People were puzzled when Vladimir Kulić started studying Yugoslav Modernist architecture in the early 2000s. "I got the question more than once: why in the world am I working on this? Who would even want to know about this?" he recalled, "Even from architects from the region."

He is unlikely to face such questions again following the critically acclaimed exhibition, “Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980,” at New York City’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which ran from mid-July 2018 through January 13, 2019.

The exhibition, which Kulić co-curated alongside MoMA’s Chief Curator of Architecture and Design, Martino Stierli, justified Kulić’s academic choices and made an argument for Yugoslav Modernism’s place in the architectural canon. Kulić trained as an architect in Belgrade during the 1990s but his interests shifted to architectural history just as Yugoslav architecture was itself relegated to history.

“What was happening in front of me with the city was far more interesting than what I originally wanted to study,” said Kulić. As the transition period went on, he saw that “suddenly Modernist architecture was completely changing meaning, changing ownership, changing purpose.”

Some of it, suddenly, was no more. The radical changes made to the architectural fabric of the country due to wartime and post-Socialist neglect “made it very obvious that this was something that required attention,” he said.
Kulić went on to get his Ph.D. at the University of Texas where he studied Yugoslav Modernist architecture and co-authored *Modernism In-Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia*. This book made him the obvious person to call when MoMA started considering a Yugoslav architectural exhibition in early 2015. At first, MoMA wanted to know whether it would even be possible to host such an event. Were there enough archival materials and enough interesting buildings to stage a show?

The curatorial team met in Skopje, Macedonia, in November 2015 where they made their case. Having convinced MoMA that the Yugoslav project deserved to be more widely known, they focused on how to introduce this little-known material to the world and make the case for the material's significance. One of the biggest challenges was the sheer size of the endeavor.

Kulić said he and his team asked themselves “whether it is even possible to insert anything new into the canon retroactively, now 40, 50, 70 years later. When there are these small interventions in the canon, these rediscoveries ... it’s usually a single architect or a single building. We have an entire country, so the scale was scary.”

A further challenge was making an argument for “Yugoslav architecture,” something that had been questioned before. Some argued that the distinctive national schools of architecture and design in places like Ljubljana, Belgrade, and Sarajevo, along with the decentralized nature of architectural decision-making in the country, meant that nothing truly unified the country and thus there was no “Yugoslav architecture,” but only “architecture in Yugoslavia.”

Kulić and his team disagreed. Where others have seen a lack of a nationally unified architecture, the exhibition presented a picture of a social, political, and economic system that created a shared space by encouraging experimentation and local initiative. “One of the most interesting
“...put together this great amount of architecture in a single place it does end up being shocking. In everyday life these pinnacles of architecture are diluted by most of the urban fabric, which is sort of mundane and mediocre. But then when you condense all of that into one place and see all of it together, it does speak with a kind of force that is not obvious in real life.”

The exhibition was made possible in large part due to the efforts of members of the curatorial team, based in Skopje, to preserve architectural plans from the post-war period that state archives have simply thrown in the trash. This “experimental preservation,” as Kulić called it, is especially important in Skopje, where not only the archives but buildings themselves have been destroyed or changed beyond repair as part of the “Skopje 2014” project to give the city a makeover.

Because Americans and other outsiders now largely associate the former Yugoslavia with the wars of the 1990s, and because the architectural material was so little known even among architectural historians, many visitors have left the show surprised and enthusiastic, having seen a Yugoslavia they never knew existed. Kulić is delighted that “that’s also the impression that a lot of people who grew up in the region had. When you put together this great amount of architecture in a single place it does end up being shocking. In everyday life these pinnacles of architecture are diluted by most of the urban fabric, which is sort of mundane and mediocre. But then when you condense all of that into one place and see all of it together, it does speak with a kind of force that is not obvious in real life.”

The exhibition was made possible in large part due to the efforts of members of the curatorial team, based in Skopje, to preserve architectural plans from the post-war period that state archives have simply thrown in the trash. This “experimental preservation,” as Kulić called it, is especially important in Skopje, where not only the archives but buildings themselves have been destroyed or changed beyond repair as part of the “Skopje 2014” project to give the city a makeover.

Because Americans and other outsiders now largely associate the former Yugoslavia with the wars of the 1990s, and because the architectural material was so little known even among architectural historians, many visitors have left the show surprised and enthusiastic, having seen a Yugoslavia they never knew existed. Kulić is delighted that “that’s also the impression that a lot of people who grew up in the region had. When you put together this great amount of architecture in a single place it does end up being shocking. In everyday life these pinnacles of architecture are diluted by most of the urban fabric, which is sort of mundane and mediocre. But then when you condense all of that into one place and see all of it together, it does speak with a kind of force that is not obvious in real life.”

The exhibition was made possible in large part due to the efforts of members of the curatorial team, based in Skopje, to preserve architectural plans from the post-war period that state archives have simply thrown in the trash. This “experimental preservation,” as Kulić called it, is especially important in Skopje, where not only the archives but buildings themselves have been destroyed or changed beyond repair as part of the “Skopje 2014” project to give the city a makeover.

Some of these architectural renderings, effectively snatched out of the trash bins, were put to good use in the exhibition, where an entire room was devoted to the utopian plans to rebuild Skopje in the aftermath of the devastating 1963 earthquake. For those who appreciate Yugoslav Modernism, it is painful to see the destruction of architectural treasures as part of the city’s makeover project.

Stone Flower Monument dedicated to the victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp, Croatia, designed by Bogdan Bogdanović. Photograph by Bobonajbolji via Wikimedia Commons.
and neglect of these unique structures, and particularly painful when it is the state, whose responsibility it is to preserve cultural heritage, actively destroying it. Kulić hopes the exhibition convinced people of its significance and value before it is destroyed.

Kulić had hopeful realizations while preparing the exhibition. “From the material we had to cut we could have made another exhibition of the same size, which is really incredible and tells you that there was an enormous amount of really interesting, valuable architecture produced at the time,” he said. He wishes they could have included the work of Bosnian architect Živorad Janković, who pioneered a new building type combining sports facilities, commercial space, and business centers, the best-known example of which is the Skenderija complex in Sarajevo. He also designed similar complexes in Novi Sad, Split, and Priština.

Kulić laments that these buildings are also under threat, particularly in Sarajevo and Novi Sad, where local authorities are trying to demolish the buildings to capitalize on valuable real estate close to the city centers, rather than investing in what Kulić considers outstanding pieces of architecture. Whereas in some places market forces are threatening this architectural heritage, in other cases the market has validated Yugoslav Modernism. Kulić noted the Hotel Lone in Rovinj, Croatia, built in 2011. The hotel is a work of aesthetic homage to the Yugoslav coastal resorts of the 1970s, which the MoMA show presented in detail. While these resorts were built for the working classes to relax in a shared egalitarian space along with foreign tourists, Hotel Lone is so expensive that MoMA refused to pay for Kulić and his team to stay there during their research trip in the region. Hotel Lone is an act of aesthetic homage, but it clearly wasn’t built for the same social purpose as the Yugoslav resorts.

The social role that architecture was called on to serve in Yugoslavia is what stood out in the exhibition. Visitors saw architectural renderings and photos of kindergartens, gas stations, mosques, mass housing projects, and workers’ universities designed by premier architects.

Today, by contrast, shopping malls and luxury apartments are the premier architectural projects being built in the former Yugoslav countries.

Vladimir Kulić, Mejrema Zatrić (curatorial advisor), and Martino Stierli (co-curator, and MoMA’s Chief Curator of Architecture and Design) at the top of a mosque in Visoko, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Photograph by Jasmin Sirčo, courtesy of Vladimir Kulić.

Kulić noted New Belgrade as another surprising place where the market has validated Yugoslav urban planners. Although the development was vilified in the 1970s and 1980s, Kulić remarks, “you can drive downtown in ten minutes, there’s ample parking, you are surrounded by greenery, the quality of the housing stock is rather high … you have access to the river and to the parks, you know ultimately, what’s not to like?”

A realization that New Belgrade isn’t so bad and that Modernist 1970s-style beach resorts are hip has gone along with a broader re-engagement with brutalist architecture across the world. Kulić is pleased by this new appreciation for his old passion. “If the exhibition pushes it even further, I’d be quite happy,” he said.

Editor’s note: This is a slightly edited version of an article that appeared in Balkan Insight and is reprinted here with permission.

Daniel Petrick is a graduate student in the Harriman Institute’s MARS-REERS program.

“In everyday life these pinnacles of architecture are diluted by the urban fabric.”