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BOOK REVIEW

## Aplenc, Veronica E. *Imagining Slovene Socialist Modernity: The Urban Redesign of Ljubljana's Beloved Trnovo Neighborhood, 1951–1989*

West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2023. Pp. 228, 60 Illustrations.

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In the continuously growing field of scholarship on the architecture of socialist modernism in Yugoslavia, Veronica Aplenc's *Imagining Slovene Socialist Modernity* stands out in its scale of inquiry and the author's theoretical and methodological approach. Educated as a historical preservationist and a scholar of folklore and folklife at the University of Pennsylvania, Aplenc probes into the urban, architectural, and sociocultural minutia of Trnovo, a small neighborhood in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, once a Yugoslav republic. Aplenc's thoroughly researched book—it is important to note that it is also smartly written—engages with the entwined notions of the socialist city, past and tradition, and postwar housing at an unusual scholarly scale of a single neighborhood in an already relatively small Ljubljana. *Imagining Slovene Socialist Modernity* further stands out among the recent scholarship on the built environment in Yugoslavia due to the author's "home field of folkloric studies" and her exploration of the intersection of the modern and the premodern and the inquiry into "what happens to the everyday within that encounter" (3). In her own words, Aplenc's book follows the tradition of Steven Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain* (Berkeley, 1995) and examines the "construction of the socialist built environment as an expression of socialist ideology," as opposed to through "stylistic visual analysis" (4).

*Imagining Slovene Socialist Modernity* is aligned with the contemporary literature on architecture in Yugoslavia in its understanding of the socialist city as an urban feature lacking "nationalist sentiment, an antisocialist stance, or center-periphery antagonisms" (10). Veronica Aplenc examines Trnovo as a part of shared Yugoslav urban practices and republic-specific architectural idiosyncrasies. Along with archival research and investigation of architectural journals from the period, this work is unusual in the context of architectural historiography in its use of oral narratives grounded in the author's academic background in folkloric studies. Still, this methodological approach is based not only in Aplenc's academic background but also in the lack of archival information on smaller towns in Yugoslavia and Slovenia, making this book all the more important.

*Imagining Slovene Socialist Modernity* examines the period between 1951 and 1989 and consists of five parts: the introduction is followed by four substantive chapters. "Visions of Upscale Socialist Modernity," the first chapter, inquires into the 1950s and 1960s and the ways in which the Slovene planners in Ljubljana explored the concept of a socialist city and its forward-looking modernizing narrative. The chapter outlines the international connections of the Slovene planners of the postwar era and their particular focus on housing architecture as the "capital's population surged after the war, and its new residents urgently needed housing" (29). Chapter 2, "High Socialism's Promises for Socialist Living," examines the later socialist period in Slovenia and the architects' favoring of single-family homes in Trnovo and its far edge, Murgle. Aplenc shows how the project for Murgle illustrates the different ways the Yugoslav architects negotiated and produced socialist space, its architects recasting the "edge of Trnovo as a socialist ideal" (91). The subsequent chapter, "Where the Socialist Folk

Live,” studies the so-called socialist slum section of Trnovo—an illegally built Rakova Jelša—and the notion of “unsanctioned architecture” constructed by the residents within the context of a socialist city (95). The vernacular architecture of Rakova Jelša shines a light on another significant issue of socialist planning: the state’s inability to provide housing for all, particularly working-class citizens (125). The final chapter in Aplenc’s book, “The Historic District That Wasn’t,” explores the work of Jože Plečnik and the marginalization of preservation in socialist Yugoslavia (126). The author investigates Plečnik’s interwar architectural modernism and its place—and the place of the architect himself—in the Yugoslav urban constellation of the 1970s. Finally, Aplenc’s ultimate chapter probes into the 1980s’ renewed interest in Trnovo’s historic core (167).

*Imagining Slovene Socialist Modernity* wholly covers the second half of the twentieth century and the development of architecture in Yugoslavia and Slovenia; the author argues that “Trnovo captured every achievement and contradiction of the past century . . . all alongside early modernist architecture and medieval *carré* preserved” (178). Aplenc’s book makes a valuable addition to the growing scholarship on architecture and urban planning of state-socialist Yugoslavia: the last thirty years saw a vital development of the field, yet its authors predominantly deal with the Yugoslav republics’ capitals and examine the politically predominant spaces of Belgrade or Zagreb, among others. Aplenc’s study of a small neighborhood in Ljubljana, its architects’ links with socialist planning, influences of Scandinavian architecture, and the shifting priorities of historical preservation makes for a significant contribution to the expansion of the field, not only of socialist era architecture in Yugoslavia but also its regional particularities.