

Villa Šerbec

The research on the Le Corbusierian “Stilt House”

Tina Potočnik, Smiljan Simerl



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In 1938 the architect Feri Novak (1906–1959), a Le Corbusier employee at the time, planned a villa in the small Slovenian town of Murska Sobota. This family home, commissioned by one of the local intellectuals, Dr Jožef Šerbec, embraced Cinq Points de l'Architecture Moderne. However, it has changed beyond recognition in the subsequent years. After the building named “The Stilt House” was intended for a complete renovation, the architectural-historical analysis using scientific research methods was launched to revise the existing information, to re-evaluate the architecture and, finally, to determine what to preserve. Based on the background of the Villa Šerbec case study, the paper argues for the importance of applying scientific research methods in architectural-historical analyses within the conservation practice in the field of built heritage.



1 Dr Jožef Šerbec, investor of Villa Šerbec

The Villa Šerbec in Murska Sobota was influenced by the famous Le Corbusier and his Cinq Points de l'Architecture Moderne. The building stands on pilotis and utilizes the concept of an open floor plan and a non-load bearing façade, which is characterised by two horizontal windows. On the street side, the architect designed the upper part of the building as a roof terrace with a prominent cantilever canopy and a viewing opening on the fence – a composition reminiscent of the elements of steamboats, a well-known example of modern architecture. The building's architect, Franc (Feri) Novak (1906–1959), a native of Murska Sobota, designed the villa in 1938 while working at 35 rue de Sèvres in the studio of Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret in Paris. The villa, originally built as a single-family house and lastly converted into a bank branch, was declared a monument of local importance in 1991, although by then, it had been changed beyond recognition.¹ Probably for this reason, it was almost overlooked in Slovenian architectural historiography.²

Therefore, conservators faced a difficult situation in 2019 when the new owner wanted to renovate the building and restore it for residential purposes – due to insufficient information about the building, it was difficult to define the framework for the interventions in the villa. Because the

Villa Šerbec –

Die Erforschung des „Stelzenhauses“ nach Le Corbusier

1938 plante der Architekt Feri Novak (1906–1959), ein Mitarbeiter von Le Corbusier, eine Villa in der slowenischen Kleinstadt Murska Sobota. Dieses von einem der örtlichen Intellektuellen, Dr. Jožef Šerbec, in Auftrag gegebene Wohnhaus entsprach den Cinq Points de l'Architecture Moderne. In den folgenden Jahren hat es sich jedoch bis zur Unkenntlichkeit verändert. Nachdem das „Stelzenhaus“ genannte Gebäude vollständig renoviert werden sollte, wurde eine architekturgeschichtliche Analyse mit wissenschaftlichen Forschungsmethoden durchgeführt, um die vorhandenen Informationen zu überarbeiten, das Bauwerk neu zu bewerten und schließlich festzulegen, was erhalten werden soll. Vor dem Hintergrund der Fallstudie der Villa Šerbec argumentiert der Beitrag für die Bedeutung der Anwendung wissenschaftlicher Forschungsmethoden bei architekturgeschichtlichen Analysen im Bereich der Denkmalpflege.

available information was unreliable, the known documents were inaccessible or lost and the planned interventions were extensive, it was necessary to prepare a conservation plan.³ The authors conducted thorough architectural-historical research and a comprehensive sondage of the structure in situ. By reviewing literature, archival and other sources, interviews, and the results of the sondage, the authors were able to verify some suppositions made in the literature and uncover an extensive amount of new information.

Feri Novak's correspondence and architectural design

Novak was one of the Slovenian architects who was trained in the studio of Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret in Paris from April to July 1938.⁴ Before that, Novak was a student of Peter Behrens, another pioneer of European modernism.⁵ He studied architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna from 1930 to 1933. Even before his arrival in Paris, Novak had already played an essential role in urban development and shaping the architectural image of Murska Sobota. During his time with the Municipality of Murska Sobota, he designed the urban plan for the city (1932–1934) and some of Murska Sobota's most recognisable buildings, such as the bathhouse (1934–1935) and the Workers' Home (Delavski dom, 1936). He also authored several villas, including the Villa Keršovčan (1931), the Villa Vučak (1932), the Villa Koltaj (1933), and finally the Villa Šerbec (1938).⁶

Villa Šerbec, often referred to in the literature as “The Stilt House”, has been compared to several iconic villas designed by Le Corbusier. Bogo Zupančič confirms the possibility of the model in the Villa Cook in Boulogne sur Seine, on the outskirts of Paris (1926),⁷ a house with a uniform building volume and a three-part façade with two horizontal rows of windows. He explains the reference to this architecture by the fact that Novak was involved in the development of the area adjacent to the Villa Cook on the St Cloud Bridge during his work for Le Corbusier. Like many of Le Corbusier’s iconic villas, Villa Šerbec stands out from the design of the streetscape. “Many onlookers stop and admire the shape of the building. It is indeed unique and shows many things we have never seen before”, wrote the author of a note about Villa Šerbec in Murska Krajina in November 1938.⁸ It stood out not only because of its design but

also because of its positioning behind the building line of the compact development next to the castle and the castle park, on the former Radgonska Road (today Štefan Kovač Street), one of the historic street axes of Murska Sobota.⁹ Novak placed the building two metres behind a continuous row of the ground floor and multi-storey houses with a gable roof made of tiles, believing that this would make the building “look like a pleasant intermezzo in the dreary backdrop of the masterpieces of Murska Sobota”.¹⁰

Novak’s original plans for the Villa Šerbec are regarded as lost to time. However, a few transcriptions of six letters that the architect wrote to the client from Paris between 15 April and 28 November 1938, have been preserved, as well as a photograph of a handwritten copy of Novak’s letter to Dr Jožef Šerbec from Vienna,¹¹ whereas the original



2 The façade of Villa Šerbec. Undated photograph



3 Façade of Villa Šerbec. Undated photograph

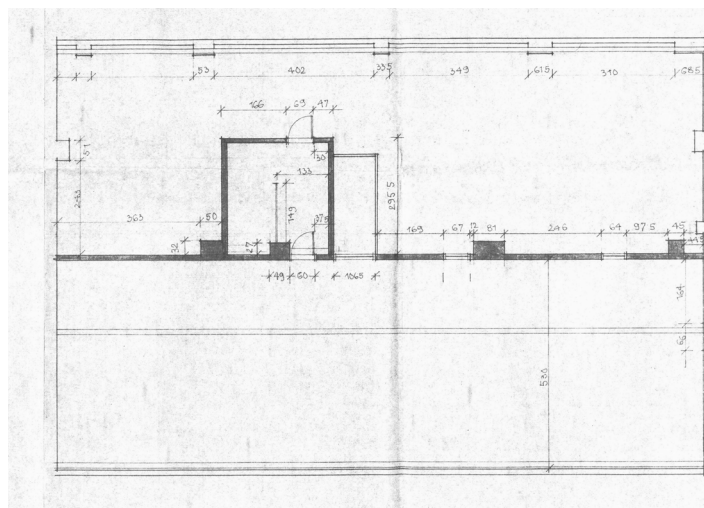
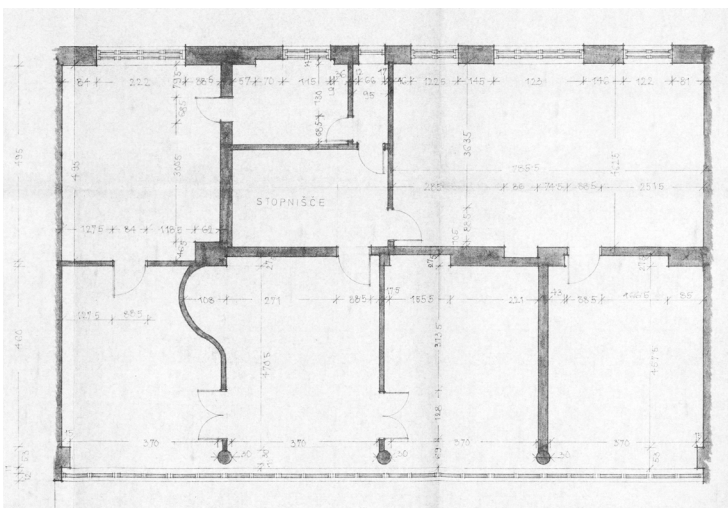
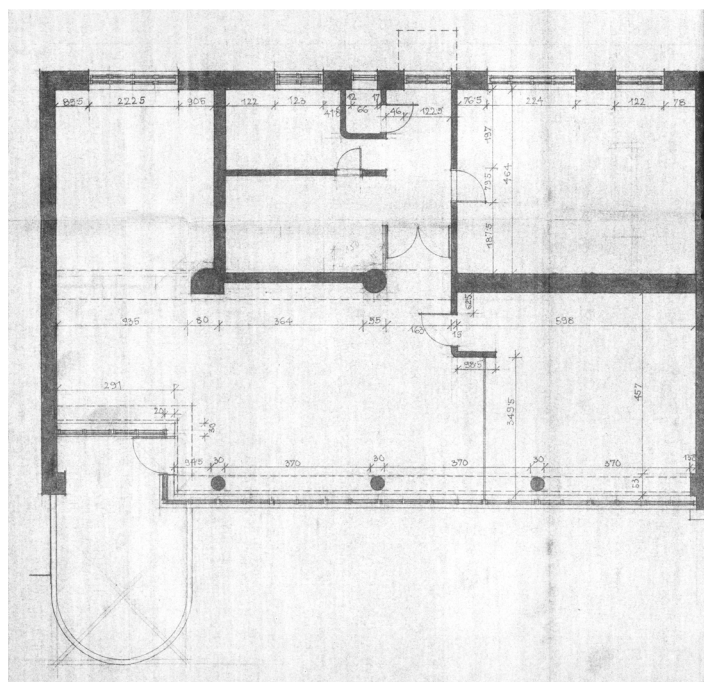
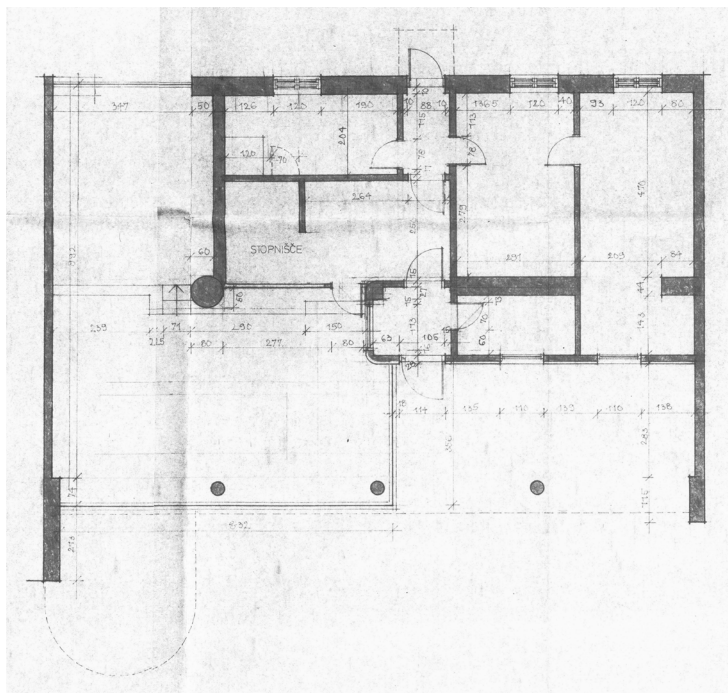
correspondence remains lost.¹² Despite the absence of the original letters, a comprehensive survey of these transcriptions has unearthed that Novak produced the plans for the villa between mid-April and early July 1938.¹³ While “pretending to be ill” in front of the master Le Corbusier, he made seven designs and several sketches for the exterior and interior: two perspective sketches of the façade, one sketch of the interior of the hall on the ground floor, and two perspective sketches with considerable detail showing the layout of the first floor.¹⁴ It is not known precisely when the building permit was issued; however the plans for Villa Šerbec were most likely among the 74 projects based on which the municipality of Murska Sobota issued various building permits in 1938.¹⁵ The construction of the villa probably began when the architect returned from Paris after announcing his homecoming in a letter dated 7 June 1938. “Since we are so devilishly noble here, we will now take a two-month holiday in the middle of the season. The studio will be closed because the bosses are going to Algiers to build a skyscraper for which we have recently completed

the plans.”¹⁶ Although it is repeatedly stated in the literature that the villa was not completed due to the outbreak of the Second World War,¹⁷ no archival data or other evidence of the (non-)completion of the villa has been preserved. Only a note in the Murska Krajina newspaper of November 20th, 1938 indicates that the new building was “already roofed over” at that time, but not yet “completely finished”.¹⁸

Novak’s correspondence also provides a valuable insight into his architectural vision and the alterations undertaken during the design phase. Apart from letters, photographs initially served as the only reliable source for piecing together the original design of the building in the research. Jerolim Purač’s photograph,¹⁹ along with three other historical photographs²⁰ taken shortly after its construction (Figs. 2–4), have been preserved and are frequently referenced in the literature and project documents. As previously noted in the literature, pictures reveal that the architect constructed the building on pilotis, mentioned by Novak in his letter dated 10 May 1938: “Perhaps under the influence of Corbusier or even the historians of Ljubljana (pile-dwellings of the Ljubljana Marshes!), I raised the whole shack from the ground. For the sake of our precious groundwater, I am sure I will be forgiven. (...) Only the foundations of the columns and supporting parts would be driven below the freezing point and widened there accordingly so that the foundations could survive the cold.” However, the attentive observer can recognise further details in those photographs. The western part of the ground floor was glazed from top to bottom, with the panes encased in a light, probably metal construction. Behind the glazing and the window openings on the floor, the verticals of the piers are visible, which probably have a circular plan, as no corners are visible. Behind the eastern pier, a recessed entrance loggia opens on the ground floor, where a large round window is visible, as well as a recessed balcony loggia on the first floor; the corner of this loggia is fully glazed. The horizontal windows were of the “sash on sash” type, opening outwards. The detail of the brick fence with the viewing opening on the roof terrace is also noticeable. However, those early images, as well as subsequent photographs illustrating individual phases of reconstructing the roof and the southern frontage, remain silent on the rear façade or the interior.



4 Aerial view of Murska Sobota and the building array with Villa Šerbec. Undated photograph



5 Floor plans of all floors of Villa Šerbec in an architectural record of the building before the reconstructions in 1978–1979

Pre-reconstruction architectural record

The aforementioned photographs, alongside Novak’s letters, likely served as the basis for reconstructing the floor plans and the façades of the Villa Šerbec in one of the two diplomas from 1992²¹, uncritically repeated in subsequent literature, failing to underscore its speculative nature devoid of factual basis, particularly evident in the reconstruction of the north façade and interior. Consequently, for conservators, these sources proved insufficient in terms of providing a comprehensive understanding of the original condition of the interior and the north façade, as well as the intricate

details, materials and finishes. To bridge this gap, a comprehensive review of literature and archival materials and, most importantly, sondages were employed to unearth the missing pieces. The challenge with the literature was the frequent unavailability of source of information, making it difficult to verify the accuracy of the data, particularly concerning specific statements. On the archival front, the enigma of missing documents, some of which seemed to have disappeared in recent years was encountered.

During the course of the research, the authors acquired the construction documentation of the complete renovation of the building dating back to 1978, which had long been misplaced but later proved to be crucial document for further exploration in architectural history, as it comprises the architectural record of the building before renovation.²² The latter includes floor plans, sections with planned interventions, but no drawings of the façades (Fig. 5). Comparing the record and the textual part of the adaptation project to the Novak’s letters, the authors were able to determine the original design of the villa, particularly in areas not disclosed by other archival sources, such as previously unknown articulation of the rear façade and the original room layout.

The ground floor

The ground floor largely corresponds to the description of the villa in Novak’s letter of 10 May 1938. On this floor, the architect planned utility rooms and a winter garden or “entrance hall” with seating areas “made of the finest fabric”, a small fountain with a statue, and a sprinkler system in which “Seerosen” were to grow. This undoubtedly shows the tendency to gain a representative impression of the space and its semi-public character. The technical report within the aforementioned 1978 documentation confirmed the existence of the winter garden. As can be seen from the architectural record, the staircase in the south was not surrounded by a wall, but it is unclear from the plan what kind of partitioning element it was. It is assumed that the drawn partition and the door are made of glass through which the staircase was illuminated, but this solution may be secondary. The renderings are broadly consistent with Novak’s statement in his letter of 15 April 1938 that the winter garden should be “in connection with the entrance and the staircase”.

The first floor

On the first floor, the architect envisaged living quarters and other rooms accessible from the entrance hall: a maid’s room, a kitchen with a pantry, a study on the north side and a south-facing living room with fireplace and access to a balcony. On the south side, he also planned a dining room separated from the living room only by a glass wall. The record shows that the layout of the rooms on this floor matches the description in Novak’s letter. It also reveals previously unknown details, such as the original extension of the loggia into the interior. The recapitulation of the works also shows that the rooms on the south side of the building were separated by the glass partition framed in iron.

The second floor

On the second floor Novak planned a room with seating by the ‘fireplace’, a bathroom and bedrooms, the layout of which he describes in more detail in his letter. The record shows that the rooms on this floor were arranged differently than suggested in the literature. For instance, it has come to light that there were four rooms on the south side, contrary to the previous belief of only three. Moreover, the record indicates that partitions were affixed to the piers, and there were niches present in the load-bearing structure/walls, likely intended for built-in furniture. Another intriguing detail revealed in the record is the oval shape of the east wall in the room adjacent to the parents’ bedroom.

6 View of the reconstructed Villa Šerbec and the site of the demolished neighbouring building in 2004. Photo: Dr Eva Sapač, 2004



The attic

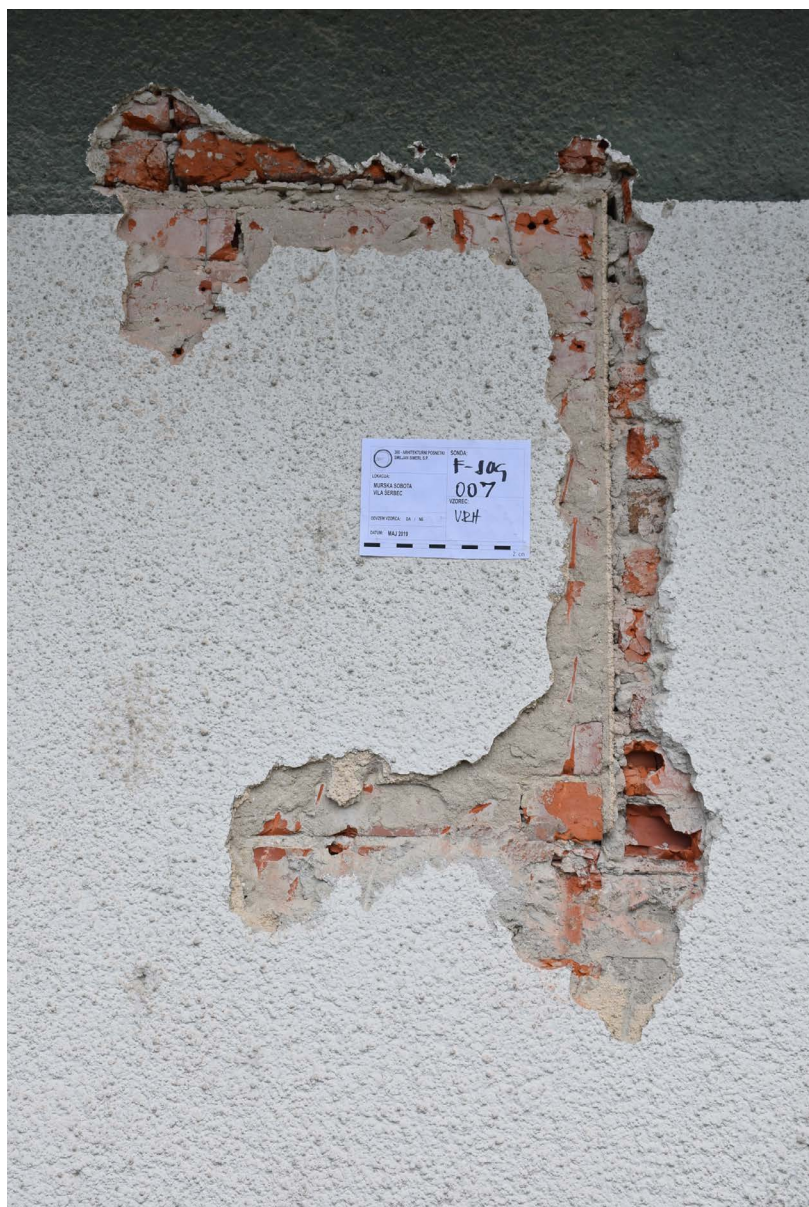
Contrary to earlier assumptions, the attic had no living quarters. The design of the staircase leading to this floor remains unknown. Records indicate that it was a straight staircase, facing south-north and very steep. Two doors led off the staircase, one to the attic and the other to the roof terrace. To the east of the door was a large window, behind which was an opening in the second floor’s ceiling, possibly roof light that illuminated the staircase on the second floor. The attic was also lit by two smaller windows (of similar dimensions) in the eastern part of the original wall under the ridge of the former single-pitch roof. The architectural record also revealed an additional window in the north wall of the recessed loggia on the ground floor. Only a round window was known until then, as seen in the photographs.

The structure of the building and its alterations

The recently unearthed archival documentation not only provides fresh insights into the original interior design but also sheds light on details regarding original construction and alterations made during the renovation of Villa Šerbec between September 1978 and autumn 1979. It turned out that the ceiling above the ground floor was made of reinforced concrete, while the ceilings on both floors were initially made of wood, as Novak had already announced in his letter of May 10th, 1938. The wooden ceilings on the upper floors were removed during this renovation and replaced with reinforced concrete slabs. The (round) pilotis were additionally reinforced and concreted “into the rectangular shape of the load-bearing wall”. The layout of the rooms was modified. A “wage department with an internal-public character” was created in the winter garden. New flooring and whitewash were provided; doors and windows were removed and replaced with new joinery. The balcony loggia was demolished, and a new parapet wall was built to extend the existing one (Fig. 6). However, it was impossible to ascertain from the 1978 documentation whether the investor replaced the gable roof with a single-pitched roof or whether this had been done earlier.²³

Sondages

In addition to research of the archival material, extensive research of the structure in situ was carried out on the north façade, the interior, and the south façade. The sondage was to obtain information about the materials and the layers of coating, as well as about the construction history of the building, the caesurae of the construction phases and original openings. These provided additional information about the design of the interior, as well as the rear façade.



7 Research of the structure in the area of the roof terrace railing: showing the caesura, the original course of the wall and the location of the ledge. Photo: Smiljan Simerl, 2019



8 Research of the structure – façade: identification of the colour tone and plaster texture. Photo: Smiljan Simerl, 2019

The research, for example, pinpointed the articulation of the north façade, the position and, in most cases, the size of the window openings. Sections of the façade were identified that had been demolished and rebuilt. The design of the entrance on the rear façade, with its curved edges and a canopy, was confirmed as planned initially. The exact alignment of the brick fence of the roof terrace on the south side of the building was determined, including the location and dimensions of the recessed segment and the shelf designed around the corner (Fig. 7). The sondage of the structure was also carried out on the plasterwork of the south façade. Discovered information on the texture and colour was initially a terranova plaster in the shade of mango yellow (Fig. 8).

Furthermore, the sondage done in the interior provided important information about the preservation of the primary elements and, in part, about the layers of paint in the rooms. The information obtained on the eastern stone wall of the ground floor has made it possible to determine the exact location of the former outer stone wall of the ground floor loggia on the façade. The probing on one of the pillars on the ground floor along the southern perimeter of the building initially suggested that it was a new load-bearing element (Fig. 9). This was also indicated by the concrete, which appeared to be of recent date. The research could not confirm the preservation of the original construction elements beneath the secondary layers of concrete, which were, according to the 1978 construction documentation, added to the pilotis during the renovation of Villa Šerbec, due to the inability to drill a core across the entire cross-section. Additionally, investigation revealed the presence of a primary pale pink wall coating among the original paint layers in the room with the balcony exit, and original coatings were also found in some of the other rooms. The colour tones of the whitewash ranged from strong blues to yellows and soft brick reds.



9 Research of the structure on the pier: determining the preservation of the primary piloti under the secondary layer of concrete. Photo: Smiljan Simerl, 2019

Persisting uncertainties regarding the design

Despite extensive research, uncertainties persist regarding the design of both the exterior and the interior. Notably, previous reconstructions had posited the presence of round windows on the north façade however, no concrete evidence supports this claim. Moreover, some other unresolved issues regarding the design of the Villa Šerbec remain.

The cantilevered canopy and the staircase

Previously considered concrete, the massive, cantilevered canopy on the roof terrace remains questionable. This is a very sensible compositional element, but Novak does not mention it in his letters to Dr Šerbec. The canopy completed a set of distinct vertical elements that counterbalances the strong horizontals, interpreted in the rows of windows while balancing the balcony compositionally. However, the material remains, and the location of the canopy's attachment has not been preserved. The architectural record has no trace of any elements associated with the canopy, while the situation of the load-bearing elements in this record imposes the question of what part of the load-bearing structure transferred the weight of several cubic metres of concrete. Indeed, the second-floor wall below the alleged canopy location is reinforced. However, the second-floor ceiling was made of wood with no load-bearing elements below the location of the canopy, and the wall on the roof terrace was also not load-bearing. The situation of the load-bearing elements, as seen in the records, suggests that the canopy could not have been made of concrete after all. Presumably, it was a light construction, with plasterwork as a finishing touch that only gave the appearance of concrete.

Another important topic in the research was the staircase, which is often crucial when representing certain architectural styles. The existing staircase in the villa is recent. All that could be gathered from the construction documents of the 1970s was that the location of the staircase was to be maintained. There is no description of the staircase, as it existed at the time, only that a new one was to be made of concrete.²⁴ The design and material of the original staircase thus remain unknown. According to the literature, it was supposed to have a curved form, which is not clear from the archives. Novak used a semicircular wooden staircase in his villas, such as the one in Villa Keršovan and Villa Dr Vučak (open staircase), and a straight staircase in Villa Kous. Although in a letter dated April 15th, 1938, the architect mentions ramps leading to the first floor of Villa Šerbec, potentially influenced by the ramp found in the House la Roche-Jeanneret in Paris (Auteuil, 1923–1925), we learn from a letter dated May 10th, 1938, that he had nevertheless envisaged a staircase in his conceptual design, which, however, is not described in detail. There is also the question of whether it was open. Sondage has shown that the covering of the staircase is not authentic. Interestingly, Novak wrote in a letter on 10 May 1938 as follows. “Directly accessible from the staircase is the maid’s room, which in this situation assumes the function of a ‘Hauswart’ at night and has a considerable view over the ground floor (...).” At least in the conceptual design, he seems to have considered an open staircase allowing a view from the first floor to the ground floor. In his letter describing the first-floor room to the south of the staircase, Novak also states that the staircase wall was made of wooden panels and veneered.²⁵ This confirms that there was no brick wall on the first floor by the staircase. A former visitor to the building also reported in 2019 that the staircase was still open in the 1950s. According to this interviewee, the staircase was also straight and running from east to west on all floors.²⁶ The sondage of the structure of the walls was therefore carried out to verify the possibility of a straight staircase. The resulting data and the simulations suggest a single-armed staircase rising from east to west, which would have been attached on the first floor at a preserved recessed segment of the load-bearing lintel, approximately 20 centimetres from the edge of the ceiling or floor (Fig. 10). A possibility of Novak designing a staircase similar to the one in Villa Cook thus remains.



10 Research of the structure in the area of the staircase: checking the possibility of the existence of a single-armed staircase. Photo: Smiljan Simerl, 2019

Novak and Šerbec: Pioneering spirit in Murska Sobota

In order to get to know and understand the listed villa, the authors were interested in information about the architect and his oeuvre but also about the investor and his role in the design of the building. Novak perpetuated the social changes of the time; in Murska Sobota, a predominantly rural environment with only about 5,000 inhabitants,²⁷ those were reflected in a new way of life implemented by the forward-looking elite. Although a more comprehensive study of the clients of Novak's villas is not available, it can be concluded that they were an educated and wealthier class from Murska Sobota, who probably chose the new architectural style as a symbol of their modernity and cosmopolitanism, like the clients of iconic modernist villas elsewhere in Europe. Like Novak's other villas, Villa Šerbec was also built for a member of Murska Sobota's intellectual elite, whose taste and inclination towards new architectural trends met with public disapproval. In the case of Villa Šerbec, this is evident from a letter Novak wrote to Dr Šerbec from Vienna on 28 November 1938: “Who writes such flattering articles in M. Krajina? I wonder what rattles his cage: I cannot believe that a Sobota's ‘peasant (gmajnar)’ can be sincerely enthusiastic about such – according to Dr Vučak – ‘ultra-modern’ buildings.”

Contrary to the architect, the investor received little attention from researchers examining Novak's opus, or specifically Villa Šerbec. Research has revealed that Dr Šerbec should not be considered among the “peasants”. He was born in Rajhenburg (now Brestanica) in 1890, worked as a livestock veterinarian in Ormož from 1919. In 1920 and 1921, he replaced the deposed mayor of Ormož as a town councillor. Moreover, Dr Šerbec was the head of the Ormož public library for many years. In June 1927, he was transferred to Murska Sobota.²⁸

Although Dr Šerbec's role in designing his new house is not yet well defined, Novak's perception of the client's importance in creating residential architecture can be gathered from the architect's following writings. “The problem – Housing – it never dries up – I am of the opinion that the person who ventures into this matter does not so much need a so-called ‘talent’, but rather a due portion of love, heart and soul for his profession and also for the random client who commissions him to create not monumental architecture, but a ‘home’ in the worst sense of the word. (...) Unfortunately, it seldom happens that any employer is given the appellation of ‘man’; too often, one is given a narrow-minded, distrustful poor man, who has no warmth of heart in his soul except the adored golden calf and who, for all our efforts and ideals to give him a home, feels cheated in his iron shirt, because he has not been made the stable and nursery in which he belongs.”²⁹

The pretence of “ultramodern”

Everything points to the fact that Villa Šerbec is the first “Le Corbusierian” building in Slovenia that the famous Cinq Points so directly determine. In Slovenia, the earliest such obvious analogy to Le Corbusier's architecture that has been established so far relates to a building constructed after the Second World War. It is a commercial and residential building in Ljubljana called “Hayrack (Kozolec)”³⁰, designed in the early 1950s on the model of Le Corbusier's l'Unite d'habitation in Marseille. However, “The Stilt House” predates the “Hayrack” by more than a decade and is unique in another way. It is “Le Corbusierian” solely “en face”.

The load-bearing structure of pilotis and lintels unquestionably embraced modern design principles. However, this was juxtaposed with a wooden ceiling on the upper floors. The front wall, relieved of its load-bearing function, featured horizontal windows, named by Novak the “Bandfenster”, represented a notably contemporary, for the periphery even avant-garde design. In contrast, the rear façade, concealed from street views, adhered to traditional masonry and load-bearing elements, featuring, as the sondages have proved, a window arrangement in line with conventional axes. On the street-facing side, the architect conceived an upper section as a roof terrace, a novel concept that embraced the idea of sunbathing on the terrace, adorned with an imposing cantilever canopy, another testament to modernity. However, on the rear side of the building, hidden behind the oak trees of the castle park, a single-pitched roof covered with tiles was employed.

The reason for a seemingly avant-garde architecture on a more conventional backdrop likely steams from a pursuit of cutting-edge architectural aesthetics while adhering to the investor's financial constraints; the architect may have been compelled to economize on concealed aspects of the building. Namely, the architect's letters to Dr Šerbec reveal that the construction of the villa exceeded the initially projected budget.³¹ “You pushed me up against the wall with the budget you gave me and now it is a matter of simplifying everything and cutting corners on every stone”, Novak wrote in a letter dated 18 June 1938. Thus, opting for wooden ceilings over reinforced concrete offered a cost-effective solution, with the architect even noting a 50 % cost reduction in ceiling expenses.³² Finally, in a letter dated 7 July 1938, which must have been a response to the investor's positive reaction to the plans for the villa, the architect assured him: “I am very pleased that you are satisfied with the plans. You need not be afraid, we will arrange everything in such a way that you will not end up in a poorhouse.” It is quite possible that the assumed lightweight structure of the leading aesthetic feature at the front of the building, the distinctive canopy on the terrace, visible from a distance in the form of a solid concrete element, is also a result of cost-saving considerations. It seems that in his search for the most modern form within the given financial framework, Novak created his last work in Pomurje – at least that is what he thought when he wrote a letter to Dr Šerbec on 18 June 1938 – an “ultramodern” building with a scenic façade.

Conclusion: The preservation of values and the importance of facts

While some important documents and details about the design of Villa Šerbec remain elusive, the original floor plan has been revealed and research has provided important new insights into the previously unknown layout of the rear façade.

The newly acquired archival documentation indicates that the original room arrangement differed from the information given in the literature. Furthermore, the sondages reveal some previously unknown details about both façades, the interior, especially the staircase, and some other important details of the building, such as the canopy on the roof terrace.

The research has shown that Dr Šerbec’s villa has to be considered as a peculiarity among Slovenian modernist architectural achievements, not only because it was the first architecture to so directly determine the famous Cinq Points, but also because of its mixture of avant-garde principles and traditional elements. The pursuit of modern architectural aesthetics within budget constraints led to compromises, such as the design of a concrete-like canopy in lightweight construction. Furthermore, the villa’s design reflects the socio-cultural context in which it was built as well as the pioneering spirit of the architect and the investor.

New findings obtained during the research have made it possible to determine which parts of the building are original and must be preserved. Furthermore, the detailed information about the design, materials, and colour scheme that has come to light has enabled the future reconstruction of both the front and rear façades as well as most of the interior, from the floor plan to the details of partitions. Additionally, the investigation has created a framework for new interventions to be made where original elements are not preserved and data for reconstruction is lacking. However, despite extensive research, uncertainties remain regarding some design aspects of Villa Šerbec, highlighting the complexity of reconstructing historical architecture while considering the expectations of new owners and conservation efforts.

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Notes

- 1 Decree on the proclamation of immovable cultural and historical monuments on the territory of the Municipality of Murska Sobota (Official Gazette, No. 8/91-58, 9/92 (corrected), 11/92-69, 5/98-260)
- 2 The work of Feri Novak, including Villa Šerbec, was discussed in the context of dissertation projects (cf. HARI 1992, BOROVSŠAK 1992, DOMJAN 2012). In 2014, a retrospective exhibition entitled Feri Novak: Architecture for a Future Man was held at the Dessa Gallery in Ljubljana, followed by a thematic issue of the magazine AB - Architect's Bulletin in 2016. Novak's work is also featured in a documentary film entitled *Arhitekt Feri Novak – Mož, ki je provinci dal mesto* (Feri Novak. The Man Who Gave the Province a City), directed by Štefan Celec and produced after the completion of the research presented in this paper.
- 3 This is a report required by the Slovenian legislation on the protection of cultural heritage, i.e. the Cultural Heritage Protection Act. Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 16/08, 123/08, 8/11, 30/11-Odl.US, 90/12, 111/13 and 32/16. The report serves conservators, as well as owners, project planners and investors in the conservation and restoration of monuments.
- 4 ZUPANČIČ 2016, p. 13, ZUPANČIČ 2017, p. 41
- 5 Feri Novak received his primary education at the Tehniška srednja šola in Ljubljana. ZUPANČIČ 2016, p. 13
- 6 After the war, as a member of the People's Committee of the Murska Sobota district, he developed the urban planning of Murska Sobota. From 1950 he was then employed by the Slovenia Project in Maribor, and from 1954–1959 he was head of Projektivni biro Maribor. According to Novak's plans, numerous residential buildings, public buildings, public and funerary monuments and interiors were built in Murska Sobota.
- 7 ZUPANČIČ 2016, pp. 11–12
- 8 Stanovanjsko poslopje dr. Šerbeca, p. 2
- 9 At that time, the municipal and state offices were already located in the castle, whereas part of the park was parcelled out and used for buildings. *Razvoj gospodarstva občine Murska Sobota*, p. 3
- 10 Cf. Novak's letter dated 10 May 1938
- 11 The transcriptions of the letters were made by Metka Hari, who keeps them in her private archive. For the research, the transcriptions of six letters were obtained from Paris dated 15 April 1938, 10 May 1938, 18 June 1938, 27 June 1938, 1 July 1938 and 7 July 1938, as well as a copy of the manuscript of a letter from Vienna dated 28 November 1938. The transcription of the letter dated 10 May 1938, in which the architect describes the concept of the villa, was also published in full by Tanja Borovšak (BOROVŠAK 1992) in her dissertation. The transcriptions by Borovšak and Hari do not agree in all details.
- 12 According to Metka Hari, they belonged to the legacy of the Prekmurian academic Vanek Šiftar, which is kept in the Maribor Regional Archives, but no letters were found when the fond was examined. The archive records are signed SI_PAM/1770: Šiftar Vanek 1947–1999
- 13 This can be concluded from Novak's letters dated 15 April 1938 and 7 July 1938.
- 14 This is evident from Novak's letters of 27 June 1938, 1 July 1938 and 7 July 1938.
- 15 *Gradbeno gibanje v Soboti*, 1. The construction plans and building permits for projects from 1933–1940 in Murska Sobota are kept by the Regional Archives Maribor. However, the documents are not stored in the archive box. Fond Municipality of Murska Sobota 1922–1941, sig. SI_PAM/0101; location 28/A-13/2/c. According to the 2008 inventory, the building plans in this fonds should be included in technical unit 9 (Building plans and building permits 1933–1940). The technical unit only contains documentation for 1940.
- 16 Cf. Novak's letter dated 7 July 1938
- 17 Cf. BOROVSŠAK 1993, 53; HRAUSKY 2016, 88 etc.
- 18 Stanovanjsko poslopje dr. Šerbeca, p. 2
- 19 Private archive of Stanka Dešnik
- 20 Archives of the Murska Sobota Design Bureau
- 21 Cf. BOROVSŠAK 1992. A second diploma on Novak's work, also dealing with the Villa Šerbec, was inventoried in 1992 in the Department of History of Art library at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana but has since disappeared. The work is the thesis of Metka Hari entitled *Architect Franc Novak – Feri and his role in the development of Murska Sobota*. In addition, the material on Villa Šerbec that was collected during the preparation of the diploma was temporarily stored in the Museum of Architecture and Design in Ljubljana but is currently no longer accessible there. The Museum of Architecture and Design holds more recent material on Novak's architecture that is not related to the building in question.
- 22 As the documentation for obtaining the building permit shows, the project involved the conversion and adaptation of a residential building into commercial premises, as well as a connection to an adjacent building in the complex where the investor was based. Archive of the Murska Sobota Administrative Unit, SGP Konstruktor Maribor, TOZD Projektivno Tehnološki biro, project no. 852. Investor: SGP „Konstruktor“ TOZD Gradbeništvo Pomurje Murska Sobota. Object: Adaptation of the building „Šerbec“ M. Sobota. Phase: PGD and PZI. July 1978. For later alterations, see: The Regional Archives Maribor (SI PAM). Fond: Konstruktor – Splošno gradbeno podjetje Maribor, 1947–1998. Technical units: 67, 77, 88, 89, 90, 92, 95, 99, 104, 113; Fond: Skupščina občine Murska Sobota. Technical unit: 648. Adaptation of the administration building (the Šerbec house). Investor: Splošno gradbeno podjetje Konstruktor, Gradbeništvo Pomurje Murska Sobota. Building documents, classification number: 351
- 23 From the aerial photograph of 1968 (Aerial Survey Lendava - Murska Sobota, Aerial Photograph Archive, Geodetic Institute of Slovenia), it is unclear whether the villa is still covered with a single-pitch or a gable roof. Later photographs showing the gable roof are undated. As the plans (roof plan M 1:50, *Adaptacija - Šerbec*, 23 October 1978) confirm, the new roof of the Šerbec villa was planned at the same time as the roof of the neighbouring building (Ulica Štefana Kovača 10).
- 24 Archive of the Murska Sobota Administrative Unit, SGP Konstruktor Maribor, TOZD Projektivno Tehnološki biro, project no. 852. Investor: SGP „Konstruktor“ TOZD Gradbeništvo Pomurje Murska Sobota. Object: Adaptation of the building „Šerbec“ M. Sobota. Phase: PGD and PZI. July 1978
- 25 References in Novak's letter of 10 May 1938
- 26 Oral source, Mr Anton Ravnič, who was a visitor to the building in his youth. This information was obtained in May 2019.
- 27 *Razvoj gospodarstva občine Murska Sobota*, p. 3
- 28 Historical Archives Ptuj (SI ZAP). Fond: Mestna občina Ormož. Rokopisna zbirka, R-70. Kronika mesta Ormož. *Chronik der Stadtgemeinde Friedau 1877*. In the research, relatives of the Šerbec family were searched for who are said to have left Murska Sobota for The United States of America at the outbreak of the war and managed to find a supposed relative Vito Šerbec (born 1928) in Canada. The research continues.
- 29 Cf. Novak's letter dated 10 May 1938
- 30 The name of the building derives from the Slovenian word for a wooden outhouse for drying grain and grass, typical of the Slovenian countryside.
- 31 Cf. Novak's letter dated 18 May 1938
- 32 Cf. Novak's letter dated 10 May 1938

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- Historical Archives Ptuj (SI ZAP)
- Personal archives of Metka Hari
- Personal archives of Stanislava Dešnik
- The Regional Archives Maribor (SI PAM)

Credits

- Fig. 1:**
Historical Archives Ptuj (SI ZAP)
- Fig. 2–4:**
Archives of the Murska Sobota Design Bureau (Projektivni biro Murska Sobota)
- Fig. 5:**
Archives of the Murska Sobota Administrative Unit
- Fig. 6:**
Archives of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of Slovenia, Maribor Regional Office
- Figs. 7–10:**
360 – Arhitekturni Posnetki Smiljan Simerl s.p.
- Title:**
Detail from fig.1

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