Jelena Bogdanović, Lilien Filipovitch Robinson and Igor Marjanović, eds.  

The ambitiously conceived title of this illustrated collected volume, which is about inception, development and various forms of Serbian “modernism” and “modernity” in arts and architecture in the interwar period, emphatically indicates the status of both cultural liminality and exceptionality, and presupposes a role of bridging the civilizational polarities. The book consists of fourteen different chapters and an introduction, which aims at presenting the complexity of modernist art tendencies in this part of Europe, stretched between the international and local, national and regional, beyond the usual tropes of the civilizational belatedness and of what Maria Todorova has called the East European “Trap of Backwardness”. While exploring the complexity and entanglement of Serbian modernism in visual culture, literature and architecture, the book helps reveal how the global cultural impact of modernity developed interesting local variants, which is still an understudied subject, marginalized in scholarly discourse. The thought-provoking introduction was written by Jelena Bogdanović, Assistant Professor of architectural history at Iowa State University. Although she specializes in the field of Byzantine art and architecture, she has ventured into a field beyond her primary academic background — a daring enterprise which has brought both positive and negative effects to the volume she has edited jointly with Lilien Filipovitch Robinson and Igor Marjanović. The wider and deeper focus on the subject is more than welcome, for Bogdanović in her introduction sets the scene for acknowledging Serbian modernism beyond genealogies, formal and typological enquiries and stylistic phases of modernist art and architecture, which is still a standard scope in both local and (most of the) international scholarship on the subject. However, there does not seem to be an in-depth analysis in many of the chapters as one would hope for after reading the introduction. Moreover, the conceptual link between the chapters is not entirely and recognizably structured: the picture it gives is fragmented and elusive, threatening the comprehensive diachronic and conceptual coherence of the phenomena discussed in various chapters.

The scholarly scope, theoretical achievements and methodological apparatus differ greatly from one chapter to another, which is explicitly declared in the editor’s outright note about “juxtaposing well-known and unfamiliar material” (p. 23) to the readers. Undoubtedly, this “well-known material” is covered in chapters by Lilien F. Robinson about Central European painters painters
Uroš Predić and Paja Jovanović, Miloš R. Perović’s account of Zenitism and architecture, as well as Dragana Ćorović and Viktorija Kamilić’s chapters on housing projects in Belgrade; most of these narratives either reiterate issues already recognized by the existing scholarship or make a modest step forward in providing the specialized readers with novel or unconventional accounts. Marina Đurđević’s chapter on the architect brothers Krstić is the most conspicuous example of this. However, most of the other chapters consist of interesting and insightful narratives which explore the complexity of relationships between modernity and tradition in Serbian modernism while analyzing various phenomena ranging from literature to architecture. A gender perspective on art and sensitivity to the issues of cultural identity distinguish several excellent essays: Svetlana Tomić’s “The Travel Writings of Jelena J. Dimitrijević: Feminist Politics and Privileged Intellectual Identity” outlines the cultural significance of one of the first famous Serbian woman writers; Ljubomir Milanović’s provocative essay “Cover Girl: Envisioning the Veil of Milena Pavlović-Barilli” uses the dichotomy of “Self” and “Other” to explore the limits of modernity in the local context; Bojana Popović’s chapter “Women and Applied Arts in Belgrade, 1918–1941” sheds light on the problem of mutual marginality of women artists and the applied arts in interwar Belgrade; and the last in this series of chapters is Anna Novakov’s “Educating Girls: Women Architects and the Design of Three Schools in Belgrade, 1908–1938” opens up a relatively new perspective on the already well explored opus of architects Jelisaveta Načić (1878–1955) and Milica Krstić (1887–1964). A novel approach in architectural matters characterizes Aleksandar Kadijević and Tadija Stefanović’s essay “Expressionism and Serbian Architecture Between the World Wars”, which has opened the vastly understudied problem of expressionism in Serbian architecture, establishing its two major trends: the “Romantic” and the “Modernist”. Nebojša Stanković’s interesting and unconventional essay “Niška Banja: Modern Architecture for a Modern Spa” traces the origins and roles of modern architecture back to the social conditions and specific milieu of a Serbian provincial town.

The book, however, has some weaknesses which have to be addressed. The most important one lies in neglecting the complex historical realities of what the editors call “Interwar Serbia”. Namely, throughout the volume “Serbia” remains a vaguely outlined cultural and political entity glaringly devoid of its contemporaneous post-Serbian, Yugoslav context. On the other hand, the cultural entities of “East” and “West” are not critically examined beyond a somewhat stereotyped imagery of contrasts, except for the very few contributors. According to the applied methodological framework marked by avoiding “partisan scholarship” and “politicized discussions” (p. 21) — but also by avoiding