

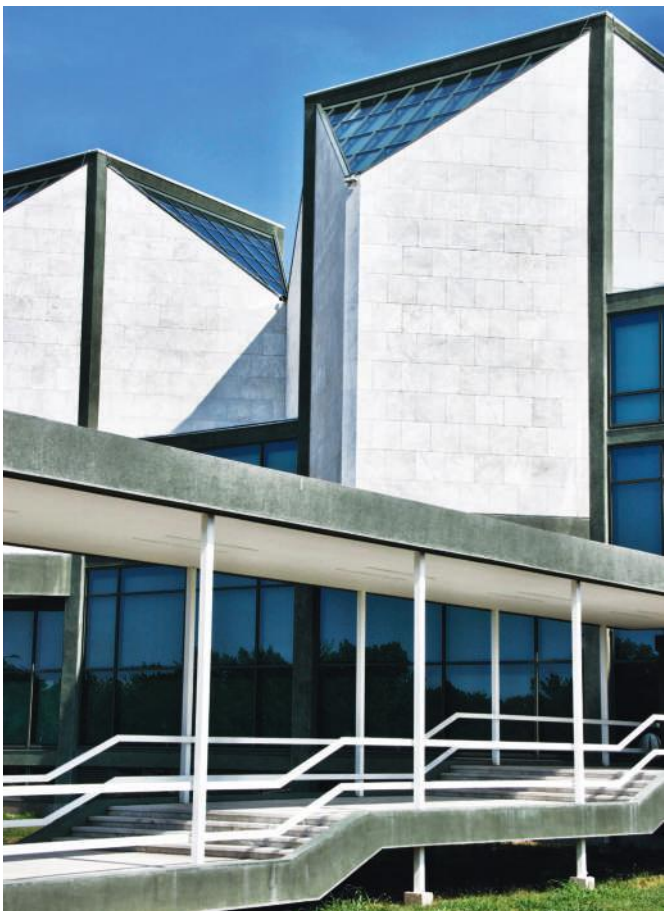




CRAFT WORK

OTHER EASTERN EUROPEAN CITIES HAVE BEEN CAUSING A BUZZ IN RECENT YEARS, YET THE SERBIAN CAPITAL REMAINED IN THE SHADE. NOW IT'S THE REGION'S MOST INTRIGUING DESIGN UPSTART AS CREATIVES MIX UP THE OLD SOCIALIST-ERA AESTHETIC WITH A FRESH TAKE ON THE HANDMADE

BY GINANNE BROWNELL MITIC
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW BUCK



I FELL IN LOVE WITH BELGRADE LONG BEFORE I fell for the Serbian man who would become my husband, the two loves blurred and intertwined. On the night before our wedding, the lobby bar of the Square Nine hotel was bathed in a marmalade lamplight, as if time were suspended. I still recall the bear hugs of my arriving friends, coats slapped, hands warmed with foam-clouded hot chocolates; the glorious mayhem that followed. Later that evening, at the Tri Sešira, a 19th-century tavern in bohemian Skadarlija, wooden boards descended as if from the air, piled high with mountain cheeses, *kajmak* (the love child of butter and clotted cream) and processional meats with dense cuts of pork and lamb. The home-cooked scents wrapped themselves around us, as did a ragtag of gypsy musicians, ever more raucous, on beaten-up accordions and guitars.

The Serbian capital isn't a showstopper; it didn't grab me by the heartstrings the first time I arrived here as a reporter 15 years ago. But over years of returning, the things that failed to charm me before – things I simply couldn't understand – now make me wonder how I ever lived without them. The Brutalist Yugoslav architecture of New Belgrade that welcomes me on the way from the airport; the unexpected Museum of African Art in the opulent Senjak neighbourhood. The grandeur of Zemun, a section of the city that was once Austro-Hungarian; the wit and artistry of the giant street murals depicting football heroes. The tranquil forested river island of Ada Ciganlija; and Skadarlija, an area where I always get happily lost browsing, the quirky artisan items in the windows undiscovered treasures that feel all mine. For if Belgrade is a complicated puzzle, it is one that is proudly Serbian, and created by hand. It is perhaps this maverick maker's spirit that charms me most – and which is defiantly transforming

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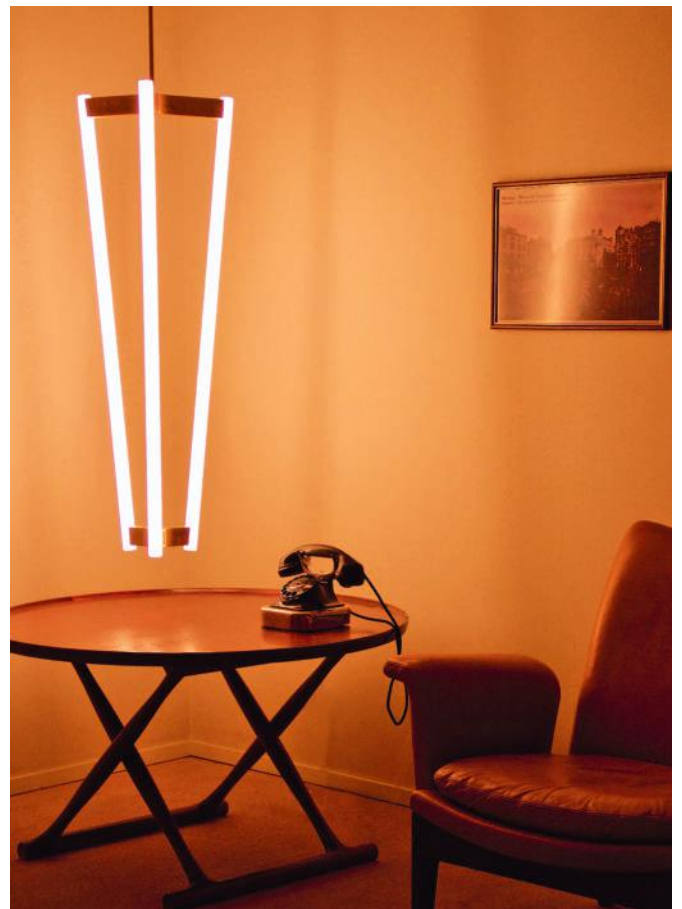
the landscape today. For a new movement of home-grown craftsmen, artists, chefs and designers is making sense of Belgrade's different pieces, reclaiming their national identity and raising up their city afresh.

Now walking the balance-defying cobbled streets surrounding the place where I got married is a journey of exploration in which an unassuming staircase or graffitied alley might lead me – as through the back of the wardrobe – into new, idiosyncratic worlds. Near the Art Nouveau home of 20th-century mathematician and inventor Mihailo Petrović Alas – one of the coffee- and peppermint-coloured buildings in Kosančićev Venac, a neighbourhood originally settled by the Celts and Romans – I find the basement store Makadam. Inside are bourbon-stained interiors, with photography prints, rings by anthropologist and designer Ana Srdic, bubble-gum-pink coffee-table books on street artists, hand-carved lights, wooden pull toys, and pillowcases embroidered with the floral motifs of medieval monasteries. It's a showcase of contemporary talent as varied as the architecture.

Makadam founder Milena Radenković opened her concept store on the street where she grew up. Her passion for the makers of her country was reignited in 2011, when she returned to Belgrade after studying economics in London and Milan. She went on a two-month road trip across the country in search of its forgotten craftsmen, sourcing kilim fabrics to repurpose as pillowcases and commissioning clutches of her design from bulrushes cultivated and hand-braided in the northern Vojvodina region. While consolidating a new era of Serbian cool, Makadam also helped to preserve dying traditions, raising the visibility of the country's lost arts and crafts. 'Most artisans are very old and think they don't need to adapt to the 21st century,' Radenković tells me in Makadam's adjacent bistro. 'But now the whole luxury business model is so focused on artisan production. And we do that so well in Serbia.' Polished-concrete walls and photos of Radenković's icons, from *The Night Porter*-era Charlotte Rampling to Lemmy from

Opposite, clockwise from top left: the restaurant at Square Nine hotel; Aero Club building; Fab Living concept-store entrance in an apartment building in Old Belgrade; the Museum of Contemporary Art. *Previous pages, from left:* Genex Tower in New Belgrade; vintage prints and furniture at Square Nine





Motörhead, encircle a bar with traditional red-cushioned wooden stools that serves Serbian wines and various concoctions of *rakija*, a 40-per-cent-proof Balkan fruit brandy. On weekend nights, the artists, musicians and students from the nearby arts university who congregate here spill out into the streets under the same light of my memories. The energy is raw, palpable.

This neighbourhood has become Belgrade's answer to Montmartre, a spry enclave of galleries, boutiques and food joints. Around the corner is experimental vegetarian restaurant Mandala, which serves sustainably farmed plant-based food in a white-columned space – a pioneer in a country where meat is the cornerstone of every meal. On the main thoroughfare of Kneza Sime Markovića, which ends at the fortress originally settled in 279BC at the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers, is another concept shop helping to define Belgrade's new identity. Fashion designer Ana Ljubinković, ABO and Remake are a three-strong collective of clothing and homeware brands with a common aesthetic: ABO makes hand-sewn shoes, while Remake sells repurposed vintage porcelain, as well as newly designed tableware with rebellious phrases and etchings recalling local street art.

The owners of Remake, former costume designer Jovana Božović and Slovenian-born artist Antea Arizanović, believe that the city has finally regained the confidence it once lost. 'People who live here travel a lot, and when they come back from other cities they say, "Why can't we do that in Belgrade?"' says Božović. 'But it has a really good vibe.' Arizanović moved here to work in what she considers the most inspiring place in the Balkans. 'Before, people had good ideas but they never tried to implement them,' she said. 'But now they have found the courage.' While the inhabitants of some of Europe's great cultural hubs flounder in political cynicism, hanging on to the

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coat-tails of their erstwhile glory days, the people I meet today seem future-facing and fresh with optimism. 'Belgrade is a renaissance city,' says performance artist Marta Jovanović, who works between here, New York, Rome and Paris. 'Not the Renaissance of Florence, but in terms of having the force to reinvent itself over and over again despite its turbulent history.'

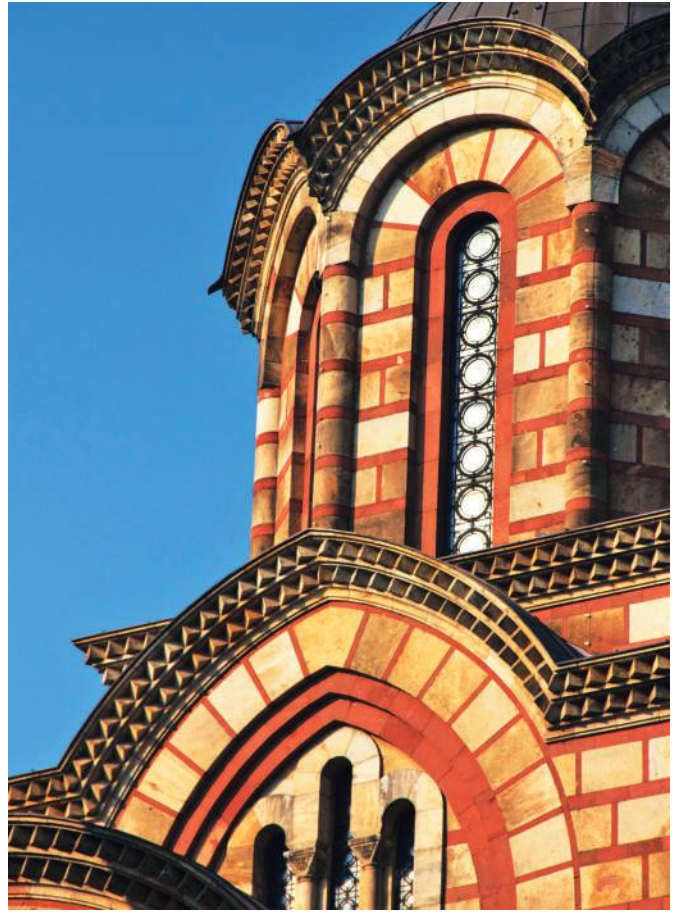
I FIRST CAME TO BELGRADE IN 2004, FIVE YEARS after NATO bombed it into uneasy submission during the Kosovo War over the persecution of ethnic Albanians in the southern breakaway region. For those not well versed in the nuances and intricacies of Balkan politics, it was perhaps understandable that many felt the blame should fall solidly on the Serbs. But I had already been covering the region's post-conflict recovery – and continued to do so for another half a dozen years – and quickly came to see that, in the wars that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, no side was blameless. On that first visit, Belgrade felt exhausted and discouraged: a huge banner of Slobodan Milošević, who was by then on trial in The Hague, hung over the party headquarters near the banal main pedestrian shopping street.

Belgradians have grown tired of this recent narrative as the only historical reference to their city. They point out that it has also survived Roman and Ottoman occupation, and the bombardment by the Nazis of buildings including the original National Library of Serbia, whose remaining foundations have been left in ruins as a memorial.

What has so often been forgotten is Belgrade's rich artistic and cultural history – a source of inspiration and pride that many young locals have only had access to in recent years. In September this year a comprehensive retrospective of the work of endurance-performance artist Marina Abramović – her first solo show in her home city in more than 40 years – opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, a modernist space in leafy, tranquil New Belgrade that was shuttered for a decade for repairs. It was Abramović

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Square Nine; court building; vintage store in Dorćol; Monument of Gratitude to France. Previous pages, clockwise from top left: Sava Centar congress centre; Square Nine postcards; Remake; Zadarska street; Square Nine; football mural; passport-photo shop; Monument of Gratitude to France





and her fellow Serbian performance artists who put Belgrade on the contemporary-art map in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Today, she is as much a national legend as Nikola Tesla – a museum dedicated to the electrical inventor, who later moved to the USA, is housed in a Twenties villa in residential Vračar. The National Museum also locked its doors for 15 years, only reopening last year, which meant that an entire generation of Serbs missed out on more than 400,000 works by Titian, Canaletto, Matisse, Renoir and Chagall. And yet it was perhaps that cultural black hole that spurred on Belgrade’s creatives to found independent projects such as KC Grad, a non-commercial space in the Savamala district that runs art exhibitions, concerts and lectures, and Performance Hub, a school and art platform founded by Abramović’s cultural heir Marta Jovanović.

Belgrade has its fashion names, too. While London-based Roksanda Ilinčić is its best-known export, a number of acclaimed local designers have joined forces in an esprit de corps of Serbian style in the incongruously grungy Belgrade Design District, set in an abandoned outdoor shopping mall near Terazije Square. Aleksandra Lalić has won numerous Serbian fashion awards for her dramatic structured dresses, suits and coats verging on art. The Belgrade look is as eclectic as its home city, she tells me in the store below her busy workshop, with a common thread of vibrant tactile fabrics and architectural cuts: ‘We use colour and patterns much more than northern European countries.’ More romantic is the atelier of Silk for Breakfast, in a second-floor apartment in the Dorćol district where clients lie around on a boudoir-like double bed. The made-to-order billowy silk kimonos, smoking jackets, trousers and dresses are produced entirely in Serbia, and the quality of craftsmanship is bolstered by the closeness of Belgrade’s community. ‘Things are easier to make from idea to realisation here – all of our brands collaborate,’ says Darija Stojković, one of the owners. ‘So it’s easy to find a workshop that is going to make this or that. And if you want something else, they will go out of their way to find it for you.’

Neighbourhood craftsmen, artists, cobblers and bakers all feel part of the same close-knit family. Not far from here is Dokolica, an upbeat café favoured by Belgrade’s intelligentsia. A rundown 50-year-old shoe-repair shop sits next to more indie hangouts such as Homa Bistrot and Od Usta do Usta. But Iris New Balkan Cuisine is my most thrilling foodie discovery yet, in a non-descript apartment building near the rapidly changing Savamala district, where the controversial Belgrade Waterfront development will open next year, housing the Balkans’ biggest shopping centre. The intimate restaurant, which opens three days a week, deconstructs traditional dishes such as *sarma* (minced pork rolled in cabbage). Fresh, organic ingredients are found all across Serbia and every family takes pride in their *domaći* homemade secret recipes for jams, *rakija* and *ajvar* (red-pepper relish), all of which they make and preserve every year. Belgrade has smart restaurants – Salon 5, Bistro Mali Pijac and Langouste – but it’s the day-to-day private kitchens that keep their standards high (can they really beat the family recipe?). After years of socialism and sanctions, Serbians won’t waste their money on the over-styled and over-hyped. And that is the very charm of Belgrade itself: unglorious, imperfect. But honest, self-made and full of heart. 📍

WHERE TO STAY

Brazilian architect Isay Weinfeld’s **Square Nine** is not the only boutique hotel in town any more, but it’s still an institution. Its modernist leather chairs have been worn in over the years by actors, artists and politicians; old-fashioned globes and spherical lights add an international feel, while a sense of place is provided by historical black-and-white photographs. **Savamala B&B**, in the landmark turn-of-the-century Export Bank warehouse, is an authentic experience with period furniture, artworks and bank-till lights in 11 design-savvy and cosy rooms. On the nearby Waterfront, the **St Regis** and **W Hotel** are set to open by 2022.

And **Saint Ten** has recently earned a reputation as one of the city’s smartest hotels; it’s within walking distance of both the Church of Saint Sava, a wedding cake-like structure dedicated to the founder of the Serbian Orthodox church, and the Nikola Tesla Museum.

squarenine.rs, savamalahotel.rs, belgradewaterfront.com, saintten.com

Opposite, clockwise from top left: perfume shop on Kralja Petra; St Mark’s Church; Square Nine lobby; Icarus sculpture on the former airforce headquarters building