

DUBRAVKO BAČIĆ

## THE ARCHITECTURE OF DUBROVNIK BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

### ARHITEKTURA DUBROVNIKA IZMEĐU DVA SVJETSKA RATA

ANTUN BAĆE



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Antun Baće's long-awaited book *The Architecture of Dubrovnik between the Two World Wars* is a truly masterful, meticulous and comprehensive exploration of Dubrovnik's interwar architectural heritage. The book grew out of Baće's dedicated research carried out for his 2015 Ph.D. thesis, supervised by the late Professor Tomislav Premerl and defended at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. His academic pursuits and extensive archival research blended perfectly with Baće's field expertise and knowledge of the area, developed during years of professional career as Heritage Preservation Officer at the Conservation Department in Dubrovnik (and its former Head).

Baće's book offers thorough insight into the architecture of the interwar period in Dubrovnik and its immediate surroundings (from Cavtat in the east to Trsteno in the west, including the Elaphite Islands). What is presented are the most important examples from the total building activity of the period, estimated at around 600 new buildings (plus numerous adaptations, extensions and additions of existing buildings) are.

The introductory discussion on the very notion of 'tradition' and its meaning in the context of the Dubrovnik region has enabled an authoritative interpretation of a qualitatively diverse and quantitatively imposing building stock. Yet, precisely because of the obvious dependence of interwar architecture on architectural heritage, present not only in Dubrovnik but also in the wider Mediterranean, Baće had to deal with prejudice about the loss of architectural value after the fall of the Republic of Dubrovnik. Reaffirming the continuity, he skillfully interpreted the 19<sup>th</sup> century building development before moving onto the interwar period. In addition to architecture and urban development, it was equally important to explain the political and cultural circumstances during the French and Austrian administration in Dubrovnik.

In several inspired chapters, the author further outlines the great expectations brought on by the end of the First World War, while also focusing on the deep disappointment of the people of Dubrovnik with the new Yugo-

slav state. However, despite the provincial environment, the vitality of the descendants of the once powerful city-state resulted in high cultural achievements. Although, according to Baće's interpretation, in Dubrovnik's world, there was much more sensibility for nurturing literature and painting than for nurturing architecture, thanks to its unsurpassed architectural heritage and wealthy clients, in the interwar period the city remained an attractive environment for architects from both near and far. Still, the distinct dominance of residential architecture in relation to public and sacred, as well as the simultaneous application of different stylistic currents, from vernacular regionalism through eclecticism to modernism, has led the author to replace the established practice of chronological and typological discourse with an analysis of architects and their works.

The key section of the book dedicated to "Creators and their works" contains nine chapters with masterfully arranged architects and groups, entailing authors from local master-builders to established architects intermittently active in Dubrovnik. The role of the conservation office led by the charismatic Kosta Strajnić, an ardent proponent of modern architecture and the main promoter of the most important modern architect active in Dubrovnik – Nikola Dobrović, is rightfully analyzed in a chapter of its own.

Among those coming from other places and active in the Dubrovnik area, the most significant is certainly the arrival of young Nikola Dobrović from Prague. He designed and built truly exceptional and internationally relevant work during his 10-year stay in Dubrovnik. Zagreb-based architects active in Dubrovnik in the period between the two wars – Mladen Kauzlaric, Stjepan Gomboš, Lavoslav Horvat, Harold Bilinić, Drago Galic, Zdenko Strizic, Bela Auer, and others – brought in high standards with their projects and, furthermore, demonstrated how to reconcile the principles of modern architecture with the specificities of local architectural heritage.

The bearers of modernity are contrasted by Lavoslav Horvat and Harold Bilinić with the monumental Neo-Historicist villa of the ship-

owner Božo Banac in Ploče, which once again, in the most visible place in the city, refers to the heritage of Dubrovnik's Gothic-Renaissance summer villas. The original interpretation of the palace as a complex work of architecture, extending beyond the discourse on the continuity of tradition and modernity, could indeed be applied to a large part of Dubrovnik's interwar architectural heritage. Architects from Split (Ivan Ivacic, Fabijan Kaliterna and Budimir Pervan) left their mark in Dubrovnik too, as did Ivan Mestrovic and Heinrich Lauterbach. The same is true of the great Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik and his students.

Baće extensively discusses the most important built and unrealized projects, assessing their significance in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Croatian architecture. In doing so, he routinely re-examines and corrects certain misattributions or wrong years, introduces new data, and expands our knowledge of the works of certain architects and master-builders, some of whom were poorly known or completely forgotten. Thanks to Baće's research, we now know more about Jozo Dražić, Fridrich Valenta, Drago Pogacić, Rikard Trostman, Vilim Dorsner, to name just a few, and how much they contributed to Dubrovnik's interwar architectural development. Nevertheless, in his research, Baće is not guided only by architectural quality; he paints a broader picture of the overall architectural production, and situates the general characteristics of the interwar building and urban development in a larger social context.

Baće consulted and scrupulously collected all available data from publications and professional literature, archival sources and old newspapers, so we can learn a lot about the historical details of every particular design and building discussed, architects, clients, and the most significant architectural features. For this book, beautifully illustrated with valuable visual material, numerous reproductions of little-known or unknown architectural drawings and old photographs, Antun Baće was recently awarded the 2023 Annual Book Award by the Society of Art Historians of Croatia.