

The National Theatre in Subotica, Serbia - enveloping the building after 20 years

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Abstract— This paper refers to an issue of the *current* and *obsolete* in the architectural design process of complex programs in specific situations. As an extraordinary example we present a project of National Theatre building extension in Subotica, Serbia. The project of adaptation, reconstruction and designing annex of the building of National Theatre in Subotica is currently the biggest investment in the field of culture in the Republic of Serbia. Narodno pozorište - Narodno kazalište – Népszínház is an institution with the long tradition of corresponding with the multiethnic society of its inhabitants through performances in all three different languages (Serbian, Croatian and Hungarian). In the last decade of the 20th century, the condition of the building was assessed as critical, and the idea about reconstruction, adaptation and extension was anticipated. After the open public competition in 1990 the joint project was developed by two highest ranked teams. In 2008 construction process was initiated, as well as the idea about commissioning for the project of a new building envelope. The paper addresses various issues of such concept, in which the final design of the enveloping is envisioned for the last phase in construction process, as well as reasons and implications of such decision.

Keywords- *architectural design, theatre building, facade design, architectural communication*

I. INTRODUCTION

The building of National Theatre in Subotica was designed in 1845 by János Scultety, and built in 1854 as classicist building, conceived as an assemblage of two programmes: theatre and a hotel. The National Theatre was also the first theatre Institution in a former Yugoslavia, residing in original building, which was known nationwide for its distinctive entrance assembly defined by six columns portico. The portico, overlooking the main town square was a dominating element of architectural composition and a single element of historical, urban and architectural meaning of the Theatre. The accompanying wings along the street and square had rather troublesome relationship with the entrance, in the sense of composition, scale and spatial distribution of the programme inside. Thus, the identification of the Theatre house and even Institution always rested on the element of the entrance –six columns portico, rendered with distinctive terracotta tone.

Several processes of reconstruction and functional alternation permanently changed Theatre inner spatial structure

and introduced the elements of neoclassicism and secession in the outer and inner surfaces. In 1990 the condition of the theatre was assessed as critical, in terms of functionality for purposes of contemporary play, with visible deterioration of the structure, which threatened safety of any kind of use. The big architectural contest, launched by the Ministry of Culture, for building's reconstruction and extension, resulted in no winning entries. However, two teams shared the second place and later merged into one team - YUSTAT - which was selected to work on the Project of Theatre reconstruction and extension. It was not until 1997 that the architectural brief was accepted, and the designing process has begun. Starting from that point, till today, when the design processes are not yet over, the politics and finances dictated the dynamics of the work, and introduced several cycles of changes in the design, often driven by personal decisions of the most influential, but sometimes hardly competent people. Resting on the experience of the long and turbulent process of design, architects' decision to leave the issues of the house envelope open, and postpone it until the very end of design process, appeared to be the daring choice. From the nowadays perspective, this decision turns out to be wise and visionary.

Today, 20 years later, the team from Faculty of Technical Sciences, led by professor Dinulović is finishing the main projects of facades of National Theatre building. This paper will present all phases that led to final decisions of adopting different design approaches for different faces of the building and motifs that underlay such decisions. The questions of communication, materiality, transcending ideas and eventually enveloping are interwoven in design process, which is in progress and in constant reconsideration.

II. PROJECT BACKGROUND

Rather mixed ideas about what a National theatre in a certain town means in case of embracing the National identity, led to a specific crisis in this particular case of National Theatre in Subotica. Multiethnic society of Serbs, Croats and Hungarians, each struggling with preservation of its ethnicity as a complex structure of national vs. /within identity of the common state, made a matrix of cultural institutions with which they all tried to identify with. National theatre was one of them, and it functioned as an exemplary case how all three nationalities could have worked and lived together, looking

from the outside, although they rarely mixed inside the building, or inside their nationally oriented programme. In a certain way they needed this theatre house as a holder of their multiethnic society, no matter that it had been rarely visited. Destruction and demolishing processes of their old theatre during the reconstruction works arouse the anger of the inhabitants of the city. The old building was falling apart, but they wanted it to stay as a monument of the society, while the state had an idea that the new theatre would connect people on a whole new level.



Figure 1. (up) The original look of National Theatre in Subotica, (before reconstruction)

Figure 2. Process of reconstruction, restoration and building extension- National Theatre assembly and complex relations between old and new

Confronted opinions led to a creation of a certain tension regarding all theatre questions, so the new theatre had a rough start. Demolishing and building processes had been dictated by the politics and finances mainly, so they developed in phases. Those were: demolishing the dysfunctional parts of the old building (approximately 80% of the building) and clearing the location; sudden problematic demolishing of the parts of the old building that were allegedly under protection as a national value; remaining massive hole on the building site, since the new theatre needed underground levels, so the inhabitants of the town were annoyed with devastating “old values” and

looking into a construction hole; quite fast development and finishing of all concrete works, that on a spot of a small old ruined structure looked like a concrete mega structure, although it is quite appropriate for the location, and heights and capacities have been closely discussed and approved; and finally, incomprehensible difference in scale, for the typical inhabitant of Subotica, concerning the huge difference in old and new – the theatre spot existing in their minds, and the big unfinished structure that took its place.

III. TRANSCENDING IDEAS – ARCHITECTURAL COMMUNICATION

The issue of communicative function of architecture is imbued in every single architectural piece, regardless its scale and importance. In this particular project, the communicative role of the building is being carefully considered, since the conception of the theatre as a “civic monument” is engraved in the history of the city and memory of its inhabitants. Thus, the issues of monumentality, representation and communication are being in a mind of the authors, while trying to express their personal judgments, beliefs and aspiration in architecture.

The architectural representation is often employed for mediating power and ideas through visual signs and symbols. In a domain of architecture, this comes on the level of basic architectural form – assembly or shape, or more recently, through communicative role of the envelope. The issues of *text* and *message* transcended through architectural medium could be addressed in various stages of design. In some cases, the meaning is implanted through conscious act of architectural design, with desirable effects on the spectator, but in the reality, the meaning is actually a *byproduct*, the result of interaction between subject and object. “The scope of meanings available to us depends on both the qualitative potentialities of the environment proper and experiencing person’s sensitive perceptive capabilities – guided by culturally, socially, historically and ideologically structured faculties of human knowledge and awareness” [1]. Beside for being considered for art and technical objects, “buildings are also social objects in that they are invested with social meaning” and as such, “shape social relations” [2]. In that sense, every architectural object is a *statement*, regardless of significance of its investors, spatial capacity or importance. It captures and embeds at least the ideas of the social moment and transcends them into built form, in more or less obvious and comprehensible way.

The communication of theatre and its environment is a two way process. As a part of the built, social, economical, political and cultural context, the building reflects the ideological conceptions of the society, whether traditional or modernising. It demonstrates the idea of social affirmation towards traditional values or strong determination for creation of the new. Thus, the ideological text of the society is inscribed in building’s programme, space and language. In return, the building reaffirms the text and mediates its meaning back into masses and spectators, through the means of architecture. In a certain way, architecture can be regarded as a specific “social mirror” which disturbs the image to the extent of desirable augmentation of certain values.

The communication of building is evolving through several stages: (1) architectural programming – which anticipates spatial occupation in a way that reflects “spatial structure” and “spatial syntax” and reveals the complex social structures behind design process [3]; (2) architectural form, which can render the whole process of designing (formalistic approach) and communicate outside of the context of theatre public, in a level of metaphorical and representational meaning, or show subtle dedication to talk the language of the spectator - theatre audience and the city. (3) At the level of planes and surfaces, the architectural language increasingly evolved in the recent history. The development of building technology put another layer of meaning, through “material reading”, which was present through the history, but now developed to the next level (stone was always a symbol of solidity, certainty and longevity). Also, appropriation of “technology of images” implanted the new meaning of communicating, where the sign is just a temporary sequence on a display, changeable “two-dimensional iconography” [4]. Thus, the solid meaning of the architectural form is traded for the meaning of the *information*, which can be temporary and ephemeral.

On these grounds we can approach the issues of communication in a case of National Theatre in Subotica. It clearly demonstrates several levels of communication with the outside audience: one conceived on a symbolic meaning and identification, appropriated for the urban scale, and one anticipated as an intimate dialogue with the adjacent surrounding, through expression of poetic complexity of the inner space. This dual communicative function evolved through different architectural means: mass and space, on the one hand, and material and envelope, on the other. The conception of space, which clearly establishes hierarchy of the programmatic elements in formal expression – where the fly tower evolved into new urban landmark – determines certain functional and visual relations with the surrounding space. In a tradition of a Rossi’s “monumentalization” of the stage tower, the theatre’s spatial and mass assembly clearly underlines the notion of a theatre – on the level of urban, and redefines the character of a city. “Thus, the stage, since it is at the same time the place of production, instrument of imagination, and referent point of the city, becomes paradigm of theatre architecture” [5].

While massing of the building evolved communication on the global scale – city skyline and notion of a theatre presence, the communication on the level of a façade demonstrate all the fragile and tactile dual relations: inside - outside, theatre world - the Other world, imagination - reality, theatre - the city, etc. In the perspective of nowadays practice, “what characterizes changes in architecture is its matter” and thus the quality, function and the “rhetoric” of the “matter” became the focal points of envelope design [6].

IV. ENVELOPE DESIGN CONCEPT

In creating and designing their concept, design team rethought all the complexity of the project, regarding its history, political, social, cultural and urban background, complex set of influences and rather indefinite design process. Among some of the strategic approaches they had to make, the so called envelopment of the house was one of the biggest. Observing the questions about today’s theatre architecture,

inevitably we conclude that “today the house tries to communicate for itself, through its own programme and essence, and it is up to architects in which particular way to enable this.” [7] Complexity of both form and function in this three-halls theatre structure, occupying the main position on the main square of the town, led to a concept of distinction of houses that form the theatre itself – the public and administrative body of the theatre, technical-technological body of the theatre, and house of the actors, as a very sensitive body of the theatre. Logical answer was to show inside-out this three-parted division of a house, thus concentrating to which function correlates with a location in which way, and make a sort of a statement by addressing and meeting the town in a specific way. “The facades are therefore defined as a system of separate but interdependent elements, which are by their nature adapted to the spatial context of the street or square that they directly correspond to, as well as to the context of internal content which they are closing (or opening) to the outside”[8]. This thinking led to a division not only in gestures towards the town’s existing structures, but to a completely different treatment of these faces of theatre house, from the architectural perspective.

Research that led to a sustaining concept for the most “sensitive” façade, according to the town of Subotica, was a difficult one. Facing the main promenade and the most prominent street in town, partly public - partly administrative body of the new house had to bring up questions about establishing contact between the town and the theatre. Following the practice of “façade theatres” that “were as a rule integrated into their streetscapes with little attempt to suggest their specific function” [9], the first idea was to invite the looks of the town inside the building, and make new theatre more approachable. Simple glass façade seemed like a good solution, because it answered two interesting topics – the first one was inviting the people in, and the other one was allowing people who work in theatre administration to feel like they themselves act in a theatre as well. Glass façade developed specially for this theatre made it possible to exclude the existing borderline between inside and outside of the house, since all the levels are visible from the main promenade, and active life of the working administration should be inviting. Facing the north orientation, this solution provided great lighting inside these spaces. The problem appeared after the elaboration of this rather simple concept – the town was “not ready” for new glass structure implemented in its historical core. Things that looked simple from the architectural point of view seemed to be too immaterialized from the point of view of the inhabitants of the town. Instead of concrete or brick walls that they demanded, the mutual agreement came upon the interior solution, which provided possibilities for different usage of the space between the glass façade and the very interior of the house. This reflected in positioning steel structures that resembled simplified portals or scaffolding inside the house, so stage designers could use them as a sort of ever-changing panels - announcements for the plays that are active in theatre at a precise moment.

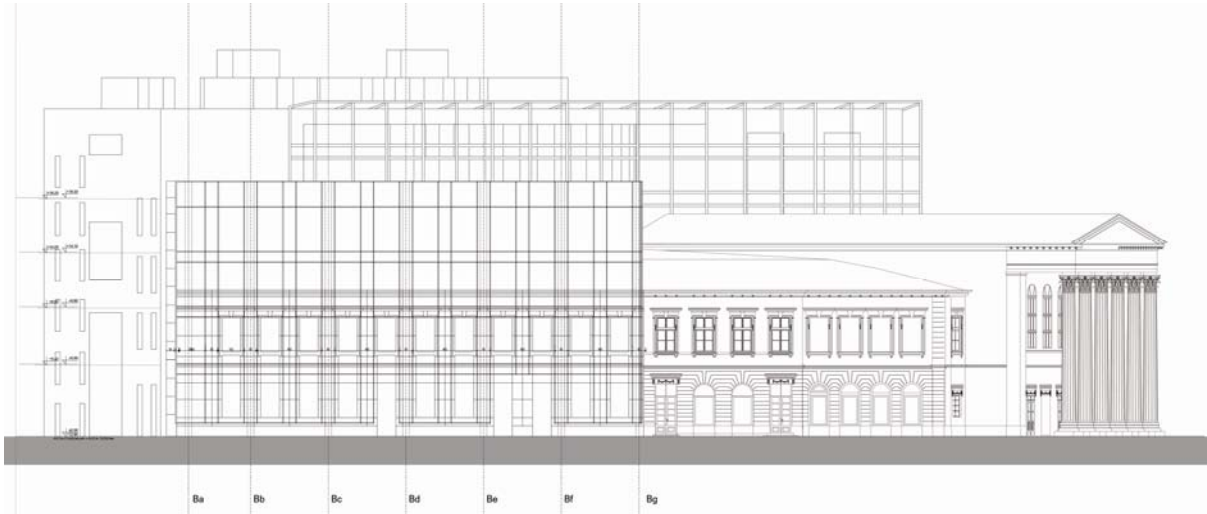


Figure 4. Elevation facing the main city promenade illustrates complexity of plans and relations between old and the new

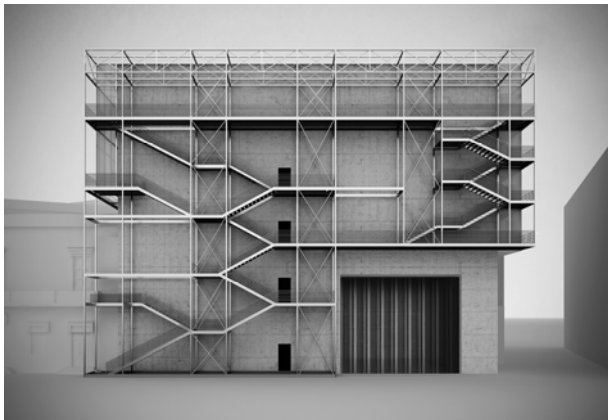


Figure 5. (first down) Elevation facing the town square – inversion of the fly tower and creation of the vertical public space

Figure 6. (second down) Visualization of the night scenario of vertical public square



The main square of the town was even more demanding. Situated on a location in a way that made the function of the theatre almost impeccable, new building addressed the square with the monumental concrete structure, 24 meters high and 30 meters wide, without almost any openings. Architect's idea was to leave that structure in concrete, as it was, without dressing it up into something "more appropriate", but with a special function, which will make this "wall" alive during whole day and night. Adopted concept for this façade was to make inversion of the fly tower in exterior of the building, which would not serve just as a demonstration of what function is inside the building, but serve as a living structure for all sorts of occasions. During night this wall should become a theatre space outside the theatre – enabling numerous theatre actions – video installations, video projections, as well as place for performances and concerts. During day this wall should embrace the role of the vertical public space, allowing the inhabitants of the town to climb on it and use it as system of horizontal terraces on different levels. This was achieved by constructing big structure, with the logic of scaffolding structures, which should be functional in all pre-described needs. It is supposed to function as an alternative exit / fire escape for the building, since it reaches all levels of the building on which people can walk, inside theatre. Concept of a huge stage – inversion of the fly tower – should represent the face of theatre that is turned towards the town, where building function is conveyed to "signify and exemplify" its quality and use [10].

Yet another challenge for this diverse approach of architects of the “envelope” of National theatre in Subotica was the so called “House of actors”. This part of the building faces small, narrow street in the background of Main Square, and is separated functionally inside the building with longitudinal hall running along the whole part of the house. In the same manner, the “house” looked like an annex from the outside, since it leaned onto the great concrete wall that dominated the scene.

Trying to avoid the impression of another closed and big wall, as well as trying to make this part of building the real “living house”, a solution has been found in appliance of the new green wall technology onto the existing concrete façade. In opinion of the designers’ team, this would make a house of actors more a home and give the precise information to pedestrians walking the street, about the function it envelopes. Nevertheless, modular matrix of big window openings that led the view into dressing rooms of actors, showed out as a problem. Perhaps contradictory in its assumption that this window into the world of “magic behind the theatre” would be more than interesting to town, it opened up questions about actors’ real and theatrical lives, as well as issue of intimacy of the inhabitant of the dressing room. In a constant endeavor to answer opposite questions: to see, but not to be seen, or to see and be seen, the conclusion came in a form of a “magical window stage”. In reality a small stage structure should be created for every window looking out of the dressing rooms, containing several layers of panels / curtains, which differ among themselves in material, transparency, translucency, and in ways they close the window. They would be easily manipulated from the inside, so every actor/actress could decide about the level of allowing the outside world into his/hers sanctuary. Effect achieved from the outside world would be spectacular – in the warm green structure, there would appear individual stages, sometimes open, sometimes not, which would, if nothing else, enable the imagining process of transformation of an ordinary individual into an actor. Ground floor of this façade has been anticipated as a basis of the house – opening doors and theatre shop-windows towards the street, revealing in a way all the processes that create a theatre play.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The conception and design of contemporary theatre reflects the “contradictions between almost daily changes of theatre, conceived as an art form, and permanence of the theatre, conceived as a built form”. This puts architect into position to “independently and almost absolutely anticipates programme, character, expression and the means of theatre for which he designs the space”[11]. In that sense, the role and responsibility of the architect is overwhelming, and requests dedication and devoted discipline.

In contemporary theatre, the lines between art forms and its domains challenge the Theatre building, and put its very existence into question. The institution of National Theatre relates its relevance to national culture and its tradition, development and preservation, in the realms of the global society. However, the house of the National Theatre has to epitomise conflicting duality of the influences: traditional origin of the Institution, and in a case of National Theatre in Subotica, inherited classicist part of the new building assembly,

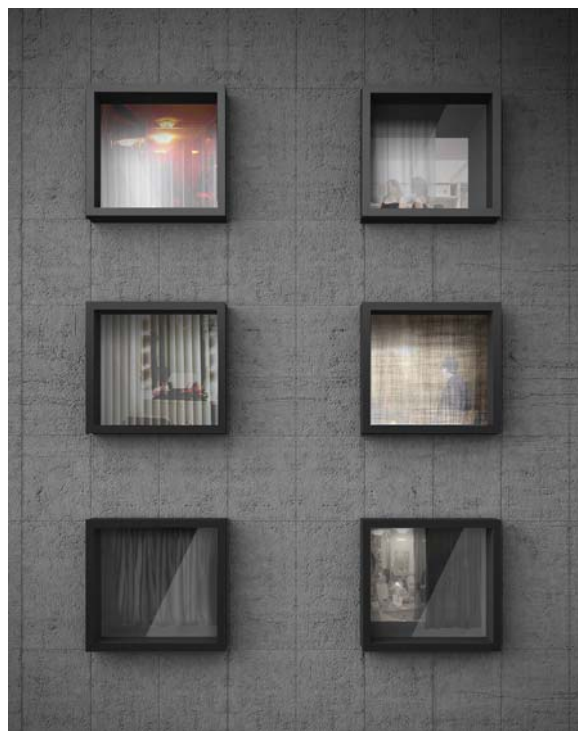


Figure 7. “House of actors” – fenestration concept

Figure 8. Closer look to the personal “window stage” and variation of the sets induced by their “owners”

and contemporary design process, based on the historical moment and its architectural codification.

In these realms, the challenge to design the envelope, is more than just designing the physical boundary between the Theatre and the City. "The role/function of the façade proves in the need for identification of the building as a theatre, but also representation of the certain artistic attitudes, ideas about theatre, individual programmes, as well as creation of the overall concept of building's "public face" [12].

The real question of this façade-designing approach was: Can something so diverse and complex as Theatre world be stated as an envelope? Isn't an envelope something smooth and monochromatic, mono materialistic that irradiates the feeling of sameness? Can we really say that we have enveloped building in a safe and intriguing way? Numerous unresolved issues surrounding the project, conflicting influences and rather hostile public acceptance challenged the authors' decisions in each and every aspect. As a final result, the value of the solution rests on its honesty of communication, underpinned but deep and sincere understanding of the theatre programme. The facades mediate recognized and contemplated values of the Theatre and its magical world, which opens up and closes in the eyes of city. By doing so, new theatre building tries to establish new and improve existing relations with its surroundings, on the level of urban, social, cultural and architectural.

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