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## The Fairground as a Geopolitical Playground: the Zagreb International Trade Fair and Cold War Circumstances

### Abstract

*Zagreb is a city with centuries-old tradition of annual fairs where the first modern international trade fair was organized as early as 1864. The history of Zagreb International Trade Fair begins back in 1909, when its predecessor, trade show named Zagreb Convention was founded and its first exhibition was held next year. Over the years the Fair changed its locations several times, due to physical limitations of the place available and lack of space needed. With the last relocation to its current location on the right bank of the Sava River, close to the cardinal city axis, Zagreb Fair gained far greater importance, propelling also further development of the city and giving decisive impulse to immediate construction of emerging Novi Zagreb. The construction of the first stage of new Trade Fair started in summer 1956 according to the spatial concept by architect Marijan Haberle. In only 115 days till the vernissage a number of 13 pavilions were built, there of 7 made for foreign countries by selected national architects. For the following event in 1957 the new Fair was completed, i.e. substantially enlarged to the extension plan by Božidar Rašica to comprise a total of 21 exhibition pavilions: nine for domestic exhibitors designed by renowned Croatian architects, and ten other ones for foreign exhibitors (USA, Austrian, BRD and DDR) in addition to the already existing one and also one more for collective foreign shows as well as one for domestic representatives of foreign industries. In the upcoming decade or so several new pavilions were built, the others changed owners or users. Above all, however (new) Zagreb Trade Fair, generously arranged, embellished in time with fine landscaping and a number of open-air sculptural accents, was not only a prestigious international commercial event. Its premises became an unrivaled arena for most direct head-to-head competition of radically opposed Western and Eastern worlds, involving (following the establishment of Non-Aligned Movement 1961), also 3rd World countries in the famous AYA – Africa-Yugoslavia-Asia exhibition hall.*

**Keywords:** Zagreb International Trade Fair, pavilions, New Zagreb

Zagreb is a city with a centuries-old tradition of annual fairs, where the first modern international trade fair was organized as early as 1864. As in many other cities, the fairs developed from markets. Until the mid-seventeenth century, markets in Zagreb were organized on the traditional central squares of the upper town, Gradec and Kaptol. The idea of hosting a major trade exhibition emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, and in 1864, on the Fairground (Sajmište) Square and in today's Rectorate Building, the first in a series of internationally important commercial exhibitions was held (the Triune Kingdom National Exposition). The National Economy and Forestry Exhibition followed in 1891. Over the years, the Fair changed its location several times due to the need to expand and the physical limitations on the space available. The following exhibition was relocated to the eastern part of the city, where the Croatian-Slavonian Economy Exposition was held in 1906.

The history of the Zagreb International Trade Fair begins in 1909, when its predecessor, the Zagreb Convention, was founded, while its first exhibition was held the following year. The initial impetus for the Trade Fair came from the mayor, Milan Amruš, who realized how important it would be for the future development of the city. The Zagreb Fair had five large permanent exhibition buildings, as well as thirty companies with their own pavilions, and national pavilions for, initially, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Czechoslovakia and France, and later also for Italy and Spain. One of the permanent struc-

tures was a former riding house converted into an "Industrial Palace".

Exhibitions were also organized in 1911 and 1913. The end of the First World War saw the formation of a new state, The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In the new state, Zagreb was the center of industry, trade, commerce and finance. The need to reinforce the links between the newly established state and the market led to the revival of the Zagreb Convention and the first post-war trade fair was organized in the summer of 1922. It was conceived as a Kingdom trade fair with an international focus [1]. After the revival two events took place each year – a special spring show in April (cars and other motor vehicles and individual branches of the economy) and a major annual international trade fair in September with numerous specialized exhibitions. The fair of 1922 covered an area of over 31,000 m<sup>2</sup>, including 13,000 m<sup>2</sup> in the pavilions, and there was a total of 650 exhibitors, including over five hundred from the host nation. International participants included companies from France, Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Poland, Switzerland and Italy.

Due to the growth of the Zagreb Convention, its location soon became unsuitable. In 1930 a call for proposals was made to reorganize the venue, but this idea was dropped. Instead, the decision was taken to relocate, and in 1934, after years of searching, the Convention was moved to the large site of a former furniture factory – "Bothe &

Ehrmann” – on the Savska Road. This move represented the final acceptance of the Zagreb Convention’s development as an urban institution with significance reaching beyond the city limits. The new location eliminated the basic spatial restrictions of the Zagreb trade fair and provided the necessary conditions for its continued evolution.

At the end of the 1935, a contest to redesign and reinvigorate the Zagreb Convention was announced. The architects Hinko Bauer and Marijan Haberle won the first prize. The design of the complex by Bauer & Haberle implemented in 1936-1938, reflects the high quality of the ensemble as a whole and of national pavilions individually [2]. It is appropriate to evaluate the Zagreb Convention using the criteria for constructing complexes used for the international fairs of the era, particularly the 1937 Paris Exposition. Individual pavilions can be compared with the structures built for international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale. This was a kind of global competition in architecture, similar to the international section of the Paris exhibition in front of the Trocadero with the Finnish pavilion of Alvar Aalto, and the Yugoslav one designed by Josip Seissel. The permanent national exhibition pavilions of France, Italy, Germany and Czechoslovakia were designed by foreign architects – architects Robert Camelot and Jacques Paul & Herb with the constructor Bernard Lafaille in 1937, Dante Petroni in 1937, Otto Roemer in 1937, and Ferdinand Fencel 1938, respectively. The French exhibition pavilion was built in the center of the new trade fair complex. Its position and circular plan were taken from the first-prize-winning design. The pavilion was cylindrical with an irregular perimeter, covered with a thin-shell steel structure (“la voile mince”), and had an inverted conical shape with a diameter of 33 meters. The cone was built of 2 mm-thick steel plates positioned 15 meters above the ground on a ring of 12 tubular posts with a diameter of 80 cm each. The posts stood on short reinforced-concrete base columns rising from the foundation ring. The lower part of the perimeter had masonry walls, while the upper part was built of wooden frames and boards with narrow vertical windows. Additional natural lighting was provided through the central roof glazing. The pavilion was heated by an electric heating system. The structure was built by the “Braća Faltus” construction company, while the “Braća Ševčik” iron and metal foundry produced the metal construction. In the Zagreb fair complex the French pavilion represents a unique engineering innovation, because it was the first time a thin-shell construction had been applied to a load-bearing structure. The pavilion has exceptional cultural, historical, technical and technological value, far exceeding its local significance, and was therefore repeatedly published and appraised in the international professional press. The Italian pavilion, a worthy achievement of interwar rationalism, was also immediately published in the periodical *Heraklith-Rundschau*. The Czechoslovak pavilion, a significant building in the spirit of what was known as scientific functionalism, was

highly appreciated within the oeuvre of its author. Interestingly, the pavilion of the Third Reich in Zagreb was designed as an elegant, atrial, skeletal structure in the Bauhaus style. It was completely different from the German pavilion designed with totalitarian architecture by Albert Speer, which was built almost simultaneously for the 1937 Paris Exposition. The architects of the French and Czechoslovakian pavilions in Zagreb occupy highly valued positions in the international history of modern architecture, while the designers of the Italian and German pavilions have fallen into complete oblivion [2].

The dynamic development of the Zagreb Convention was unfortunately short lived: the big autumn show in 1939, where the Philips Company presented a television exhibition with a movable TV studio, coincided with the German invasion of Poland and the outbreak of the Second World War. Soon the activity of the Convention began to fade and in autumn 1942, instead of the international fair of samples, only a Croatian-German agricultural festival was held. The exhibition activity on the Savska Road site was reignited in 1947 under the new name “Zagreb Fair”. Post-war changes, both social and political, demanded a reorganization of the Zagreb Fair in a way that suited to the government of the newly established Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The composition of foreign exhibitors changed significantly with the leading role now taken by the Soviet Union. The affiliation of Yugoslavia to the socialist bloc and the beginning of the Cold War, were both important factors in how individual states presented themselves at the Zagreb Fair [1]. The International Sample Fair was organized with the purpose of promoting the first Yugoslav five-year plan for boosting the national economy. At the fairground, the former French pavilion, located in the middle, now became the Central Pavilion, while the Czechoslovak pavilion was retained for use by Czechoslovakia; the Concert shell between the main entrance and the French Pavilion (which became the national pavilion of independent Croatia in 1941) was demolished, and the picturesque Banovina pavilion was replaced with an unsightly addition to the former German pavilion. The new era was marked with a sgraffito mural titled *Work, industry, construction* by Ernest Tomašević [2].

In June 1948 an attempt was made to sabotage the Zagreb Fair: “...the countries of the Cominform bloc wished to obstruct the fair by first hiring pavilions and then cancelling their participation at the last moment. Thanks to the resourcefulness of the Zagreb Fair management, this scheme was not only prevented – quickly filling the entire exhibition space previously hired by the USSR – but was also turned into our advantage, the western side of the fairgrounds being expanded by three new pavilions” [3]. As the Yugoslav League of Communists under Comrade Tito had been expelled from Cominform that same month for having refused to accept limits on its independence of action, sabotage of the Zagreb Fair was not entirely unexpected.

From the early 1950s the Zagreb Fair yet again showed a need for expansion. At the same time, Većeslav Holjevac, mayor of Zagreb, recognized the city's need to cross the Sava River and to continue its logical progression to the south. Out of this came the idea of making a new venue for the Zagreb Fair on the right bank of the Sava River. In the spring of 1953, experts from various city institutions came together to evaluate the possible expansion of the city, and the Zagreb Fair, beyond the Sava" [3]. A location was conditionally approved, along with plans to expand the city south of the river.

The construction of the first stage of the new Zagreb Fair started in summer 1956, along the lines of a spatial concept by the architect Marijan Haberle. In record time, with only 115 days till the vernissage, the first 41,000 m<sup>2</sup> of the exhibition space, complete with all utilities and facilities, was completed on a plot measuring 325 x 900 m. Thirteen pavilions were built, seven of which were designed for foreign countries by selected national architects. Italy, the USSR, Romania, Czechoslovakia, China, Hungary and Poland took the opportunity to build new structures with a total exhibition area of 19,432 m<sup>2</sup>. For Yugoslav exhibitors, the Zagreb Fair authorities built five pavilions totaling 20,464 m<sup>2</sup> in area. Due to the unexpectedly high interest from exhibitors and the lack of space, two other pavilions originally earmarked for Yugoslavia were ceded to India, Austria and West Germany. In addition, some foreign countries, including the USA, Great Britain, Liechtenstein, Israel and Pakistan, stayed at the old fairground, occupying some 20,000 m<sup>2</sup> of exhibition space in the city center (Savska Road), making a total of twenty-five participating countries from three continents.

In September 1956, Marshal Tito opened the 51st International Fair in Zagreb, which was in that year held in two locations: on the completed part of the new grounds, and on the old fairground in Savska Road. During the opening it was pointed out that "the Zagreb Fair 'is becoming a manifestation of two permanent policy aspirations of Yugoslavia: aspirations for economic progress and aspiration for a wider and broader cooperation between Yugoslavia and other countries'" [4]. "With the 51st International Fair, Yugoslavia was affirmed as an industrial land and at the same time had become a manifestation of Europe's economic scale. That, business people of many countries did not hide" [5].

As part of US President Eisenhower's foreign economic policy, which started in 1954, United States participation in international trade fairs included exhibitions behind the Iron Curtain. The first such appearance was at the International Trade Fair in Zagreb in Communist Yugoslavia 1956. While little was expected in immediate trade, the fair offered a chance to counter Soviet propaganda and present an approach to American life and resources [6]. The theme was "America at home", where Yugoslav workers were invited to compare their daily lives with those of their American counterparts. The display model was a completely furnished "pumpkin" – a shaped dwell-



**Fig. 1.** Zagreb International Trade Fair, aerial view 1957 in front line – Hungarian, Soviet and Chinese pavilions; behind – Czechoslovak, Romanian and GDR pavilions; far behind – USA and Engineering pavilions

ing of sprayed concrete designed by the architect John Johansen especially for the Zagreb Fair. [Fig. 1.] "It is the first building of its kind in the world ... The structure of the building is made of a concrete shell covering over the pipe framework. A concrete circular dome covers a floor of about 15 m in diameter. The frame, coated with concrete (concrete can be also sprayed), is mounted on the edge of the circular foundation and connected at the top to a tubular joint. The most interesting thing is that the roof of this building does not require any central pillar, so the entire surface of the building is completely free for decoration" [7]. Despite its interesting project, the United States exhibit was at a disadvantage, being housed at the old fairground in downtown Zagreb, while the Russians and Chinese had permanent buildings of their own at the new grounds outside the city [8].

For the following event in 1957, the new Fair was complete, having been substantially enlarged in line with designs by Božidar Rašica, to comprise a total of 21 pavilions: nine for domestic exhibitors, designed by renowned Croatian architects, ten others for foreign countries (the existing pavilions were joined by those for the USA, Austria and the two Germans), one more for collective foreign shows, and the last one for domestic representatives of foreign industries. [Fig. 2.]

The first US pavilion at the Zagreb Trade Fair was designed by the Walter Dorwin Teague Association. It contained 4,250 m<sup>2</sup> of space. Most of the construction materials were made in Yugoslavia, including ten Y-shaped steel posts supporting the building, each stretching its arms 29 meters across the width of the building. Aluminum louvers, each almost one meter wide and 4.8 meters long, covered the façade [9]. [Fig. 3.] These were fabricated in the US and shipped across the ocean with "do-



Fig. 2. Shaped dwelling of sprayed concrete designed by John Johansen – US display model at Zagreb International Trade Fair

it-yourself" instructions for the construction crew. The pavilion included an appliance store, a model apartment, an area for farm machinery and a fully equipped laundromat, creating a sensational picture of the American way of life. By creating consumer demands that the Soviets could not yet fulfill, Americans wanted to push the independent-minded President Tito closer to the West [10]. Many years later Walter Dorwin Teague explained the situation:

*"In 1957, I designed and built the permanent United States pavilion in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, for the Department of Commerce. With some misgivings, Paul Medalie, the Commerce man, and I gave in to the pleadings of the Yugoslav fair management and agreed to let them do the construction. The schedule was almost impossible; because of delays in the contract we couldn't break ground until June, and the 350-foot-long building was supposed to open, with exhibits, Sept. 10.*



Fig. 3. USA pavilion at Zagreb International Trade Fair 1957

*The Yugoslavs wanted to show what they could do. The steel mill in Maribor worked 24 hours a day, and 13 machine shops in Zagreb cranked out the huge louvers that made up the facade, using the material we shipped over. Our people and the Yugoslavs worked side by side, communicating in sign language.*

*The main exhibit was a complete duplication of a large U.S. supermarket, and the U.S. Food Chain Association did a masterly job of bringing over everything and setting it up. On Sept. 10, Marshal Tito walked down the aisle and cut the ribbon to open the show. The supermarket was a huge success, and the Zagreb officials went on radio with glowing praise of the building, the exhibits and the cooperation that had overcome all obstacles.*

*Almost 30 years have passed since then, and I haven't been back, but I know that at that time there were very few people in Zagreb who didn't admire and want to emulate the United States, and that includes Communist Party members. We weren't trying to tell them to give up Communism; we were saying: 'This is how we do it. Judge for yourselves.' "* [11].

The permanent American pavilion was the largest exhibition building constructed by the United States in any foreign country at the time of construction, and it was supervised by the designer's son, Walter Dorwin Teague, Jr [12]. The first American supermarket in a communist country, Supermarket USA, as a joint project of the National Association of Food Chains and the US, was housed in one third of the pavilion [13]. Six hundred manufacturers contributed equipment and merchandise for the exhibit, including packed and perishable items.

The American pavilion drew visitors with a series of interesting exhibits (agricultural and household appliances, the typical American home) and a supermarket that had never before been seen in Yugoslavia [10], while the pavilion of the USSR, dominated by huge machinery, special vehicles, also presented "a 'new model of the Volga passenger wagons', trucks, and a self-propelled combined harvester SK-3." Only the free sightseeing flight by Aeroflot helicopter, brought along with the Soviet exhibition, went some way toward matching the delights of American abundance [14].

The following year, the struggle for supremacy between the Soviets and the Americans was once again expressed at the Zagreb Fair with demonstrations of the competing achievements of their nations. The idea behind the US exhibit was to "show the Yugoslavs that American ideas and methods can help them solve some of their problems... The food packaging machinery, for instance, is a follow up of last year's highly successful exhibit of a typical American neighborhood supermarket. The supermarket idea has caught on here since then – about fourteen are said to have been built or are being built in Zagreb and Belgrade." [15] Tito, having inspected the US units on display, commented: "Just the thing for Yugoslavia." Reporting from the Fair, the Russian press *Moskovskaia pravda* obviously criticized Tito's short

visits to the pavilions of the socialist countries (three to seven minutes), as opposed to the US pavilion, where he stayed for over 30 minutes. They concluded that Tito's attitude to the Fair was just as questionable as his views on Marxist doctrine [16].

Throughout the years "rival suitors – the United States and the Soviet Union – woo Yugoslavia with technological triumphs" [17] developing competition that intended to maintain economic, military and political interests in this part of the globe. In 1959, for instance, the main Soviet exhibit was Sputnik 3, an automatic scientific laboratory spacecraft. The same year, the United States countered with a North American X-15 rocket-powered aircraft, along with the Transland Ag-2, and cars such as the Chevrolet Impala and Studebaker Lark VI. The most significant achievements from the Space Race were exhibited at the Zagreb Fair shortly after their use [Fig. 4.].



**Fig. 4.** Soviet exhibit Sputnik 3 and United States exhibit North American X-15 rocket-powered aircraft at Zagreb International Trade Fair 1959

Competing for position, even at the Fair, led to several new pavilions being built in the following decade or so, while others changed owners or users. Italy constructed three new national pavilions in 1956, 1959 and 1962, selling their previous ones to Poland, the Netherlands and Switzerland respectively, while the original Hungarian pavilion of 1956, having a light and easy-to-disassemble metal structure, made way for the new West German pavilion and moved nearby; it was later moved to a more distant point in order to accommodate domestic wooden industries, while Hungary shared a new pavilion with Spain. The largest pavilion built for a foreign country was the second USSR pavilion, designed by Boris S. Vilenskiy in 1967. That same year, the second American pavilion was also built, designed by Fritz Bornemann using the innovative Mero system of nodes and beams, positioned closer to the main city axis.

In the chronology of the Zagreb Fair, the 1960s were the years of the greatest developments with a fast-growing economy in general and particularly rapid industrial advances. This enabled further strengthening of international trade and politics. The expansion of the fair in 1963 was mainly due to developing countries in Africa and Asia using international trade exhibitions to promote themselves as part of the world economy [3]. Within the

Non-Aligned movement, the AYA – Africa-Yugoslavia-Asia – exhibition center played an important role in world relations. The Round Table of Developing Countries, a permanent forum for stimulating cooperation among developing countries, used especially for the transfer of knowledge and technology, also took place at the Zagreb Fair, along with its pioneering role in presenting developing countries to the rest of the world [18].

In the 1970s, the trend in fairs tended towards specialized events, and the Zagreb Fair management also adopted such a business policy. In parallel with the founding of specialized fairs, the tradition of the Zagreb International Autumn Fair was maintained. In the late 1980s, the history of the fair reached another turning point with the break-up of Yugoslavia. A period of transition ensued, and a significant part of the market was lost. With a view to establishing closer links between the economies of particular countries and the domestic market, the Partner Country project was initiated in 1987 at the Zagreb Fair. Despite the turbulent social and political events in the 1990s, the Zagreb Fair continued to be held [3]. The last twenty years have been characterized by a slowdown in activities.

Since 2003 the entire complex of the Zagreb Fair has been registered cultural property with 8 individually protected pavilions: the USSR pavilion, designed by J. Abramov in 1956 – a distinctive exhibition hall, 14.2 m in height with a 27.5 m arch span, consisting of prefabricated mounting elements resting on two monolithic reinforced-concrete frames; the Chinese pavilion designed by Cheng Sung Mao in 1956 the Czechoslovakian pavilion from 1956, designed by the Czechoslovak architect Josef Hrubý as the only major building at the Zagreb Fair whose load-bearing structure is made of wood, making it a rarity among the mostly concrete and steel buildings typical of fairs; the International 'collective' pavilion by architect Ivo Vitić, from 1957 – a reinforced concrete structure of the original system, with cables on the roof, whose elegant silhouette and mesh-ribbed-surface gable walls make it truly stand out [Fig. 5.]; the Engineering pavilion from 1957 by architect Božidar Rašica – a simple object with large dimensions and an airy construction (steel and glass) that allows variable spatial solutions and multipurpose use, located on



**Fig. 5.** International 'collective' pavilion, Zagreb International Trade Fair 1957



**Fig. 6.** Engineering pavilion, Zagreb International Trade Fair 1957

the very edge of the fair, in order to facilitate access and use, without the need of going deeper into the grounds of the fair [Fig. 6.]; the third Italian pavilion built in 1962 by Raffaele Contigiani and Giuseppe Sambito – this project aimed to create an architectural structure showing new technical possibilities (inverted pyramids made of

lightweight ribs covered with sheet metal and glass. The design allows flexible shifts that may be caused by the wind or the stretching of the steel acting on the pyramids themselves, on their covers and on the glass wall membrane) [Fig. 7.]; the Hypar of 1964, again by Božidar Rašica – a reinforced concrete shell designed as an information point; and the DDR, also designed by Božidar Rašica in 1964 – the design is based on a modular spatial system, where six major load-bearing concrete piers carry inverted pyramids. The mantle object is derived from what was at the time an entirely new building material: molded glass elements [19]. The existing urban matrix of the Zagreb Fair in its present situation is the guiding commitment for future constructors.

The principles, on which the pavilions for trade fairs were built, were not rigidly determined, because the role and



**Fig. 7.** Third Italian pavilion, Zagreb International Trade Fair 1962

character of the fair, in conveying the latest ideas and products to an immediate audience, changed in accordance with social, economic, political and other factors. By a tradition, European nations tended to build their own pavilions for the Zagreb trade shows: France and Czechoslovakia had their own pavilions here in 1922, and then there was, of course, a great architectural contest between the German, French, Italian and Czechoslovak pavilions at new Zagreb Convention in 1936/1937.

The last relocation of the Zagreb Fair, in 1956, to its current location on the right bank of the Sava River, close to the main city axis, was a step of far greater importance than simply moving the fair. It was a decisive moment in the expansion of the city, which propelled further development and gave added impulse to the immediate construction of the emerging New Zagreb. The Zagreb Fair was always a place of innovation, in terms of both architecture and the exhibits themselves. The innovative techniques used in the design and construction of the pavilions (the thin shell of the French pavilion, the sprayed concrete house and the Mero system used in the US pavilions), combined with the way the latest achievements in science and culture were presented, ensured that the Zagreb Fair played a significant and inescapable role in the history of trade fairs.

Above all, however, the (new) Zagreb Trade Fair, generously arranged and embellished over time with some fine landscaping and a number of open-air sculptural accents was not only a prestigious international commercial event: its premises became an unrivaled arena for the most direct head-to-head competitions between the diametrically opposed Western and Eastern worlds, eventually augmented (following the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961) by the addition of third-world countries in the famous AYA – Africa-Yugoslavia-Asia – exhibition hall.

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