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8 Valaoritou Street
Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
www.atiner.gr

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Aleksandar Ignjatovic

Assistant Professor, University of Belgrade, Serbia.

Modern States, Ancient Nations: Balkan National Pavilions at the Paris World Exhibitions in the Twentieth Century

The nineteenth-century Europe witnessed the birth of several nations and states in the Balkans that were further impelled by the dissolution of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century. In order to represent their nations as a part of the civilized Europe, the elites of these newly-established political entities (Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania) sought to create a proper image of their constantly expanding national cultures.

Among a variety of cultural resources, ranging from language, myth and ethno history, to material culture and archaeology, architecture got a prominent role in the representation and legitimization of the complex cultural identities of these Balkan nation-states. The context of the World fairs and international exhibitions was particularly compelling for these new nations to display different visions of their identities, in order to impose wishful images of national cultures and to erase a stigma that had been cast upon most of them. International shows were perfect settings for the Balkan countries to erect architectural pavilions which could narrate the dual concept of the old-new national culture.

Simultaneously referring to the nation's 'glorious past' and contemporary modernity, the architecture of pavilions represented an intriguing cultural hybrid of Western, Oriental and vernacular styles. A number of examples – with attention given to the Serbian and Yugoslav show at the Paris World Exhibitions in 1900, 1925 and 1937 – is to be presented to demonstrate that formally and stylistically different architectural traditions – from Art Nouveau of the 1900s, to Historicism, Vernacularism and Modernism of the late 1930s – were equally important for the representation of national identity, irrespective of their labels of 'national architecture' or 'international style'. This means that stark differences that exist between different architectural styles appear irrelevant if seen in the perspective of the nation-building processes. Moreover, it was exactly the architectural hybridity of these pavilions that really mattered if one was concerned with their relevant contextual interpretation.

By employing an analytical perspective that deliberately neglects to pursue a common dichotomy of national/international style, the paper

will stress the complexity of material aspects of ideology that architectural theoreticians and historians are commonly unaware of.