

Slovenian Architecture in the Period of Socialism

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The paper discusses the characteristics of Slovenian post-war modernistic architecture until the early 1980s and the development of postmodernism. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the period governed by the new political conditions saw the initiation of many major reconstruction and industrialisation projects. This provided new opportunities for a generation of young architects who were mostly former students of Jože Plečnik, but who already before the war had made a shift towards the emerging modernism. Furthermore, functionalism supported by a social vision of quality living and working environments, became the gui-

ding principle of creativity of the time. Nevertheless, despite the modernist discourse both in urban planning and architecture, the tradition of the Jože Plečnik School remained present and apparent, particularly in the architect's eye for detail and spatial context.

Without doubt, the development of these sensibilities brought on the relatively fast and fruitful articulation of Slovenian regionalism, which started to emerge as early as in the late 1950s and reached its pinnacle in the 1960s and early 1970s, arguably the most successful period of Slovenian post-war architecture.

Fig. 1: Panoramic view of the new socialist town of Velenje built beside a coal mine, which developed much more intensively than Nova Gorica due to the strong local political efforts fostered. The picture shows the centre of the town with free-standing buildings in a green setting and the main square with the administrative building of the Velenje Coal Mine and Culture House. Architects: Janez Trezn, Franc Šmid, Ciril Pogačnik, 1953–61

Abb. 1: Panoramablick auf die neue sozialistische Stadt Velenje/Wöllan, errichtet neben einem Kohlebergwerk, die sich aufgrund des starken lokalen politischen Engagements sehr viel intensiver als Nova Gorica/Neu Görz entwickelte. Das Bild zeigt das Zentrum der Stadt mit freistehenden Gebäuden, in Grünanlagen eingebettet, und den Hauptplatz mit dem Verwaltungsgebäude des Velenje Kohlebergwerks und dem Kulturhaus, Architekten: Janez Trezn, Franc Šmid, Ciril Pogačnik, 1953–61





Fig. 2: The Culture House in the centre of Velenje. In all Slovenian medium-sized towns the culture house was the place for the main cultural and political events. Architect: Oton Gaspari, 1959

Abb. 2: Das Kulturhaus im Zentrum von Velenje/Wöllan. In allen mittelgroßen slowenischen Städten war das Kulturhaus der Ort der wichtigsten kulturellen und politischen Veranstaltungen, Architekt: Oton Gaspari, 1959

The cultural and political context

When talking of the architectural legacy of the socialist era in Slovenia, it is important to present a wider cultural and political context of Slovenia at the turn of the 20th century, which was influenced by the pre-war development of the new Slavic state and the post-war change of the political system under the communist leadership.

Along with a stronger awareness of the national identity the creation of the Slavic country, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, after World War I brought the establishment of many new national institutions, among them the first national university in Ljubljana in 1919 with the department of architecture and Jože Plečnik (1872–1957) as the leading figure. After his early encounters with modernism and even a short experiment with cubism in Vienna and Prague, Plečnik upon his arrival in Ljubljana started to develop a unique language of the neoclassical tradition, where he paraphrased in a very subtle way the classical tradition and traditional building identity with his enormously creative impulse.

Eventually, modernist ideas were also adopted in the Slovenian territory; young architects were educated about the current trends by Professor Ivan Vurnik who like Jože Plečnik had been trained in Vienna. Furthermore, many students decided to study abroad. In the 1930s, eight students worked in Le Corbusier's architect's office, among them Edvard Ravnikar (1907–1993) who later became the central figure of post-war architecture and urban design.

Despite the circumstances, functionalist thinking already became well established in the pre-war years. Even though the mark of the Plečnik School was clearly evident and sometimes directly resonated in the design (e.g. the Skyscraper [Nebotičnik] by Vladimir Šubic), some other authors

(e.g. France Tomažič, Oton Gaspari, Herman Hus, Edvard Ravnikar – to mention just the most important ones) integrated the Plečnik school of thought into their modernist projects in a very subtle way, lending a special character to the composition and detail.



Fig. 3: The Litoštroj factory was a large-scale industrial plant, designed as an open structure in green surroundings, with innovative building structures to present the enforcement of the new society in industrial development. The metalworking plant has a suspended roof fixed on triangular brackets. Architect: Miroslav Gregorič, 1946

Abb. 3: Die Litoštroj-Fabrik war eine große Industrieanlage, entworfen als offene Anlage in grüner Umgebung, mit innovativen Baukonstruktionen, um die Durchsetzung der neuen Gesellschaft durch die industrielle Entwicklung zu veranschaulichen. Die metallverarbeitende Anlage besitzt ein aufgehängtes Dach, das an dreieckigen Auflagern fixiert ist. Architekt: Miroslav Gregorič, 1946

Fig. 4: Residential and commercial complex of Kemija Impex inspired by Unité d'Habitation, but built in the urban context of Ljubljana's main street. Architect: Edo Mihevc, 1955–57

Abb. 4: Wohn- und Gewerbekomplex Kemija Impex, angeregt durch die Unité d'Habitation, aber errichtet im städtischen Zusammenhang der Hauptstraße von Ljubljana/Laibach, Architekt: Edo Mihevc, 1955–57





Fig. 5: The panorama of Koper with a block of flats in the middle of the medieval city, evidently built to override the old with the new. Architect: Edo Mihevc, 1964
Abb. 5: Panorama von Koper/Gafers mit Wohnblocks im Zentrum der mittelalterlichen Stadt, offenkundig errichtet, um das Alte durch das Neue zu überwinden, Architekt: Edo Mihevc, 1964



Fig. 6: The memorial complex on the island of Rab shows the architect's subtle approach to context and tradition. Architect: Edvard Ravnikar, 1953
Abb. 6: Die Gedächtnisanlage auf der Insel Rab zeigt die sorgfältige Herangehensweise des Architekten an Kontext und Tradition, Architekt: Edvard Ravnikar, 1953

The end of World War II witnessed substantial political changes. Slovenia became one of the republics of the new socialist Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito. Tito's conflict with Stalin in 1948 and the resulting termination of contact with the Soviet Union significantly influenced the cultural setting. Despite pursuing its 'own way to socialism', the country had to start cooperating with the West, as the total economic embargo on the part of all socialist countries meant complete isolation. Indirectly, the latter provided several advantages, particularly opening of the borders, cooperation and the possibility

of education and dissemination of western trends, which was reflected positively in architectural design.

Postwar industrialisation and the construction of socialist cities

The post-war era was characterised by large-scale reconstruction and industrialisation, characterised in Slovenia by the construction of the new socialist cities of Nova Gorica, Velenje and Kidričevo. On the outskirts of Ljubljana, the Li-

Fig. 7: The Town Hall Building in Kranj introduced contextual regionalism, which intensively developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Architect: Edvard Ravnikar, 1958–60
Abb. 7: Das Rathausgebäude in Kranj/Krainburg führte den kontextuellen Regionalismus ein, der sich intensiv in den 1960er und 70er Jahren entwickelte, Architekt: Edvard Ravnikar, 1958–60



Fig. 8: The Prisank Hotel corresponding with the alpine landscape is one of the best evidences of the regionalism of the 1960s' generation (demolished). Architect: Janez Lajovic, 1961–62
Abb. 8: Das Prisank Hotel, das mit der Alpenlandschaft korrespondierte, ist einer der besten Belege für den Regionalismus der 1960er Jahre (zerstört), Architekt: Janez Lajovic, 1961–62





tostroj industrial complex for the production of turbines for hydropower plants was built, accompanied by a residential area, a school and a sports centre. Due to its self-sufficiency it was called the Litostrój town, even though it later became fully integrated into the urban tissue. The complex, which was based on the idea of a factory in a green setting, showcased an innovative design and construction concept of the

Fig. 9: Residential and commercial block in Velenje. With its clear tectonic structure and intensive architectural graphics it is an example of the architect's modernist poetics developed in Ravnikar's school. Architect: Stanko Kristl, 1960–63

Abb. 9: Wohn- und Gewerbekomplex in Velenje/Wöllan. Mit seiner klaren tektonischen Struktur und intensiven architektonischen Grafik ist er ein Beispiel für die moderne Poesie des Architekten, die in Ravnikars Schule entwickelt wurde, Architekt: Stanko Kristl, 1960–63

Fig. 10: The Revolution Square, today Republic Square, was the biggest urban intervention built as a political and administrative centre. Architect: Edvard Ravnikar with collaborators, 1961–74

Abb. 10: Der Revolutionsplatz, heute Platz der Republik, war der größte städtische Eingriff, errichtet als politisches und administratives Zentrum, Architekt: Edvard Ravnikar und Mitarbeiter, 1961–74



structures (with suspension roof structures, prefabricated construction elements, etc). The residential area also followed the functionalist postulate of living in a natural setting; furthermore, the concept introduced the idea of a common canteen, which would relieve women of housework, but the plan was not put in place.

Naturally, the construction of all major projects had a political background. The town of Nova Gorica (New Gorica) was erected near the border to Italy, when after the war old Gorica (Italian Gorizia) became part of Italy. This was a direct manifestation of the strength of the new socialist country. The plans were not fully realised; however, the basic structure has been preserved to this day, and it evidently follows the modernist doctrine (figs. 1, 2).

Despite its political ties with the Soviet Union until 1948, at the time there were, in fact, no real-socialist aesthetics present, which were otherwise dictated by Moscow in practically all Eastern Bloc countries. Closest were the buildings and monuments by Vinko Glanz (1902–1977), built for the political elite (the National Assembly Building, Tito's villas in Bled and Ljubljana and the municipality building in Nova Gorica), particularly in relation to the tectonics of works, the symmetry of design and the use of traditional materials, but upgraded with personal interpretation.

1950s – radical modernism and identity

The post-war period, which began with Plečnik's retirement, was marked by two architects who were both Plečnik's students: Edvard Ravnikar (1907–1993) and Edo Mihevc (1911–1985). Even before the war and immediately after, both architects were involved in major construction projects and became professors of architecture at the university.

Edo Mihevc was mainly a project designer and a teacher educating through his project work, while he hardly wrote about it. However, he was an exceptionally industrious project designer who realised over 100 projects in his time. Right after the war, he and Miroslav Gregorič headed the erection of the town of Litostroj (fig. 3). In Ljubljana, he built a residential and office complex (1953–55), a version of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, located along the main road of the capital (fig. 4). The project showcases the cosmopolitan orientation of the architect who was well familiar with the current events, which also resonated in his later projects for office buildings in Ljubljana. Among these are Bavarski dvor, Metalka and the Impex Palace.

Later, his focus became the Slovenian Coast, for which he elaborated regulation plans and many projects, which culminated in his own take on Slovenian Mediterranean regionalism, where he could not avoid large-scale interventions which demolished many historical buildings at the coast. Especially evident were the interventions in the medieval built heritage of Koper (fig. 5).

In contrast, Edvard Ravnikar was a very industrious writer, thinker and painter, and is considered to be the leading figure of post-war modernism. Next to his architectural work, he established himself as an urban designer and won many Slovenian and Yugoslavian competitions. He designed



Fig. 11: The Garage in Ljubljana showcases the architect's innovativeness in building technology and structure, which was constantly researched in the projects of Savin Sever, 1969

Abb. 11: Die Garage in Ljubljana/Laibach veranschaulicht das Innovative des Architekten in Bautechnologie und Struktur und wurde laufend in den Projekten von Savin Sever erforscht, 1969

Nova Gorica, the first newly erected socialist town. Characteristically, during the implementation of current functionalist trends and radical modernism he wanted to establish contact with tradition, which he, in his own way, interpreted in the vocabulary of modernity, as shown in both of his projects from the mid-1950s: in the Memorial Centre of War Prisoners (1953) on the Island of Rab (fig. 6), Croatia, and in the Town Hall Building in Kranj (1958–60), where he

Fig. 12: The Cultural Centre in Skopje with its dynamic structure houses several cultural institutions on the Vardar river bank; Štefan Kacin, Jurij Princes, Bogdan Spindler and Marjan Uršič, 1969–81

Abb. 12: Das kulturelle Zentrum in Skopje mit seiner dynamischen Struktur beherbergt zahlreiche kulturelle Einrichtungen am Ufer des Flusses Vardar; Štefan Kacin, Jurij Princes, Bogdan Spindler and Marjan Uršič, 1969–81



transcended the typical modernism of the time by reinterpreting the architectural tradition, while taking into account the spatial context and innovatively structuring the building into several smaller ones, thus adapting it to the scale of the city centre. In the central building with the Great Hall he took a very distinct approach by reinterpreting the traditional structure (i. e. the temple) through the use of the modern language of structure/construction, hence creating a vocabulary which he further developed in his later projects. At the same time, the project became an important model, norm, measure of the strongest generation of architects – his students who worked in the 1960s and 1970s (Vodopivec, 2005) (fig. 7).

The generation of the 1960s and 1970s

Ravnikar's intensive focus on teaching in the 1950s helped to create a circle of young artists who travelled abroad to be educated and to familiarise themselves with the groundwork of Max Bill and modern Scandinavian residential building. Indeed, this group of young designers created a special language of Slovenian modernism. For some authors, this language relied on the spatial context and reinterpretation of spatial and architectural elements (Oton Jugovec [1921–1987] and Janez Lajovic [1932]), while others embraced structuralism originating from the reinterpretation of construction, headed by Savin Sever (1927–2003), Stanko Kristl (1922) and Milan Mihelič (1925).

The Prisank Hotel in Kranjska Gora (1961–62) by architect Janez Lajovic was one of the finest examples of Slovenian regionalism. It presented a modern articulation of traditional elements and materials in a volumetrically diverse composition entering into a dialogue with its surroundings (fig. 8, 9).

As a result of industrialisation and improvement of the economic situation in the country, the late 1960s and 1970s resulted in a more intensive urbanisation and construction of large residential neighbourhoods, particularly in large towns, and in a more intensive work on major projects of urban design. In Ljubljana, the construction of the Revolution Square, the central public space of the capital city, was completed; the monumentality of the central skyscrapers at the edges of the square is in dialogue with the existing elements, evident in the pavilion design of the first department store and in the exhibition of archaeological artefacts of Roman Ljubljana (fig. 10).

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the arrival of the next generation of Ravnikar's students, who were becoming increasingly successful in the wider Yugoslavian territory (fig. 11). Among the projects that stood out due to their complexity and timelessness is the competition project for the Cultural Centre in Skopje, won by a group of young architects: Štefan Kacin (1939), Jurij Princes (1933), Bogdan Spindler (1940) and Marjan Uršič (1934) (fig. 12). In the structure, the freely positioned volumes around the central space/atrium create a dynamic composition complemented by a sculpturally folded structure of smooth roof cladding made of reinforced concrete.

The great Plečnik exhibition and transition to post-modernism

The events at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s were characterised by a further development of critical regionalism, which was especially evident in the work of the group Kras led by Vojteh Ravnikar. It opened a new chapter of development attached to rationalist ideas of neighbouring Italy. The period is characterised by the Great Plečnik Exhibition, which was opened in 1986 in the Pompidou Centre in Paris. The exhibition represented a cornerstone, i. e. with the emerging postmodern paradigm, while also marking the end of an extremely creative period which – at the time of established doctrines of international styles – was characterised by the development of a subtle form of regionalism in Slovenia. Plečnik's legacy in creativity and in enabling a reinterpretation of both the classical and traditional Slovenian construction distinguished itself in the quality work of Plečnik's successors who developed their solutions in the language of modernism – both on the architectural scale and in detail, representing the key potential of the era.

Zusammenfassung

Slowenische Architektur in der Zeit des Sozialismus

Der Beitrag behandelt die charakteristischen Elemente der modernen slowenischen Nachkriegsarchitektur bis in die frühen 1980er Jahre. Nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg und unter den neuen politischen Bedingungen – Slowenien wurde eine der Republiken des neugegründeten Jugoslawien – wurden zahlreiche Wiederaufbau- und Industrialisierungsprojekte in Angriff genommen. Eine junge Generation von Architekten, überwiegend Schüler von Jože Plečnik, folgte den Prinzipien der Moderne sowie des Funktionalismus, gepaart mit der Vision von besseren Wohn- und Arbeitsbedingungen. Ab den späten fünfziger und dann vor allem in den sechziger und siebziger Jahren mündete dieser Ansatz in einen ausgeprägten slowenischen Regionalismus.

Bereits seit dem Bruch Titos mit der Sowjetunion 1948 hatte eine zunehmende Öffnung zum Westen stattgefunden, was sich auch in der baulichen Gestaltung niederschlug. Schon vor 1948 hatte es übrigens kaum gestalterische Übereinstimmungen mit der sowjetischen Architektur gegeben.

Beinahe alle größeren Bauprojekte hatten einen politischen Hintergrund: So wurde etwa Nova Gorica als Verlust für das an Italien abgetretene Gorica nahe der slowenisch-italienischen Grenze errichtet. Es handelte sich dabei um die erste sozialistische Stadt überhaupt.

Aufgrund der Industrialisierung und einer verbesserten wirtschaftlichen Lage erfolgte in den späten 1960er und 1970er Jahren eine zunehmende Errichtung großer Wohnbezirke, vor allem in den größeren Städten, sowie die anspruchsvolle Gestaltung von Stadträumen. Eines der herausragenden Beispiele dafür ist der Revolutionsplatz in Ljubljana.