

Berliner Denkmalsalon am 9. April 2018

Selman Selmanagić – eine europäische Biographie

Bauhaus-Archiv / Museum für Gestaltung, Südhalle

Prof. Dr. Aida Abadžić Hodžić

Selman Selmanagić (1905–1986): An European Biography

Goethe once said that a happy man is he who knows how to bring into relation the end and beginning of his life, who, at the end of his days, looks back to his life and in that life, he recognizes a whole, a form, a possible story. So, happy is the man who lived as if he was writing good literature. The story of Selman Selmanagić is such an example.

Eight years ago, at the time when I was starting my research on life and work of this exceptional man born at the very beginning of the 20th century, in a small town in the North-Eastern Bosnia, in Srebrenica, hardly a few people in the wider region have ever heard about him. Enthusiasm, interest, motivation that were raised after the first, Bosnian edition of the book on life, Bauhaus years and architectural and designer impact of S.Selmanagic stressed the uniqueness of his life story. This enthusiasm was especially remarkable amid young architects, designers and students of art academies because through the life story of Selman Selmanagic not only were the virtues of work, courage and decisiveness promoted, but his story also gave a chance for a new perception of Srebrenica, which was no longer just a picture of war and genocide, but also the image of a brave, young man who arrived in Berlin in the early 20th century and became a part of the European art history.

Srebrenica, Dessau and Berlin were the three main towns that defined Selman's life. He was born in Srebrenica in 1905 and he wanted to be buried there. He studied and got Bauhaus diploma in Dessau in 1932 and these Bauhaus years defined his life orientation. He spent the major part of his lifetime in Berlin, until his death in 1986 and was a prominent figure in the city re-building after the Second World War and a longtime professor at Kunsthochschule Weissensee. Therefore, I am very happy and proud that German edition of my book that was first published in Sarajevo in 2014 is now presented in Bauhaus Archiv in Berlin, in the framework of the European Year of Cultural Heritage, on the eve of the Bauhaus centenary. I express my gratitude to all those who made it possible and who provided a necessary support: to members of Selmanagic family, esp. to his late wife Emira, his daughters Selma, Azemina and Jasemin, to Directors and representatives of Landesdenkmalamt Berlin, esp. to Dr Hubert Staroste and Prof Dr Jorg Haspel, to translator of the book, Mrs Azra Džajić Weber and to Bauhaus Archive for a welcome to this central archive of the Bauhaus legacy. I address my gratitude to all those who helped and supported my research in Berlin, Dessau, Graz, Zagreb, Sarajevo and Srebrenica and whom I mentioned in the foreword of my book. Especially emotional was my meeting with former students of Selman Selmanagić that was organized, by the assistance of Rektorin, Mrs Leonie Baumann, in the recently renovated aula of Kunsthochschule Weissensee, in Feb. 2015.

Through his life and work Selman Selmanagić was a witness and an active participant in the dynamic history of Europe of the 20th century: from his childhood and youth in Bosnia, in the encounter of the East and the West and two great Empires; through his education in the laboratory of the European artistic avant-garde during the last years of the Weimar Republic; up to his encounter with the Orient and Middle East in the late 1930s and to the turbulent war and post-war years in Berlin and challenges of the ideologically and politically divided Germany. It is very hard to capture this dynamic and fulfilled life in a short presentation but what makes Selman's life and professional story so appealing and remarkable is a rare

synthesis of his character, worldview and professional credo that is clearly and uncompromisingly reflected in all his projects. His courage and decisiveness, his life in the encounter of different cultures, his dominant pedagogical concept of the “architecture beyond four walls” and his imperative to study the present times and to shape for the present times all together reflect his firm adherence to central Bauhaus principles. His emphatic openness to dialogue with various cultures and traditions reflected the spirit of internationalism and openness that characterised the Bauhaus as whole but also his personal experience and background. It should be noted that Selman Selmanagić ancestors from his mother’s side were highly ranked officials of the late Ottoman Empire and that his father had finished law studies in Istanbul in 1902, in the years of the Austro-Hungarian administration in Bosnia. This fruitful mixture of the East and the West, together with his strong temperament and his somewhat adventurous mindset, spurred his desire to become familiar with different cultures, most significantly marked during his travels to Turkey, Egypt and the Middle East during the 1930s where he showed a rare and subtle capacity to communicate with and to work for different sides in a rather complex political situation which he would manage somehow even during the Berlin war years.

Selman Selmanagić was the only architect from the territory of the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia who completed his studies and graduated from the Department of Architecture at the Bauhaus. The fact that he had not previously graduated from (or even attended) a fine arts academy, and that his previous training had been exclusively in the field of crafts, distinguished this student from Bosnia and Herzegovina from all the other students from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia who stayed for a shorter or longer period of time at this progressive, avant-garde school. His master skills in carpentry had in fact been acquired in Sarajevo and Ljubljana, before enrolling at the Bauhaus.

Selmanagić came to the Bauhaus quite unexpectedly, without knowing any German or having any financial support. Even though he went to Germany to perfect his primary training as a carpenter, after a casual conversation with a fellow-traveller on the train to Germany, an Austrian who told him about the school, he decided to enrol there and acquire additional knowledge at the very source of European modern architecture, visual arts, and design. Immediately before Selmanagić’s arrival in Dessau, the Bauhaus had opened a new department – the Department of Architecture (1927) – headed by Hannes Meyer who, from 1928, also became the new Director. Meyer’s two-year-term of office involved a radical revision of the Bauhaus’s former programmatic and methodological concepts. The new motto of the Bauhaus in Meyer’s term became ‘the needs of the people instead of the need for luxury’. Selmanagić started the Preliminary Course at the Bauhaus in October 1929, in Josef Albers’ class. Albers focused on achieving the best possible product with the minimum expenditure in terms of material, energy, and time. Selmanagić often recalled a moment from Albers’ Preliminary Course that illustrated his working method well. Selmanagić kept a German dictionary on his desk, which he pressed with a plank so that it opened like a fan, making it quicker and easier to use. When Albers noticed this practical ‘invention’, he praised it as a perfect example of studying the nature of material and the way it could be used. During its active years, the Bauhaus also resorted to production ‘for the needs of the people’, using cheap plywood as the primary working material. As an example of design based on people’s everyday needs, Selmanagić often quoted the exercise of designing a cabinet and the question that Arndt had posed in the workshop during the second semester, “What is going to be put in this cabinet?” He went on to explain that in each design phase, they should start from the idea of the whole, the actual needs of the user, and the function of the object, rather than the elements of design. Such experiences would prove particularly valuable in Selmanagić’s later work, as he designed furniture for the German Workshops (Deutsche Werkstätten) in Dresden-Hellerau, through cooperation that started in 1945 and lasted all his life, resulting in many pieces of furniture and interior design which have become classics of modern European design. Selmanagić achieved particular fame with his ‘seminar chair’ (Seminarstuhl), designed in 1949 with Liv Falkenberg and Herbert Hirche, which would be used in many educational institutions, including the Humboldt University in Berlin.

According to Selmanagić, he was especially impressed by a young Czech guest lecturer, Karel Teige, who taught him to overcome the narrow understanding of architecture as an exclusively visual phenomenon, resulting in the gradual formation of his future concept of 'architecture beyond the four walls'. Owing to Selmanagić's broad range of interests, including his predilection for the lectures held by Kandinsky and Klee and Dürckheim's lectures on the psychology of form and his teaching on 'perceived space', Selmanagić's functionalism eventually evolved into something more than a mere, one-sided, utilitarian programme.

What also determined Selmanagić's later work and pedagogical experience in particular, was his encounter with teamwork. Meyer insisted on working in 'collaborative cells' and the formation of 'vertical brigades', composed of students from various study years joining in teamwork. Such experiences would later have an especially strong impact on Selmanagić, particularly in the course on urban planning held by Ludwig Hilberseimer, during the time of the Bauhaus' last director, Mies van der Rohe. Even though it was Meyer who introduced the 'analytical and scientific approach' to architecture, Hilberseimer was among the first teachers at the Bauhaus who directed his attention to socially weaker strata when designing his housing typology. As part of Hilberseimer's course, Selmanagić and his six colleagues formed the Student Collective that participated in designing a settlement for workers from the Junkers aircraft factory in Dessau. Although it was not realised, it was one of the most ambitious team projects produced by the Bauhaus Department of Architecture, designed for twenty thousand people and was preceded by an exhaustive scientific analysis which, besides exploring the technical, economic, and ecological parameters, included a detailed socio-cultural analysis of potential residents' lifestyles. This same year he was named "le Corbusier of the Balkans" by his professor Hilberseimer for his project of the family house in Zvornik (Bosnia), ordered by Selman's father who wanted to see the progress of his son in order to provide him a necessary support for the continuation of his studies. Until then, Selman's family did not know that he was studying in Bauhaus and until then he one and alone financed his education, working as a carpenter in the Bauhaus workshop. Detailed and comprehensive analyses prepared for Junkers-Siedlung were exceptionally important for Selmanagić's later work in Palestine (from 1935 to 1939), and also in Berlin during the years following World War II and he applied them in projects with his students. The town of Schwedt (1959-1962) and the Berlin districts of Hohenschönhausen and Fennpfuhl were prime examples.

In the post-war, divided Berlin, Selmanagić was a member of the Planning Collective (Planungskollektiv) headed by Hans Scharoun, which was in charge of renovating war-devastated town. With a team of eight architects, between 1945 and 1950, Selmanagić managed the Department for Planning the Construction and Renovation of Cultural and Sports Facilities and Monument Conservation, which covered the city as a whole. In this period, Selmanagić completed his most demanding, most significant project, the Stadium of World Youth (Stadion der Weltjugend) in Berlin (1950), once the largest athletics and football stadium in the GDR. He cooperated on this project with a colleague from the Planning Collective, the landscape architect Reinhard Lingner, and it continued to echo the living tradition of the Bauhaus. He encouraged the renewal of many destroyed cultural monuments in Berlin, among others Schinkel's Neue Wache.

However, the context of the Cold War soon initiated the changes in the reception of the Bauhaus in the GDR, which became negative as soon as in the early 1950s and the Bauhaus tradition was dismissed as a 'foreign, hostile phenomenon'. The exclusive model for East Berlin and East Germany was then the monumental architecture and urban planning of the Soviet Union, with strikingly broad avenues and buildings reviving the classicist culture of the 19th century as the ideal way of defining East Germany's new identity, on the defensive against the dominance of the 'international style'. In this context, the Bauhaus was condemned as a 'corrosive bourgeois element embodying anti-national and anti-socialist

elements', and criticism was also directed against Selmanagić personally. The educational programme at the Department of Architecture, of which Selmanagić was the head from 1950 to 1970, and which strongly relied on the Bauhaus model of integrating different fields and pursuing social engagement, would become one of the rare representatives of the Bauhaus tradition in the GDR, given the fact that Selmanagić was not allowed to carry out any major projects, apart from the significant one of expanding the Weissensee school building (1956). Furniture and interior designs, including DDR fair pavilions worldwide would be, therefore, his only realized projects, besides his intensive pedagogical activity. A sad testimony to this was his direct conflict with the German Architectural Academy about the town of Schwedt in the early 1960s. The importance of taking people's actual needs into account and thinking about architecture 'beyond four walls' was also reflected in Selmanagić's later insistence, against the judgment of the German Architectural Academy (DBA), on his master plan for Schwedt which also included a large, beautiful, communal swimming pool and many green areas, as these would enrich the everyday lives of its inhabitants and improve their quality of life.

As a lecturer in architecture and spatial design for many years, Selman Selmanagić had a great impact on many generations of students, nowadays active in the field of architecture and design. His pedagogical approach which defined and understood architecture as a sphere far surpassing merely formal and functional issues, powerfully reflected and perpetuated the key values and ideals of the Bauhaus. In his own pedagogical and creative work, Selmanagić strove to find a social use and justification for the Bauhaus's basic theoretical and practical values, in which they could provide a kind of model for active, engaged life and work in accordance with the times and society. Even in his later years, S. Selmanagić remained a member of the Bauhaus in spirit, always receptive to the challenges that every new period brought before him. He noticed, for instance, that most young people wore jeans instead of the trousers that he had worn in his youth, and that a new kind of wardrobe interior would have to be designed to accommodate this change. In one of his last interviews in 1985, he said: "We must study the present and work for the present." Even though he was eighty years old at the time, he still followed with interest the changes in the behavior of the new generations: from the way they dressed to the way they sat down. "You don't get new ideas by following old examples", he said, "but by trying your best to understand the needs and habits of your users. It is much easier to imitate than to study the totality of life and its processes. Examples are easy to find. They are everywhere. But the goal of the Bauhaus was, in the words of Paul Klee, to make the invisible - the processes of life - visible." The studying of "life processes" occupied the principal role in the Bauhaus pedagogical system.

Selmanagić was critical towards historicism and once he said: "With all due respect for the classical arts, Schinkel's buildings in particular, I believe that copying architectural styles from past societies is wrong." This is how he illustrated his thoughts on the connection between design and the present historical moment: "I was once asked what my basis for design was. I answered: 'When I design a chair, I base the design on the bottom that will sit on it.'

As a lecturer, he kept contacts with great masters, among others with Walter Gropius with whom he collaborated in the project of the Bauhaus school reconstruction in Dessau. In one of his letters to Selmanagić, Gropius extolled the teacher's personality, the power of his character, and his enthusiasm as key elements in the educational process. The Bauhaus programme combined and wove together various theories and practices trying to harmonize artistic autonomy and freedom of expression, as the paradigmatic values of modernity with an ideal and need to create a universally understandable language of forms. This inner contradiction also seemed controversial to the 'masters' of the Bauhaus, echoing even in a distinction between *bauen* as used by Meyer and *baukunst* as used by Mies van der Rohe when referring to the architecture.

The life and professional story of Selman Selmanagic was full of unexpected turns and brave decisions, he witnessed difficult challenges and hard times. His students also recalled a

saying he often quoted, which he had heard from his father Alija, and which was supposed to prepare him for the unforeseeable challenges that life brings, and situations in which he would have to learn how to make something out of nothing: "Sooner or later, you will have to make gruel out of plain water"/ Irgendwann müsst ihr aus Wasser Mehlsuppe kochen können".

A deep belief in the postulates of Bauhaus together with the power of his personality and character made Selmanagić a lighthouse of the Bauhaus idea in a politically and ideologically demanding context, even at the cost of the exclusion from many projects. This certainly reflected the basic principle of the Bauhaus that its activity should consist not only in the act of 'building the house', as implied by the very meaning of the name Bauhaus, but should be conceived more broadly, as 'turning a house into a home', which implied defining living space and the world we inhabit.

If the size of one personality and fate should be determined in light of the circumstances under which this person lived and what he eventually achieved, then Selman Selmanagic - a young, brave and versatile Bosnian who, without any knowledge of the German language and any support, successfully graduated from the leading art school of the European avant-garde and later became a respected and distinguished professor, architect, designer and rebuildder of Berlin - indeed had a great and fulfilled life, adding a significant and remarkable piece in a complex mosaic of the history of European design and architecture.