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Pavilion in  
Barcelona in  
1929, from the  
Collection of  
photographs  
of the Archive  
of Serbia





# SIX DECADES OF THE BUILDING OF THE FACULTY OF NATURAL AND MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES

## THE TEMPLE OF NATURAL SCIENCES AT

**A**s an institution, the Faculty of Natural and Mathematic Sciences does not exist for more than three decades, but in the minds of Belgradians, its impressive building from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century at the Studentski Square is still recognized as the building of the Faculty of Natural and Mathematic Sciences.

The Faculty of Natural and Mathematic Sciences at the University of Belgrade separated from the Faculty of Philosophy in 1947. At the moment of its establishment, the faculty was located at the today's building of Rectorate, the magnificent Captain Miša's Mansion. In that school year, the faculty admitted 565 students, but only 26 of them graduated. In the following years, the number of students increased and the available space has become insufficient for the needs of the increasing number of students. However, Captain Miša's Mansion, as a cultural and historical monument, was under the protection of the state, so no reconstruction or expansions were possible.

Using his position as the rector of the Belgrade University, professor Vukić Mićović (1952–1954), with the support of his colleagues, managed to secure space for the construction of a joint building for the Faculty of Chemistry, Institute of Physical Chemistry and Institute of Mineralogy. The design of the building was significantly and dedicatedly contributed by professors of the above-mentioned institutions—chemists Vukić Mićović and Đorđe Stefanović, physicochemist Pavle Savić and geologist Stojan Pavlović.

Connection between the above-mentioned professors and their professions is reflected in the shape of the building of the faculty, which, seen from above, looks like the letters H and E. Employees and students of various faculties, which stemmed from the former Faculty of Natural and Mathematical Sciences, jokingly say that they are not sure if the letters were written in Latin or Cyrillic alphabet. In the first case, it would be easy to understand

Slađana Savić,  
curator,  
Collection  
Greats of  
the Serbian  
Chemistry,  
assistant  
professor,  
University  
of Belgrade  
– Faculty of  
Chemistry,  
Aleksandar  
Đorđević,  
researcher-  
intern,  
Institute of  
General and  
Physical  
Chemistry,  
Ivana  
Jovanović,  
architect,  
Trgomatik  
Ltd.  
Vesna  
Milanović,  
PhD  
assistant  
professor,  
University  
of Belgrade  
– Faculty of  
Chemistry



# STUDENTSKI SQUARE

that this is the building ruled by chemistry [in Serbian, chemistry is spelled *hemija*—translator's note], while in the second, the shape of the building would be a warning not to come anywhere near the building [letter H in Latin alphabet and letter N in Cyrillic are identical, while *NE* is a Serbian word meaning no—translator's note].

Location for the construction of the Faculty of Chemistry was approved on October 22, 1952 by the Act no. 1742, enacted by the Administration of the Master Plan and then Institute of Urban Planning of Belgrade. At the approved construction location, which included the

area between Studentski Square and Braće Jugovića, Simina and Višnjićeva streets, there was once the building of the Belgrade City Administration. This building is etched in the memory of many people as the infamous *Glavnjača*, a detention house for political prisoners. Some of the former prisoners were university professors, so it quickly became clear that the building of *Glavnjača* would not be missed and that no one would regret if an academic building is constructed in its stead. The only thing that marks the memory of *Glavnjača* is a memorial from 1974 in front of the Faculty of Chemistry. The copper flower and the mosaic from the memorial were reconstructed and restored in 2013, but the flower disappeared in 2019.

According to official information, *Glavnjača* was razed to the ground and on September 8, 1954, the construction of the Faculty of Chemistry began in its stead. There is a wrong opinion that certain prison cells were only upgraded,

Photograph of professor Đorđe Stefanović (left) and professor Vukić Mićović (right), December 12, 1961 (photo: Collection of the Greats of Serbian Chemistry)





but there is no architectural basis for such an opinion. The area of the building of the faculty was much larger than the *Glavnjača's*, so it was necessary to dig out deeper and larger foundations, while the location of the Institute is actually a merger of several plots. The simplest way to merge these plots was to remove all the existing buildings and set the foundations for a single building. Due to the nature of the soil, after over half a century since the construction of the building, an increasingly uneven settlement of the building began to occur, which caused damages to it, while a large concentration of humidity has been noticed in the rooms below the ground level. In 2011, the repair of the building began and in September 2012, the indentation of piles was done in order to protect the building from further settlement.

The appearance of the building, layout of the rooms and necessary resources were, apart from the architects,

in the hands of the above-mentioned four professors, and the contribution of chemists Vukić Mićović and Đorđe Stefanović should be particularly emphasized. In the preparation of the construction design, two of them used the model of the West European institutes of chemistry. The limiting factor were the available funds, which arrived sporadically, after long periods of time, and this extended the deadline for the completion of the construction of the building for three years. Additional limitation was the state's request to use only local products, which impacted the quality of certain installations, and the gas installation, which was never activated, is often cited as an example.

Financial and other complications during the construction were described in a comical epic song by Slavko Mihajlović, assistant professor, titled *Building the Institute upon Glavnjača*. According to that song, the professors have built

Model of the building of the Faculty of Chemistry, probably a gift from the company *Bihacit* from Bihać, Bosnia and Herzegovina (photo: Collection of the Greats of Serbian Chemistry)



their assistants into the Institute's foundations, thus preventing the further crumbling of the building. In that song, the four builder-professors stated, as a justification for this, that the assistants don't leave the laboratory anyway, so they wouldn't even notice the difference if they build them in the foundations.

The construction was officially completed on September 14, 1961, i.e., that year, the Rectorate gave the building to the Faculty of Natural and Mathematical Sciences and not to the Faculty of Chemistry, as it was planned. Other departments

of the Faculty of Natural and Mathematical Sciences also had problems with the lack of space. Before moving into the building, the University Council has decided that the building, initially intended for Institute of Chemistry, Institute of Physical Chemistry and Institute of Minerology, should also accommodate Institute of Physics, Department of Mathematics and administrative services of the Faculty of Natural and Mathematical Sciences. It is important to emphasize that this decision was reached three years after the start of construction of the already designed



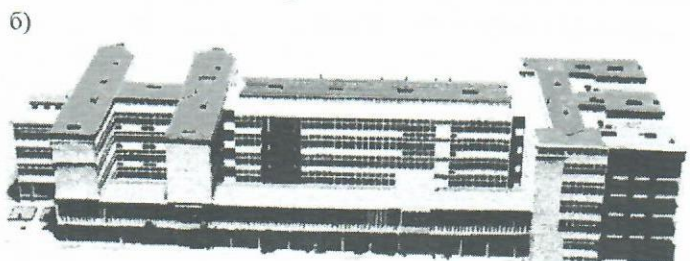
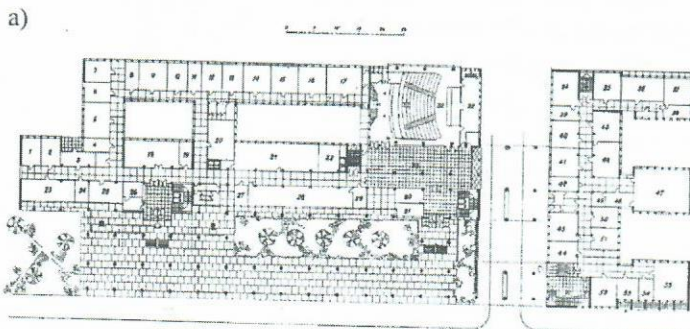
and approved Institute of Chemistry.

In 1950, the First meeting of architects and urban planners of Yugoslavia was held in Dubrovnik and on that occasion, they announced their attitude that "architecture must leave its mark on what it has created", which had a great impact on the further development of architecture. This was also the guiding idea of Aleksandar Sekulić and Đorđe Sekulić, architects, during the designing of the Institute of Chemistry as a complex megastructure in 1954. Their architecture follows the modernist approach, which was dominant in that period.

The height of the building was aligned with the other buildings on the

street. Urbanistically, it was not possible to retract the building from the regulation in order to form green areas, so the building design included colonnades in order to expand the pedestrian space. This period was also characterized by the breaks in the building that enable road traffic to pass through it. Light-colored geometrically structured façade contributes to the harmony of materials and masses. This kind of buildings represents the shape of transient architecture from late modern to internationalist style and also represent the needs of the investors and the social companies to express their success and progress.

The students also voluntarily participated in the move of the laboratory ware and equipment from Captain Miša's Mansion. The building was filled gradually and later, the Faculty of Natural and Mathematical Sciences was registered as the organ of property management. The faculty existed in this form until 1990, when all



a) Layout of the base of the building of the Faculty of Chemistry (Sekulić and Stefanović, 1954)

b) Photograph of the Faculty building (photo: Archive of the Faculty of Chemistry).



4. Photograph of the building of Faculty of Chemistry, Faculty of Mathematics, Faculty of Geography, Faculty of Biology, Faculty of Physics and Faculty of Physical Chemistry, view from the Studentski Square, March 11, 2021 (photo: Slađana Savić)

the departments that were a part of it, were separated into individual faculties, which included: Faculty of Chemistry, Faculty of Mathematics, Faculty of Geography, Faculty of Biology, Faculty of Physics and Faculty of Physical Chemistry.

All of the stated faculties still use the building at Studentski Square, while the Faculty of Chemistry occupies the greatest part of it by both area and the number of the staff. Additional rooms in other locations are at the disposal of some of the listed faculties, but

generally, it can be said that the problem of space for most of the faculties that stemmed from the Faculty of Natural and Mathematical Sciences has still not been resolved, and this is especially true for the Faculty of Geography and the Faculty of Biology.

Sixty years after the completion of this temple of natural sciences in Belgrade, this achievement still seems unachievable for most administrations of the faculties in Serbia, although the needs for more modern space constantly continue to grow ■