

BETWEEN CRITERIA CRISIS AND POSSIBLE NEW VISUAL IDENTITIES OF CHRISTIAN SACRAL ARCHITECTURE

on the example of contemporary tendencies in construction engineering of the Serbian Orthodox Church

Zoran M. Jovanovic

A recent announcement that within the project of "resending people to the Moon", as a preparatory stage for Mars, the NASA's Lunar Architecture Team has decided on lunar bases", has launched various ideas. Those ideas do not belong exclusively to the futurology, but they are (re)becoming a matter of research of various scientific disciplines, both exact and empiric. Creators of the sacral architecture will be focused on increasingly achievable aspiration to settle extraterrestrial space, even the one intended for the Christian church. There is no doubt that those ideas will generate significant reconsideration, even challenging past understanding of the architecture intended for the Christian cult. Certain conclusions will even bring to reaffirmation of the position that the common statement that the most valuable Church art has been already achieved is entirely inappropriate, the statement referred to by those who are wishing in traditional and conformist spirit to take the role of the last harvesters (Mt. 13, 30), by using non-existent canons or even misusing the existing ones and adjusting them to their various interests. By this, they are becoming even more similar to follower of the interpretation (not only of the religious art) based on a religious-idolatrous approach to texts of Holly Fathers and other Church Authorities, passing over in silence and/or neglecting a fact that even among them there were certain theological disagreements as well as that in the modern theology and liturgy there are novelties, because the Church, whether they want it or not, is a living body. It seems that as a consequence, during last decades throughout Serbia significant number of churches have been built that are replicas of ancient East Christian churches that, as such, cannot restore to life the past and cannot present a healthy way to God, as eminent psychologists would say. In line with the afore-said NASA statement, the question is raised whether (i) the Orthodox Serbs, should they become inhabitants of the celestial bodies next to the Earth or nearby, would build churches which would, with their form evoke churches that, like in any previous period, usually represent non-creative, artificial paraphrases and evocations to the Byzantine architecture and its spiritual circle i.e. so-called "Serbian golden era", regardless the fact that in the era of post-modern and malignant variants of (pseudo)eclecticism have certain value.

Therefore, even more prominent place deserves a chapel built in 2002 in the scope of the memorial complex on Bubanj near Nis¹ designed by the architect Sasa Budjevac. The main characteristics of this Serbian Orthodox Church are that the church is in the form of a transparent cube with a cross marked in a specific way on its transparent wall canvas. In the spirit of the high tech architecture, the chapel

¹ Location where fascists shot over 10,000 Serbs during the WW2.

represents not only an exception in the architecture of the Orthodox world, but also an extremely provocative incentive to some ideas, among which there are also those related to real nature of the Christian temple, its form and contents, considering that characteristics of the afore-said chapel go deep into the most complex issues of the Christian theology, hence achieving recognition, in a specific way, for the teachings of the Church.

With its structure, the chapel on Bubanj initiates at the same time reflection on a line between the constancy and changes in the architecture of the Orthodox world. Its architect imposed a question whether the church should be covered in gold, with massive walls and pillars made of precious stone or imitation as, for example, often used, or whether it should emphasize Christ's simplicity and modesty. The chapel on Bubanj directly indicates that the believer should observe the world through spiritual eyes, on which actually Byzantine esthetics of the church art insists upon, invoked by many, but usually only when indicating some special qualities of the Orthodox church, at the same time neglecting the law of (human) nature as well as real messages and lessons of the Founding Father of the Church.

The concept of the chapel near Nis provides a possible answer to the question whether the sacral architecture is exclusively a "matter of spirituality", i.e. how to represent a sacral event as the key moment of the intimate believe (in community). To that extent, the idea of Sasa Budjevac represents so far unequalled expression in architecture of the Orthodox world, offering one of the possible solutions in terms of the design of future Christian churches on Earth as well as on Moon, and other planets, like Mars, where, according to the Church teaching, the God reigns, as well i.e. Kosmokrator.

The most eminent researchers of the modern Serbian architecture agree that the chapel near Nis is, in every respect, an extraordinary, non-standard, non-traditional solution within the architecture of the Orthodox world², unfortunately without considering its particularities. For those who are rare in-depth interpreters of the chapel, the main focus is on the fact that the overall uniqueness of the chapel is reached by using a transparent cube i.e. a "metal-glass membrane", therefore achieving a fragile, but "strong prayer and contemplation place"³. The afore-said perception indicates that the work cannot always be reduced to superficial semantic analysis, i.e. only to easily-understandable specific modular forms. Therefore we believe that even former legions of allegorists, as Umberto Eco would say⁴, would find with a good reason, some inspiring occasions to interpret the chapel on Bubanj in an eloquent way, trying to thoroughly define

² With its contents, i.e. its "emptiness", Budjevac building stimulates a lot of thinking, launched by the architect maybe even unconsciously. Namely, the chapel, although intended for liturgy, as reported by some pieces, has no specific features characteristic for indoors and topographic structure of Orthodox churches. The same refers to lack of the holy table (with the altar-area and therefore the altar-screen, "iconostas"), which would mean for many people that key structural-sacral elements of the church intended for the crown ceremony are missing. Such a position is incorrect from many aspects, З. М. Јовановић, *Иконостас, Азбучник православне иконографије и градитељства*, Београд 2005, 208, 209.

³ НИН-ови критичари бирају. Десет најбољих. Уједначене вредности, НИН, 8. 1. 2004, 40.

⁴ У. Еко, *Kultura, informacija, komunikacija*, Београд 1973, 227.

meaning of each architectural elements, codes of which it consists of⁵, as well as messages that it (can) radiate. The ground for such approach could be found in the Old Testament as well as Judeo-Christian and West-Christian Medieval tradition, where glass and crystal edifices are well known⁶. Furthermore, glass, regardless if artificial or not, i.e. its substitution, as this is the case, can be understood as a direct gold equivalent, having through many centuries similar or same symbolic meaning, and the same is valid for the crystal. The afore-said is particularly important if we evaluate the edifice as brilliant, considering that its structure, no matter how simple, can resemble some marvelous crystal, square brilliant, similar to the one from the vision of St. John the Theologian.

From the semantic point, the chapel on Bujanj can be observed as a structure indicating a ritual place", as described by its architect, adding that he did not want to be (consciously) epigone, because as he said, "the originality represents the author's honesty in its creative act, refusing to use, plagiarize or paraphrase his well-known models".

However, Budjevac reference to the tradition is specific and not easily-recognizable, considering that its form in certain way borders on the transcendental, passing into the invisible, into the metaphysic world. Within the edifice, there is also a unique echo of the past, of the East-Christian tradition, considering the fact that its architect did not reinterpret, but in a visionary and innovative manner, he was striving to interpret the tradition by using a modern language and a cross, as a dominant motive on the wall canvas proclaims the spirituality at the abstract level. In this way, Budjevac is at the same time destroying the dogma about an edifice that "with its solidity and imposingness of its structure is rendering people closer to the God"⁷.

On the other hand, Budjevac creative reading of the heritage and referring to the ancient tradition, expressed as a simple form of the chapel in a form of cube is related to forms of early-Byzantine church architecture, but interpreted in a way characteristic for the spirit of the times: glass structure, more precisely artificial glass structure placed in the metal membrane ("metal net").

With respect to the form of the chapel on Bujanj, this solution, as much as it may seem atypical of the ecclesiastical building of an Orthodox church (irrespective of the materials used), should not be perceived as a shocking novelty for it is based in the ancient theology tradition. Namely, ever since the times immemorial when, looking at the sky the Man contemplated about the place where God lives, he

⁵ The chapel on Bujanj, regardless its simple look, like any other work of art, withstands superficial and unilaterally-oriented interpretation, considering the fact that it represents "a system of the system". Such an idea links us to the thesis of U. Eco, when talking about the semiology and semantics in the architecture, pointing out that the architecture is not based on geometrical codes, but can be described using some; this thesis has been cited by many theoreticians of architecture, agreeing or disagreeing therewith. According to Eco, that particular "language of architecture", made of codes, is of particular importance for the perception, which is evident in terms of the example of the edifice on Bujanj near Nis.

⁶ R. Hag Bleter, *Титаниче "staklenog sna" - ekspresionistička arhitektura i istorija metafore kristala*, in: M. R. Perović, *Istorija moderene arhitekture. Antologija tekstova, 2/b*, Beograd, 2005, 112.

⁷ M. Јанакова, *Аутори, дела, методи у српској архитектури на прелазу векова*, Београд 2005, VIII.

envisaged it as a vault of heaven, spherical in shape (as a dome, a dome-like canopy). Looking at the ground, he concluded that the place he was living on was relatively flat, like a slab (cube). In time, the plate became not only a symbol of that which had been created but also of stability and a symbol of wisdom, truth and moral perfection in the mystical sense. This perception was directly reflected in the interpretation of a Christian shrine and its form. For, Christ's manifestation to the people, when according to the eyes of the Church, by his embodiment in Mary, the sky and the Earth, the celestial and the earthly worlds were united was also reflected in the perception and shape of architecture of shrines. It got a real and a symbolic meaning, first by construction of dome in a basilica and then, through development of ecclesiastical architecture, also through more complex forms of the central plan of structures with the aim of introducing a visible incarnation of the Sky (sphere, orb) and the Earth (cube). And so the basic form of the eastern Christian ecclesiastical structure became a central dome, built on quadrangular foundation. Unification of the spherical i.e. the dome as the Kingdom of Heaven was imagined with the Earth in the shape of a flat plate was taken as a symbolic expression of the incarnation of Christ, as a "descent of the Creator from heaven to live in human body on earth". And so the cube, just as the place where God lives, gains on holiness, receives the features of ideal, divine (circle).

In the series of structures made of the simplest geometrical forms of glass or its alternative, the most famous is probably the equilateral pyramid within the Louvre complex. However, the Apple store in New York is more relevant for us, for it was built in the spirit of minimalism, with the entrance placed in a glass cube, thus gaining the shape of three-dimensional (beaming) monolith. This interpretation is possible in a certain context also in the interpretation of the Budjovac creation on mount Bubanj in the vicinity of the city of Nis that bears morphological similarity to the above mentioned shop. With respect to that, the concept of Sasa Budjovac is not a precedent in the history of architecture, in this case modern and postmodern architecture. For, in modern architecture, the idea on geometric shape became one of the "key tools". Thus, in addition to the famous works of Mies van der Rohe and the efforts of architects surrounding Weissenhoff⁸, Le Corbusier insists for instance in the text *Towards a New Architecture*, on "primary forms" that need to be combined with "elementary cubes" and then ascribed some kind of "moral content". This instruction takes us back to the ancient interpretations of geometrical bodies, that Le Corbusier supplements in his true spirit: that "moral content" requires "forms to be symmetrical". The afore is very much applicable also in interpretation of the chapel on mount Bubanj near Nis.

As already mentioned, a special place in the chapel is that of the motif of the cross. In the base of the chapel, it can also be linked to the requirements of the traditional ecclesiastical construction with the cubic structure not being burdened by additional construction of complex forms. Rather, being clearly drawn in the base, it is allowed to indicate the direction of movement, thus emphasizing its symbolic movement. In other words, in a parterre environment, in corners of

⁸ It is about the architects' aspiration to design buildings with flat roof, plane facade, large vitrified areas, using a new building methods and using metal skeletons, referring to a modern way of living and spirit of the times, D. Panson, *Arhitektura i moderna*, Beograd 2001, 21, 22.

pedestrian leeways forming a cross in the directions East-West and North-South, square planes are located (with quartz sand for burning candles), forming a cross. The same motif was repeated on the chapel facades, so that it symbolically divides and balances out their surface. This treatment of the cross which is visible from all corners of the world, completely equally in a vertical as well as in a horizontal plane, and at the highest level of the structure when the observer is glancing at the sky constitutes the motto that Sasa Budjevac insists on starting from the view that the cross is the fundamental and central symbol of Christianity; a connection of direction and center; mid-step between permanent and transcendent i.e. the starting point and the cross section, the center of heavenly (vertical) and earthly, secular and ephemeral (horizontal).

That is how one should accept this transparent pellicle, membrane wrapped around the chapel whereby the "border between that on the Outside and the Inside is almost fictitious", giving an impression that all is one no matter how certain people relieve it is "not all one", since the form of the cross in the complex of the wall can be interpreted as a different surface only.

The afore is also a reason to recall Plato's standpoint that architecture is what remains of the structures when you take out the stone. This brings us back to the beginning of our story about the need of more modern interpretation of building of an Orthodox church when the size and whiteness of mortar are no longer needed to indicate the relevance of the Saint it was consecrated to, or the power and affluence of the members of a local Church, just as the vacuum filled with spirit, the vastness of space of the chapel on mount Bubanj indicate, in the most direct way, that at least in this moment and in this location, fear of empty space (horor vacui) was conquered.

The conditional emptiness of the interior of the chapel on mount Bubanj should be taken also as an expression of the endeavor to experience holiness of the space through presence of the Man in it; the Man who does not need any decoration to stress or prove the holiness of the ambiance.

One of the questions emerging in considerations of the structure on mount Bubanj is also a reflection about its semantic and substantial uniqueness, contrasting in this case the opinion that the shrine must have the layers of national (style), be filled with "popular features", or characteristics of a building tradition of a nation where the place of worship is built. In this context it is also relevant that not much attention to date has been paid about the Evangelistic poverty when building places of worship and other structures of the Church, and also that the investors, founders and other donors were far from poverty promoted by Christianity, when "wealth results in arrogance, the feeling of possession and power"⁹. The example of Christ speaks to that, as from his birth in poor crib to the cross of his crucifixion he testified to poverty. With respect to that, researchers of Roman Catholic art highlight (coming closer to certain Protestant tendencies in a way), if a shrine is to be understood as a home of God and image of Heavenly Jerusalem "nothing should be overly affluent nor beautiful to reflect in our eyes this dignity

⁹ F. Ćkunca, *Izgradnja sakralnih objekata*, in: F. Ćkunca, A. Badurina, B. Ćkunca, *Sakralna arhitektura tijekom povijesti i danas*, Zagreb 1987, 143, 144.

and symbolist". In order to prevent that the above initiated something foreign to the Orthodox church and its teaching, we shall seek support in the words of the Holy John Chrysostom, who said in a form of a specific epistle: "Let us start living wisely and celebrate Christ as he wants it: the highest honor to a person is the one that he himself wishes and not the one we think [...] Is it important that the table of Christ shine in golden chalices if he himself is starving?"

This view has been reinforced by the chapel which is a subject of our study. Its designer has at the same time and probably unconsciously, reaffirmed the issue of the extent to which designing of a place of worship is a complex task, for a church, structure should be "seen inside", and thus built from its interior content, from the affluence, messages and morals, contrary to the frequent practice resembling of idolatry to the exterior, an illusion, deceit.

There is no simpler form or greater complexity than in the chapel on mount Bubanj near Nis. In addition, its creator transposed sacral heritage as noon had done before him thus creating aesthetically a match comparable to the highest peaks of art of other Christian confessions –Roman Catholic primarily¹⁰– after a long period in the art of Orthodox Church.

One possible objection of the critics is that the chapel is not observant of the East Christian tradition and certain rules of the Church as it contains to icons, nor "windows to the Heavens" and the "Bible for the illiterate", altar would not, for instance, be unjustified. The fact that contemporary man needs only to close his eyes to be, in church terms, with God proves this objection to be unjustified. This is similar to the people who in ancient times longed, with their eyes closed and dreaming, to flee the Earth, to inhabit other celestial bodies and consequently, according to the belief, come closer to God and Heavens. However, they were also aware that God is borne in oneself, as a specific shrine where He lives, gathering in places called "a chapel" and "a church", irrespective of the materials these structures are made of.

The idea of Sasa Budjevac materialized in the chapel on mount Bubanj enables the visitor directly to find the Creator, not only in the infiniteness (surrounding

¹⁰ *European Church Architecture 1950–2000* (ed. W. J. Stock), Munich – Berlin – London – New York 2002; M. Dhenks, *Moderni pokreti u arhitekturi*, Beograd 1990; A. Badurina, *Кљжanski sakralni prostori*, in: F. Ђkunca, A. Badurina, B. Ђkunca, *Sakralna arhitektura tijekom povijesti i danas*, Zagreb 1987, 66–74; T. Premerl, *Nuћna prisutnost umjetnosti u funkcioniranju sakralnog prostor*, *Иовјек и простор* 11–12 (2005) 21; V. Penezіж, *Sakralna arhitektura u Nјеманкој*, *Иовјек и простор* 11–12 (2005) 12; S. Kriћиж Roban, *Иезнемо за црквима које нисмо успјели изградити*, *Иовјек и простор* 11–12 (2005) 24–27; V. Kusin, *Сукреатори духовнога*, in: *Novija sakralna umjetnost*, Zagreb 2006, 5; I. Ољтриж, *Od kriznih ishodiљta do krize identiteta*, in: *Novija sakralna umjetnost*, 9–16. As regards "glass cubes" in the sacral architecture in the Western countries, it should be mentioned that in the history of the Roman Catholic architecture the practice of building sacral edifices of glass is well-known for decades. It can be traced back to first "greenhouses", i.e. glass gardens, crystal palaces and halls and their pre-functionalization, M. Pucar, *Bioklimatska arhitektura, zastakljen i prostori i pasivni solarni sistemi*, Beograd 2006, 12–23, 62–83; N. Pevsner, *Izvori moderne arhitekture i dizajna*, Beograd 1972, 182; K. Frempton, *Moderna arhitektura: kritиkа istorija*, Beograd 2004, 29–36. The "glass architecture" has its culmination in the "Crystal Cathedral" (1980), belonging to the Garden Grove, and in the Church of Sacred Heart in Munich (2000).

him), and which the transparent walls of the structure imply but also to find Him within his own self. That is why the materialized building vision of Budjevac may be interpreted as provocative but also as moral and didactic in all the forms it invokes.