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Pablo Berzal Cruz, Athena Stourna, Tyrone Grima, Alba Balmaseda Domínguez



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Dragana Konstantinović

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Architecture Plays! New Spatial Narratives of Novi Sad in Architectural Documentaries

Dragana Konstantinović

Department of Architecture and Urbanism, Faculty of Technical Sciences,
University of Novi Sad, Serbia

Abstract

Architectural documentary film has become one of the primary tools for archiving, recording, and representing the performance and changes in architectural spaces. In the city of Novi Sad, the specially established production house Neoplanta Film adopted the modernisation of urban space in the second half of the 20th century in the short documentary footage. Through this project, an avant-garde film group of young directors, cinematographers, and screenwriters emerged. The fragmentary digitised archival material from this project records the process of radical urban transformations of the city.

This work deals with creating and re-creating new urban narratives that promote the modern history of Novi Sad and redefine its monolithic identity image (Konstantinović & Zeković, 2023-2). By observing the city as a system of different architectural layers and associated urban narratives, architectural documentary film's importance in revitalising forgotten urban narratives, which has been suppressed due to unsatisfactory ideological connotations, is explored. In these processes, whether based on re-editing and re-assembling film archives or creating new film material, the role of architecture and architectural space is crucial for understanding the history, atmosphere, sentiment, and context of new urban stories.

The work raises key questions about the conceptualisation of such projects: Is it possible to recreate urban narratives through documentary film? What is the role of architecture and architectural space in this? How are spatial narratives created? Can space preserve memory? Following the two projects of the research group BAZA—a spatial praxis platform—approaches will be presented on how architecture and architectural space become vital embodiments of time and how they can be employed in the storytelling of urban history.

Keywords: Architecture, Urban Space, Urban Narrative, Urban History, Architectural documentary, Performativity of architectural space

Modernisation Recorded: *Neoplanta Film Novi Sad*

The documentary film became a vital medium within the architectural domain in the second half of the 20th century. This period saw a significant transformation in urban spaces, driven by the ambition to establish new social orders (Konstantinović & Zeković, 2023-1). Architecture and urban planning were not just functional but symbolic, representing progress, modernity, and the future (Zeković & Konstantinović, 2022). In the city of Novi Sad, the specially established production house Neoplanta Film was created? following the economic development of the Province of Vojvodina. For a group of young filmmakers and professionals, this was more than just documenting construction sites—it was about witnessing and narrating the radical changes in the urban landscape as symbols of a new socialist life. Their films captured the process of modernisation, documenting the progression from old to new, the reconstruction of the city, the building of new neighbourhoods, and the new rituals of urban life.

Through this project, an avant-garde film group of young directors, cinematographers, and screenwriters emerged. Their early work's legacy—the evidence of the emergence of the first film-making professionals in the province—lies still unsorted and in 8,000 film cans, waiting to be archived appropriately.

Spaces & Documents: Toward the Creation of the (New) Narrative

The rare fragments of digitised archives of the Neoplanta film incited the idea of using this archive material to explore the urban history and contemporality of Novi Sad. In this context, architectural documentary films are not merely historical records; they are tools for re-examining and revitalising urban narratives, especially those suppressed due to ideological reasons.

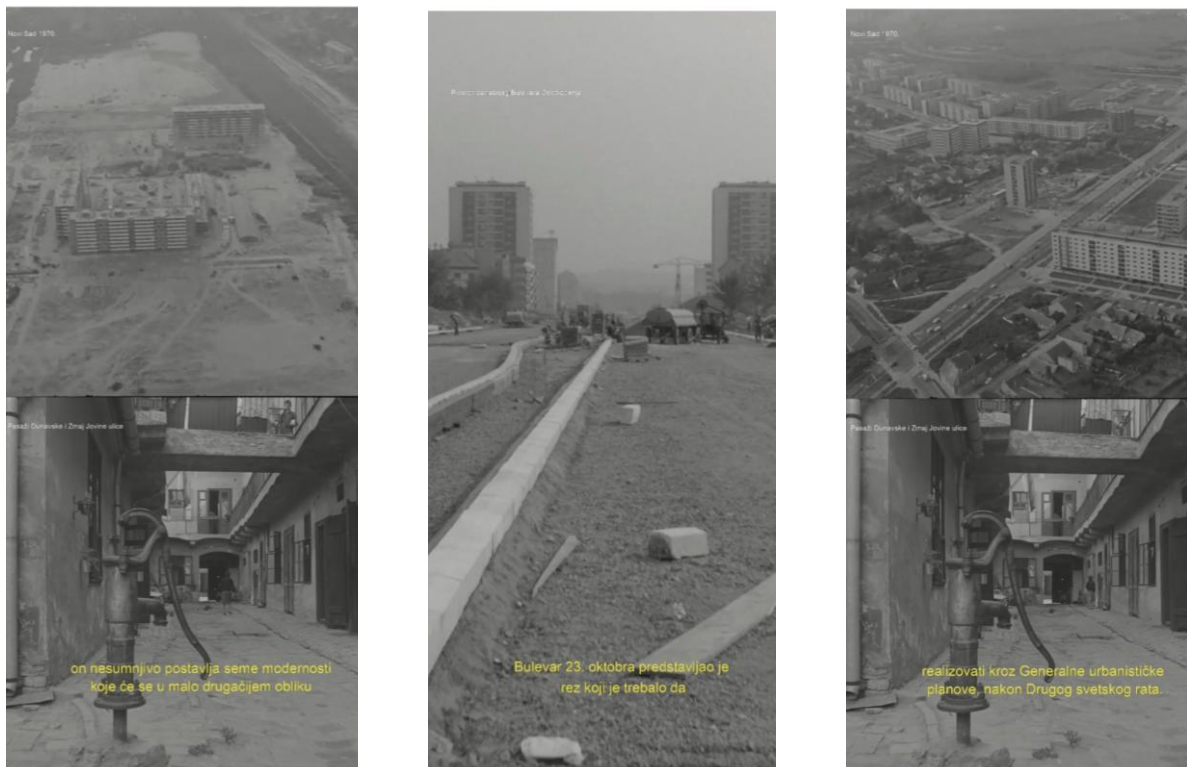
In the project *Modernisation in Six Stories*, the Neoplanta film archive is used to create vertical cut-outs and diptychs, constructing the visual narratives of urban history (Figure 1). These re-edited film segments offer a compelling storytelling method, supported by a new audio narrative. Architecture and architectural space are crucial for understanding the time, atmosphere, sentiment, and changes in the urban environment.

Six stories follow the major topics of urban transformation: 'Birth of a Modern City' shows the creation of Novi Sad, which seemed 'destined' to become a city from its establishment. 'Long live the Industry!' deals with the massive infrastructural projects that relocated the production and railways to the north, marking the shift in urban expansion towards the Danube River. 'Novi Sad Boulevards: Life In-between' highlights how the city was reshaped by modern urban planning and the creation of new boulevards, while 'City on the Sand' delves into the construction of large residential areas. The segment 'Life of the City' shows

the improvement of living standards in the city, while ‘Mišeluk: Epilogue of Yugoslav Optimism’ is about planning the Mišeluk settlement —one of the last ambitious urban projects of the Yugoslav era (Jović, et.al., 2023). This reimagined footage was presented as a video installation in February 2022 under the project *Novi Sad – Modern City*, within the Novi Sad European Capital of Culture programme (Figure 2).

Figure 1

Frames from diptychs based on re-edited *Neoplanta* film archive, © 2022 by BAZA – Spatial Praxis Platform



Urban Ghosts: *Novkabel ERA*

The second project, a contemporary architectural documentary *Novkabel ERA*, examines the Novkabel headquarters building (Figure 3). This imposing structure, located in the industrial outskirts of Novi Sad, stood abandoned for years, becoming a ghostly presence in the urban landscape. The documentary reconstructs the history of this building and the industrial complex surrounding it, utilising architectural photography to capture the eerie atmosphere of the now-empty administrative tower and its ruined halls.

It is not just a story about a physical structure but also about the lives, aspirations, and challenges of those who occupied these spaces. The history of Novkabel and the city of Novi Sad is intertwined, and the documentary highlights how this once-successful factory was a crucial player in the city’s industrial and technological development. The routines of

the former employees, and their interactions with the space accompany the major storyline—the story about the factory, the city, and the people.

The ERA Novkabel building was designed and built in 1983 as a production and administrative building of a unique program within the Novi Sad cable factory, which was involved in developing electronics, computers and automation. The decision to start such an ambitious program, from which the first computers ERA20 and ERA60 emerged, was a logical step in the development of this successful work organisation, recognised by the AVNOJ award in 1982 for the most successful work organisation in the SFRY. Following the contemporaries of this project and the "ghosts" at the location of Novkabel, the film reconstructs the urban and social history of Novi Sad, the context and space where the IT industry of Novi Sad was born (Figure 4).

Figure 2

'Modernisation in Six Stories', video installation/pavilion, Photo by Igor Đokić; © 2022 by BAZA – Spatial Praxis Platform



Figure 3

Novkabel ERA, the front cover of the documentary, Photo by Aleksandar Dadić © 2022 by BAZA – Spatial Praxis Platform

**Reimagining the City: Creating New Spatial Narratives**

Architecture and architectural space are essential evidence of urban history in physical realms. In a situation when the physical and social realms are contested, cinematic images and supporting stories could be the tools for re-creating new urban narratives and redefining the current monolithic identity image. These forms rely firmly on the strategies of employing the spaces in the storytelling of urban history as an unequivocal embodiment of time, beliefs and societal values. Architecture becomes a stage for a story, but also a performative framework for interaction with people, creating, through the lens of camera, a different set of meanings and values. In this way, a documentary becomes a tool for a permanent change of existing conceptions about the past through a more open and diverse comprehension of our urban history, essential for building an inclusive future.

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Figure 4

Scenes from the documentary *Novkabel ERA (2020)*, © 2022 by BAZA – Spatial Praxis Platform



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