorities. The aim of the paper is to show how the architectural symbol of the city becomes a visual indicator of power, i.e., a concrete indicator of the structure of gaining and losing power.

*Keywords:* National Assembly, ideology, space, spectacle, power, symbol

## ДОМ НАРОДНЕ СКУПШТИНЕ РЕПУБЛИКЕ СРБИЈЕ И ПРОСТОР ИСПРЕД ЊЕ КАО СИМБОЛ ВИЗУЕЛНЕ РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦИЈЕ МОЋИ

### *Сажетак:*

Дом Народне скупштине Републике Србије, у Београду, представља монументални јавни објекат, који је схваћен од почетка свог постојања као репрезент темељних политичких и културних опредељења. Остао је визуелна парадигма националног курса и суверенитета Србије до данас. Поседује велики значај у читавој својој историји. Рад се бави употребом простора Народне скупштине и слике скупштине која се развија у државном репозиторијуму. У служби различитих идеолошких одредница, Дом Народне скупштине је препознат као архитектонски симбол који је често освајан од стране власти. Циљ рада је да покаже како архитектонски симбол града постаје визуелни показатељ власти, односно конкретан показатељ структуре добијања и губљења моћи.

*Кључне ријечи:* Народна скупштина, идеологија, простор, спектакл, моћ, симбол

## 1. INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

The House of the National Assembly is a space permanently engraved with identity, a visual representative of different party systems, an architectural symbol that was originally allocated to the aristocracy, a symbol intended for the city, street, stage, and people.

Conceptualizing the Parliament building represented the most significant architectural task in the 19th century. It was set with the aim to have a dominant position in Belgrade's urban tissue, in a significant location in the city center. It is situated on a very vivid public space, bounded by Kosovska Street, Takovska, Nikola Pasic Square and Vljakovic Street, in the immediate vicinity of the Old and New Courts and the Palace Garden (today known as Pioneer Park), with which it forms a unique architectural and functional unit. It was built between 1907 and 1936. The history of its construction, with numerous interruptions and changes to the project and with the participation of the most important local architects of the first half of the 20th century, symbolically reflects the turbulent history of Serbia, the former Yugoslavian state and its parliamentary life. From the beginning of its existence, it was conceived as a symbol of parliamentarism and democracy, but it was much more accompanied by the shadow of the communist rule and then by the events that followed in the period of post-socialism and transition.

The National Assembly House is, above all, a representative of monumental architecture. The very course of construction of this magnificent representative of Serbian and Yugoslav culture reflected the time and events in the spheres of political, historical, cultural and artistic life. It was rightly proclaimed a cultural monument in 1984 and as such represents the pride of the city of Belgrade. In addition to its cultural and artistic role, it also has the ideological connotations of a society that was decisive in changing its ideology, and of today's society that emerged as a product of the changes that have taken place.

The physical form of a building can be interpreted as a symbol of the conflict of different ideological messages. Often, due to frequent changes in political frameworks, the silhouette of a building is difficult to relate to an event, and therefore events that have marked its history will be analyzed.

We can take its form as a mainstream of buildings used for political purposes. In its existence, it has changed various symbols of ideologies, becoming itself a symbol embedded in the layers of the collective memory of the people. Thus, the architectural form of the building can be remembered as a concrete indicator of power. This paper deals with the analysis of the structure of power, that is, the analysis of political events and the analysis of the symbols of the house.

## 2. THE HISTORY OF THE HOUSE OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY – THE SPACE IN WHICH POWER IS ESTABLISHED

The Assembly House is one of the most monumental buildings in Belgrade, built in the style of 20th century academicism. The idea of building a National Assembly House came into existence in the 19th century. The Ministry of Construction announced a call for the first project of the National Representative in 1892, created by the architect Konstantin A. Jovanovic, however that project was not realized, presumably due to a lack of funds. The formation of a large state (The Kingdom of Serbs Croats and Slovenes) also required a new project. The new project was created by the architect Jovan Ilkic. The foundation stone for the building was laid by King Peter I on August 27, 1907. The construction was interrupted by the First World War, and the works were resumed only in the third decade of the 20th century by Pavle Ilkic, an architect who worked according to the memory of his father's old plans [1:85]. The assembly was built until 1926 when construction works were stopped due to insufficient funds, and the next phase in construction began after the assassination of King Alexander I Karadjordjevic in 1934. At that time, the architect of the Russian imperial court and the academic Nikolai Krasnov was appointed the chief designer. According to his project, the interior of the Assembly was completed along with all the details. The whole building was completed and consecrated on October 18, 1936, and the first session in the new building was held on October 20 of the same year. (Fig. 1) At that time it already existed as the National Assembly of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia [2]. As for the content of the symbol of the National Assembly, Gordić states that the decoration of the building, the interior, the facade and the main entrance remains the largest artistic endeavor in our country. A large number of works of art were obtained through three open competitions. They accentuated the Yugoslav character, bringing national history and folklore through various artistic forms. He further states that there is great historical value in their joint work and the artistic achievement of the newly created state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, with the

assistance of Russian emigrants. The newly created works of art had the idea of unity in style, and were imbued with political character [3].

The building was used for three years, from the date of the first session until 1939, when it was dismissed. At the beginning of World War II, the building was used by the occupying German Military Command. The end of World War II brought about a change in political circumstances. Thus, the heraldic symbols and features of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia were removed and replaced with symbols of socialism [4:90].



Figure 1. *The Assembly House 1936.* (Source: <https://sr.m.wikipedia.org>)

### 3. A SYMBOL IN SPACE

The House of Commons, as we have already said, frequently changed its features, various symbols of ideology, such as “a dynamic palimpsest on which historical events and personalities are always re-written in their struggle for power, recognition and legitimacy [5:379].” It was this need to gain legitimacy that was critical to recognizing the building as a symbol in space. Each newly formed government sought to erase the past, or at least the memory of it, changing its adherents, emblems of power, dates of public holidays, street names – “in the same way crossing the paths of its power and the avenues of its authority,”[6:379] reflecting them on an architectural object, which no longer represents a mere blend of art, architecture, history, but rather hints at feelings. As described by the authors of "The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form" – “Just as Liechtenstein borrowed comic book techniques and characters to convey satire, sadness and irony rather than fierce adventure, so too can the language of architecture suggest sadness, irony, love, the state of humanity, happiness, or simply inner intent rather than the need to buy soap or the possibility of an orgy. [7:177]”. Interpreting and evaluating the symbolic content of this space, the National Assembly House and its plateau is a very challenging process. Its physical structure directed the flows of various manifestations, with its straight square and the plateau on which it was erected. The plateau in front of it has a vacant surface, which was later called the plateau because it lacks peripheral structures and serves as a base for the building for a more monumental approach. Part of the ambiance decoration of the building was a decorative fence with stylish candelabras, which was erected in 1937. (Fig. 2) The project, as well as the whole interior, was done by architect Nikolai Krasnov. The fence was located here until 1956, but it was removed during the construction of Marks and Engels Square (today Nikola Pasic Square). We can interpret the fence as unambiguous symbolism. In fact, it wasn't easy to approach the building until the mid-20th century. Next to the monumental staircase, in 1939, the sculptural group “Playing the Black Horse”, by sculptor Toma Rosandić [8:5], was set up. The fence was actually a visual barrier between the authorities and the people.

The disposition of the building forms an orientation in space, form - creates a perceptual representation, ornaments and symbols its identity. Its spatial form shows an articulation of knowledge and skill.

The Assembly was closely involved with the street in every event in which it participated. The street is in Lefebvre's vision, the factor that represents everyday life, the microcosm of the contemporary world. "The street? It is a meeting place, without which there are no other possible meetings in certain places (in cafes, theaters, various halls), [9:28]" here we become a scene, a spectator and sometimes an actor. Such theatricalization of the street as a space of spectacle stems from the fact that "all street events, celebrations, manifestations, demonstrations, create an extraordinary sense of community, stimulate people with an even greater engagement, participation. At the same time, these spectacles support a certain view of the city, its identity, its essence, which wants to impose itself as general and on the citizens themselves - participants of the event, but also those who live outside it"[10:175]. From this we can conclude that the Assembly space, as a scene space, allows one to adjust their own level and strength of personal experience and participation in events.



Figure 2. Part of the building was a decorative fence  
(Source:[http://beogradskonasledje.rs/kd/zavod/stari\\_grad/zgrada\\_narodne\\_skupstine.html](http://beogradskonasledje.rs/kd/zavod/stari_grad/zgrada_narodne_skupstine.html))

#### 4. SPACE - SEEING IS BELIEVING

In order to fully understand the role this house plays, in the representation of political power in the city, in addition to interpreting its form, it is necessary to analyze the causes as well as the events, that is, the links between it in the urban core of the city and the events.

It is the place where the Kingdom was abolished in favor of Marshal Josip Broz Tito, thus becoming a symbol of the state ideology of the new regime. From Tito, as the great demiurge of its people and the emanation of the state, until 2000, the space of the building was frequently changed. It had been appropriated by the regime for directing public events for the sake of its glorification, but also used by citizens, who created special kinds of spectacles in front of it. Whether it was a gathering, a protest, which contained the necessary dose of subversion and resistance, as a sign of distinct dissatisfaction of citizens. Creating a spectacle, often triggered by the regime's systematic efforts to bring the masses closer, the Assembly was the stage from which great acts of ideology were displayed.

Todorović sees these great works as "the principle of seeing is believing, in this case believing in the greatness, strength (and sometimes untouchability) of the authorities and the messages that the spectacle shows" [11:190]. In this way, the government encourages the liking and acceptance of political messages.

After Tito's death in 1980, the collective memory was linked to the image of the National Assembly with the cult of the communist rule, while later that image was replaced by numerous images of public protests that took place during the breakup of the state.

State incompleteness and frequent political storms in Serbia in the 1990s, showed that new circumstances could now completely change the function of these territories, and that which was once in the service of the government could become an instrument of the opposition [12:1]. That came true a couple of years later. Belgrade was at that time synonymous with the political stage, where events were often miserable and dramatic.

Events such as Tito's military parades, Tito's funeral, are events that seek to assert power in their representations. Another type of events are those where the social role involves open resistance, mockery of authority, and general dissatisfaction. The best example of such an event is October 5, 2000. These two periods best depict the National Assembly as a *pars pro toto*, which is why its space was the most desirable scenery in the political events and lives of statesmen and citizens.

#### 4.1. The premises of the National Assembly, the time of socialism - verification of power

The National Assembly became the main architectural symbol to support Tito's personal cult and the validity of the new regime. Its monumentality was accentuated by the dome, which rises above the central staircase, creating symbolism between the sacred and the secular-imperial. This symbolism of the dome was related to the centers of power in the world (St. Peter in Rome, St. Paul in London) until the creation of American state houses, which made a radical transformation, especially of the Washington Capitol, where the reading between terrestrial and celestial gains explicit affirmation of the secular rule [13:68]. The exterior of the building has become widely known throughout the country thanks to daily media coverage. On the other hand, the meetings held in it were never broadcast live, so it remained partly mysterious to the public, and its secret quarters hid the mechanisms of the communist rule. Undoubtedly, the image of the National Assembly remains etched in the collective memory of Tito's era for state spectacles, primarily military parades, held in front of the building that took place from 1950 to 1980. (Fig. 3) The major controversy of Tito's rule was his extraordinary ability to conduct complex international relations with countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain and in Third World countries. His ability and acceptance of his personality culminates, in addition to holding military parades, in two other historic events held in the assembly. One is the first session of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 and Tito's funeral in 1980 [14:70]. Thus, the building became the main stage in the most significant urban spectacle, which fully fitted into the image of Marshal Tito and his way of life. He did not like modernism. Tito did not like Central Committee building (The CC) because of the ideology he supported and the opposite ideology that the building presented. Tito reportedly entered CC only once, on the occasion of its grand opening. He made all the important decisions elsewhere. The CC itself is a controversial, tall, modernist tower, symbolizing power, and in fact we see a total absence of power in it. The building that represented the Communist Party, modeled on the architecture of the ideologically opposed capitalist system [15:274]. Therefore, Tito chose the Assembly for the visual verification of his rule in space, which was reminiscent of the urban setting of the Reichstag in Berlin. In both cases, the entrance area is dominated by a monumental staircase with a ramp, which stands out on the plateau.

In the parades in front of the monumental main façade of the Assembly, the military and civilians participated, all mixed together making a festival on the plateau. The parades were always organized on May 1<sup>st</sup>, the International Labor Day, to maintain the populist spirit of the Yugoslav army. The elegantly designed stage, with communist symbols, was set up at the entrance to the Assembly. The monumental stage setting was reinforced by the Assembly silhouette, where the stairs and the dome had a special emphasis. There were also leading figures in the political regime and the military establishment. A key figure in the space and in this spectacle was Marshal Tito, who always stood at the center of the composition, as conductor and owner, who welcomed the impeccably coordinated columns of the participants [16:72]. This would mean that each space had its owner, with property being viewed here as "a relationship ... as an ethical and political relationship in which one person, or group of persons, has the power to change the behavior (roles) of other persons, or the group in the desired direction." [17:13] Therefore, Tito managed a *mise-en-scène* that was well known to everyone. All participants as well as the audience were known, everyone knew their place and everyone knew what to do, everyone was well trained for their roles. Tito was also inspired by the Vienna Parliament, above all in terms of urban aesthetics, a space where various military honors and performances were held. Yet, among all communist countries, only the Yugoslavian First of May Parades were very similar to the Soviet military processions, although the background of these events was reminiscent of the Ringstrasse in Vienna [18:74]. All of those stairs, ramps, stages, walls and other elements of urban street mobiles around the National Assembly, including the Old Palace (Belgrade City Hall) and Pioneer Park, became a kind of attitudes, theatrical boxes and gallery space of a monumental city auditorium, and at the same time, stages for simultaneous representations of power [19:12].

These performances took place in the space of the House of Assembly and were an indication of the new energy and power created by the state. This was also evident on the occasion of the First Non-Aligned Conference in Belgrade, in 1961. In those days, from September 1 to September 6, not only

the Assembly, but the whole city was a big stage. The main hall of the Federal Assembly, where plenary sessions were held, was remodeled and adapted for the conference. The United Nations headquarters in New York was completed at that time and it became a model for transforming the interior of the National Assembly Hall to fit the meeting perfectly. In the hall of the Federal Council of the Federal National Assembly, Tito inaugurated a gathering of the highest representatives of non-bloc countries, which by the world public received the qualification of *conscience of humanity* [20:208]



Figure 3. Military parades, in front of the building May 9<sup>th</sup> 1975.  
(Source: <https://sr.wikipedia.org>)

During Tito's time, the space of power seemed designed and harmonious. In their own way, each system tried to cover the arena and the hectic relationships with the theatrical spatial gestures, to decorate it into an idyllic urban scene [21:19]. On the other hand, this was not always possible, so the great resistance of the people will mark the period after his death.

#### 4.2. Year 2000 – the space of revolution

Numerous gatherings happened, student protests in late 1996 and early 1997, war and repression in 1999, until October 5, 2000, when this space could be described as a paratheater. The “paratheater” represents every possible behavior, from the more peaceful and ordinary, anti-dramatic behavior (protest walk) to the most intense, dramatic behavior (“hepenning “within protest”)” [22:148]. The city became an arena in those days, and on October 5, it was a reality that followed the people and then reached its fullest. The people decided to conquer and take over the center of power, whose identity and symbol were gradually built by the more famous Milosevic's predecessor, Tito.

Scenes of the National Assembly building in flames appeared in all the world media to illustrate the mass protests by the united opposition after Milosevic refused to acknowledge defeat in the elections. Even before the tragic breakup of Tito's socialist country, in the early 1990s, protests became common in many urban areas in Belgrade, including the plateau in front of the assembly. The protest echoed the ambitions of young, educated citizens, not only in Belgrade but throughout the whole country. They did not want to re-map the city in the name of the new order, nor to occupy its streets and mark them with their ideas. Their walk was aimed at key destinations, toward the most significant places of power that needed to be re-established. The National Assembly was not only symbolically but literally recaptured by the masses in the fight against the Belgrade police [23:382]. It is estimated that there were about one million people from across the state in front of the assembly who wanted to take control of their own lives. Then the space of the city became an arena – “the scene of conflicts of different interests and cultures, while fighting for survival and domination. By its very nature, an arena is a place of showdown, matches, feasts or parades, its manifesting stereotypes. The urban arena is a reality - life. It seeks a new chance and a straw of salvation, examining personal abilities and powers [24:16]”. It was in this space that the struggle for survival, perhaps prestige, for a better tomorrow, for the right to live and make choices, took place. From the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> of October the energy was booming, more and more each day. The Assembly became the ultimate scene of political spectacle, directed by the people and the opposition.



The plateau was no longer the place where citizens expressed their position and occupied their city, the interior of the Assembly building became that place. A group of people climbed the facade of the building to break in through the window. The building was stoned and set on fire. The crowd looked like a group of violent fans. Perhaps the scenes of the Belgrade events did not fully reflect the tension of the day, the fear and the enormous will, but they created a strong conviction of the great force of the spirit in the fight against power. "In short, and indeed briefly, that performance has replaced the clichéd image of horny nationality - a theater of cockades and uniforms" [25:17].

In the heat of the battle arena the inside of the building was destroyed. The sculptures inside were badly damaged and much of the furniture was stolen. The interior thus changed its appearance, from the royal, replica of the UN, to the ignition and destruction. As Todorovic further states, "spaces of persistence have become spaces of revolution, spaces of acquired power. And like all spaces of revolution, they were inevitably marked by violence; the violence of the police against the people and the people over symbols of power" [26:383]. The conquest of space created an opportunity for an interactive, new energy of the masses, and a new idea of creativity from which a different socio-political community could emerge, which would be more authentic and national. Along the way, the most significant scenography of the city, as the eternal symbol of power that became a symbol of revolution, was the National Assembly. (Fig. 4)



**Figure 4.** Bulldozer in front of the building

(Source: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulos/politica-exterior/el-juicio-de-milosevic/>)

Belgrade, in those days, was synonymous with a public political stage outside the country. "We view the year 2000 and the 5<sup>th</sup> of October events as the beginning of a new time and a new spirit (as much as everyday events relativize this claim), and we consciously deny the conclusion" [27:10].

## 5. CONCLUSION

The building of the National Assembly House has, in its history, been accompanied by a combination of incredible political events, creating the identity of the Assembly and building its space as one of the most important spaces of power, not only in Belgrade but also in the state of Serbia. Designed as a House to serve the Kingdom, it has changed its emblems of power depending on political circumstances and turmoil that were common in this part of the Balkans.

The first significant period that can be characterized as the period of the establishment of power is 1936 and the date of its inauguration. Then, in very difficult times, from the premises of the National Assembly, the Kingdom sent a message of unification and political aspirations of a newly formed Kingdom.

The second period is certainly the period after the Second World War, when a new ideology occupied a building, not only physically but also scenically, where it showed and assured the people of its power through frequent changes of scenery and defiling of the military, as the most relevant

indicator of the power of a country. In addition to the military, it was also the spatial background of a large gathering held in Belgrade, the First Non-Aligned Conference in 1961. This gathering placed the building at the center of the world press, because the organizers of the event, that is, the very top of the country, made sure that it was a true representative of open Yugoslav foreign policy.

The third period is observed as a period of the loss of power. It is actually characterized as a verification of the discontent of the people, when the establishment lost its power and the space of the National Assembly became the space of great revolutions. The plateau in front of the building, which in fact had the greatest power of subversion at that moment, led to the loss of power of the ruling party, that is, the seizure of power by the people. We can conclude that the National Assembly House has successfully served its purpose, display and verification of power. Authority is verified when it is presented visually in the space which is a symbol of the state. Through a series of celebrations, parades and conferences, through its official opening and later through the change from kingdom to socialism, the Assembly has acquired the status of an indispensable symbol whose form, shape, silhouette, secondary plastic and interior show that whoever is on its stage actually possesses power. In the period of post-socialism it continued to be the architectural house of worship of all statesmen. In space, dominant, it always acted neutral, when power was conquered and when power was replaced. Its plateau is often seen as a plateau for the revolution, a plateau on which the mass expresses its affection or dissatisfaction with political circumstances and the state leadership. For the festivities it was decorated, for the revolutions set on fire, in numerous layers of materialization and appellations it carried (crown, star, coat of arms) it became a *pras pro toto* of national events.

As such, it has become, before and after Tito, the polygon of understanding and cognition, that is, the potential for the formation of spatial representations and associations. As a very important city and stage space, as a public presentation of knowledge and events, it continued to showcase events, cultivate, animate and ennoble the city. The National Assembly describes all the aforementioned periods in its own way, through space and through the events that were created there, creating a small theatrical historical vademecum. It does not contain everything, but it contains substance. Its form, monumentality, perseverance and European attitude at the heart of the city are relevant indicators of architectural symbols and their significance for the ideology and the country. From its inception to its existence today, it has changed its protagonists, who have left at least part of the scenery inside it. Participants in these past events have fought against their mythomania, and the space witnessed that fight and speaks of it. The National Assembly is a safe place for new and authentic, highly original stage metaphors about political circumstances in Serbia.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The paper was done within the project "Optimization of Architectural and Urban Planning and Design in Function of Sustainable Development in Serbia" (No. TR36042), funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

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