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RAIMONDO MERCADANTE

BETWEEN HISTORY, IDEOLOGIES AND CONFLICTS

ARCHITECTURE IN SLOVENIA
1968-1991

Foreword by

ÁKOS MORAVÁNSZKY





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*This book is dedicated
to the memory of prof. Marco Pozzetto*

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FOREWORD

THE “UNDERDEVELOPED” EPICENTER

Viennese architectural critic Friedrich Achleitner quoted in an essay a quip by Edvard Ravnikar, the Slovenian architect who plays a central role in the present book: “Today architecture can only be found in underdeveloped countries”. Ravnikar said this in the final decade of the last Millennium, and he knew all too well how much interest Slovenian architecture generated among architects – first in Central Europe, then in the larger international context. Speaking about Slovenia as an underdeveloped country was therefore not without coquetry, as Achleitner himself remarked. Less than twenty years later, in a slim volume about architectural epicenters, edited by Petra Čeferin and Cvetka Požar, Slovenia was described as an example of an emerging epicenter. The two statements are not contradictory, nevertheless they raise the question regarding the perception of Slovenian architecture both inside and outside the country.

When I visited Ljubljana in 1982 with a group of young architects from Hungary, and Edvard Ravnikar showed us his Cankarjev dom, the large cultural and congress center in the final phase of its execution, we were deeply impressed – not only by the quality of architecture, but by the political-cultural ambitions that the project represented. “It is such a tragedy that the Yugoslavian way to socialism was not open to Hungary” – said a member of our group, a well-known architect from a large Budapest office. From the Hungarian perspective, Slovenia was certainly not underdeveloped, but a proof that the dream of the imme-

diate post-war years, a democratic society with a socialist government was not entirely utopian. For us at that time, Slovenia was the model of a well-functioning economy, vibrant cultural life and good architecture in a “non-aligned” country.

What we did not know that this model was at the time of our visit already under pressure. One of the most serious dilemmas was the creation of civil society, as a space for the manifestation and articulation of possible democratic processes. The architecture of Jože Plečnik, a new “discovery” and revelation for architects outside of Slovenia in the Eighties, was an example of a positive nationalism. In the political sphere, the task was the reconstruction of a positive notion of the nation as factor of power. However, the contradictions between post-modern rhetoric and the modern Yugoslav context cannot be ignored. How can civil society as an a-national idea be reconciled with a context in which national statehood is not a political but an ethnic community? Moreover, the national idea was incompatible with the increasingly strong homogenizing tendencies that strove to eradicate differences.

When I visited Ravnikar’s Cankarjev dom later, already in the new Millennium, the signs of the crisis were obvious. Even the idea of a cultural center lost its power, it was an investment struggling with the costs of upkeep, and offered spaces to be rented for parties and other private events. The entrance of global capitalism ended the world’s division into two antagonistic blocks and launched the expansion of neoliberalism. Artists and architects in Slovenia reflected in their work the ambiguities of the situation critically.

The slightly more than two decades in the focus of Raimondo Mercadante’s book is for all these reasons a period of transition. 1968 was a pivotal year, not only in Slovenia, not only in Europe: Vietnam war, civil rights movement in the United States, student’s revolts, Prague spring, cautious privatization efforts in several Socialist countries... The author starts with Plečnik’s international “discovery” and the controversies around his position in the architectural school of Ljubljana and concludes with a thorough discussion of the post-Socialist situation. The 1980s were also a time of large and far-reaching changes in art and culture, a time of new art paradigms, as well as a period of the crisis of modernism and the advancement of postmodernism. Postmodern

architecture is usually connected to the “cultural logic of late capitalism” (Fredric Jameson), to the aesthetics of capitalist consumerism. But Mercadante gives us a different narrative, presenting it not only in the framework of Slovenian debates, but also with respect to the Slovenian-Italian and Slovenian-Central European context. He refers to the pioneering work of the architectural historian Marco Pozzetto, who – as the author emphasizes – continuously crossed national and cultural borders, and to whom he dedicated his book.

Raimondo Mercadante is well prepared to deal with the historical events of an architecture in a context characterized by different languages and peoples, where finding a common spirit, a *koiné* – one of the favorite terms of Pozzetto – was the result of a concentrated theoretical and artistic effort. His exceptional command of languages, his previous research and publications on Karl Scheffler and Walter Curt Behrendt, including the Italian translation of the key writings of these authors enabled him to understand the larger context of architectural theory in the Germanic and East-Central European countries. His meticulous research into the first-hand sources, his interviews with the protagonists, as well as his rich photographic survey of the buildings helped him – and us, readers – to understand the outstanding architecture and inspiring ideas that belong to the shared history of Central European architecture.

Ákos Moravánszky

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My main person of reference in Ljubljana, was prof. Aleš Vodopivec with whom I had long conversations from 2019 to 2022 in the form of interviews. Equally important were the encounters I had with other

former students of Edvard Ravnikar, whose work has been the focus of my research: Janez Koželj, Jurij Kobe, Andrej Hrausky, Peter Gabrijelčič and Marko Cotič. Among the masters of the older generation, I had the opportunity to interview Janez Lajovic.

On the other hand, my project has greatly benefited from the encounter with architects, journal editors and museum curators from the later decades, like Prof. Miha Dešman, editor in chief of *AB* since 1994, the architects Maruša Zorec and Robert Potokar, who had personal memories of Vojteh Ravnikar, or dr. Matevž Čelik, the former director of the Arhitekturni muzej in Ljubljana and the current director, dr. Bogo Zupančič and the curator, dr. Maja Vardjan, head of the archive. I would also like to acknowledge prof. Franci Lazarini, from the University of Maribor and prof. Martina Malešič from the University of Ljubljana for the productive conversations we had.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Archives and libraries:

Arch.Pozz.Pa Marco Pozzetto Archive, Department of Architecture of the University of Palermo

AJK Archive Jurij Kobe, Ljubljana

MAO Muzej za arhitekturo in oblikovanje, Ljubljana – Museum of architecture and design, Ljubljana

NUK Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana- National and University Library, Ljubljana

PAM Pokrajinski Arhiv Maribor- Provincial Archive, Maribor

UIRS Urbanistični Institut Slovenije, Ljubljana – Institute of Urban Planning of the Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana

UKM Univerzitetna knjižnica, Maribor- University Library, Maribor

Abbreviations of Slovenian and Yugoslav entities and organizations:

BIO Bienale industrijskega oblikovanja – Biennial of industrial design, Ljubljana

BTC Blagovno-trgovinski center, Ljubljana – Center for commercial activities, Ljubljana

DAL Društvo arhitektov Ljubljane- Society of Ljubljana Architects

FAGG Fakulteta za arhitekturo, gradbeništvo in geodezijo, Ljubljana – Faculty of Architecture, Engineering and Geodesy, Ljubljana

- FLRJ Federativna ljudska republika Jugoslavija- Yugoslav Federal People's Republic
- GR Gospodarsko Razstavišče – Exhibition Center, Ljubljana
- GZS Gospodarska zbornica Slovenije- Slovenian Chamber of Commerce
- JLA Jugoslovanska ljudska armada – Yugoslav People's Army
- JNA Jugoslovanska narodna armada- Yugoslav National Army
- KS Krajevna skupnost- District community
- LUZ Ljubljanski urbanistični zavod – Ljubljana Institute of Urban Planning
- MC CK ZKS Marksistični center pri CK ZKSlovenije- Marxist center of the Central Committee of the Communist League of Slovenia
- NOB Narodnoosvobodilni boj- National Resistance War
- OF Osvobodilna Fronta – Liberation Front
- OŠ Osnovna šola – primary school
- SAZU Slovenska Akademija Znanosti in Umetnosti – Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts
- SFRJ Socialistična federativna republika Jugoslavija- Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
- SIS Samoupravna interesna skupnost- Self-managed communities of interest
- SML Skupščina mesta Ljubljane – Municipal Assembly of Ljubljana
- SKS Samoupravna komunalna skupnost- Self-managed municipal community
- SRS Socialistična republika Slovenije – Socialist Republic of Slovenia
- SSS Samoupravne stanovanjske skupnosti- Self-managed communities for housing
- SZDL Socialistična zveza delovnega ljudstva – Socialist Workers' League
- ŠKUC Študentski kulturno-umetniški center – Student cultural and artistic center
- TOZD Temeljna organizacija združenega dela – Basic organization of associated work
- VVZ Vzgojno varšteni zavod – Institute for care and education
- ZDAS Zveza društev arhitektov Slovenije – League of Architectural Societies of Slovenia
- ZIL Zavod za izgradnjo Ljubljane
- ZKS Zveza Komunistov Slovenije – League of Slovenian Communists
- ZMS Zveza mladine Slovenije – Slovenian Youth League
- ZSSS Zveza stanovanjskih skupnosti Slovenije – League of Housing Communities
- ZUM Zavod za urbanizem Maribor- Maribor Town Planning Institute

Abbreviations of works consulted:

- ARHITEKTURA + BESEDA: *Razstava delovanja skupine, zbrane ob časopisu ab, arhitektovem biltenu, glasilu društva arhitektov Ljubljane*- Ljubljana Razstavišče Riharda Jakopiča junij 1981 (Ljubljana: AB, 1981).
- BERNIK2004 Stane Bernik, *Slovenska Arhitektura Dvajsetega Stoletja, Slovene Architecture of the Twentieth Century* (Ljubljana: Mestna Galerija, 2004).
- ER93 Friedrich Achleitner and France Ivanšek (eds)., *Hommage à Edvard Ravnikar: 1907-1993* (Ljubljana: France and Marta Ivanšek, 1995).
- HDS Leopoldina Plut-Pregelj et al., *Historical Dictionary of Slovenia*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).
- INTERPOLATIONES Bogdan Reichenberg et al., *Interpolationes. Gradnje v izgrajenem okolju. Bauen in gebauter Umgebung. Costruzioni in un ambiente precostruito. Arhitekti – Maribor 1980-1990. Architekten – Maribor 1980-1990. Architetti – Maribor 1980-1990* (Maribor: Mesto, 1991).
- NSA Stane Bernik, *Novejša Slovenska Arhitektura, The recent architecture in Slovenia* (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 1968).
- SLU Stane Bernik, *Slovenska likovna umetnost 1945-1978: arhitektura, urbanizem, industrijsko oblikovanje, grafično oblikovanje, fotografija* (Ljubljana: Arhitekturni muzej, 1979).



Tab. 1. Map of the Republic of Slovenia after 1991, cartographic Service of the United Nations.

INTRODUCTION

In a speech given at the award ceremony of the Plečnik Prize awarded to him in Ljubljana on January 23rd 1975, Marco Pozzetto (1925-2006), a famous Italian-Slovenian architectural historian from Trieste, who significantly contributed to making the architecture of Jože Plečnik and Max Fabiani better known in Italy and in Western Europe¹, formulated some reflections that we may assume as a common thread for our discourse:

... it is very difficult to rationally explain how the Slovenes, who numerically amount to the population of Turin, have maintained themselves for centuries as a nation, despite the strong pressure from North and West and, perhaps, even from the South. [...] Right when architecture, at least ideally, abandoned the millennial canons and began to adapt itself to the growing demands of philosophy, society, economy, giving its own psychological reading, the Slovenian nation of one and a half million people gave to Europe and the world two of the maybe fifteen world pioneering architects! Both were at the top of their profession but, despite this, due to political, language or other difficulties, still almost unknown².

As Marco Pozzetto saw with reference to Fabiani and Plečnik, Slovenian architectural history seems to us a quite unique one for its originality, despite the influence from Western Europe and from the Balkans. The “miracle” of Slovenian architecture lies in how such a small national community so managed to express its own voice.

This is all the truer, when we consider the little-known history of the architecture in the time span from the post-1968 years to the beginnings of the Balkan wars, which led to the end of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The period covered by this book was characterized in Slovenian architecture by a profound crisis, which affected the architect's attitude towards society, politics and history.

In the 1970s, Yugoslavia's economic and political situation became critical: the state was more and more indebted, industrial pace started slowing and the construction industry entered a difficult phase. Architects and planners, still involved in generous state competitions (often without any real implementation), were left without work. In a sort of revival of the condition experienced by the architects during the French Revolution, when theory and utopia were a compensation for the lack of work, Yugoslav architects and urbanists, influenced by the ideology spread by Marxist journals like *Praxis* and by the reading of Western sources, started a phase of reflection on the role of urban space and on the same role and meaning of architecture in contemporary society.

Far from being restricted to architects, planners and designers, this theoretical debate involved sociology, philosophical thought, literature and the history of art. Architectural design and theory were seen in strict relationship with urban planning, in search for a new architectural narrative and a stronger integration of the buildings with the city. Architecture also reflected the cultural and lifestyle changes, due to the Communist Party's loss of centrality. While the memory and commitment for the partisans' war faded away in the people, a growing awareness of Slovenian Central European identity came to the fore; on the other side, unofficial subcultures became evident through many different forms, such as the punks and the alternative communities.

Slovenian architecture in the age of Postmodernism was far from following foreign trends, as was the case in many post-socialist countries, who mainly embraced the elements of Postmodern architecture after 1989 because it originated from an autonomous reflection on its own meaning and ethics. The architecture we will examine in depth in the following chapters, nonetheless, should not be studied apart from what was going on in the other Yugoslav republics; on the contrary, many contacts, cultural exchanges or possible parallels with Croatian, Serbian,

Bosnian and Macedonian schools should be considered to fully understand the Slovenian debate. Albeit the main Slovene architects showed personality traits, cultural references and goals which often were heterogeneous, we may find many aspects which justify a coherent narrative of the events. This may be explained thanks to the presence of a common background, the education at the Department of Architecture in Ljubljana University, where most of the masters we will analyze, like Janez Koželj, Aleš Vodopivec, Jurij Kobe, Vojteh Ravnika and Peter Gabrijelčič, were students of Edvard Ravnika (1907-1993), one of the greatest Yugoslav architects in the second half of last century (**fig. 0.1**), who was professor of social housing and urban planning there from 1945 to 1980. Furthermore, the movement which took place in Ljubljana in the 1980s, which was extremely attentive to contemporary Italian debate, may be largely identified with the activism played by the journal of Ljubljana Architects' Society, *AB-Arhitektov bilten*. This journal was the place where from the 1970s a paradigm shift in the architects' references took place. With the aim to restore and revitalize the core of the town and its typological characteristics, Ljubljana became one of the main centers for architectural theory in Yugoslavia and all over Central Europe. Slovenian architects started criticizing the theories on the zoning and reading the works of authors like Henri Lefebvre, Wolf Jobst Siedler, Rob Krier, Carlo Aymonino, Aldo Rossi, Philippe Panerai, Manfredo Tafuri, Georges Teyssot and Francesco Dal Co.

The "Kras" Group from Sežana, in the western offshoot of the republic, created by Vojteh Ravnika in 1977, was another important actor of the new Slovenian architectural trend in the 1980s.

Finally, the *AB* group claimed for the architects a key role in criticism and architectural historiography, a field dominated up to that moment by art historians.

In the architects' mind, a shift with the recent tradition of "ljubljska šola", the architectural school of Ljubljana, emerged. This school had developed after WWI, thanks to the didactic work of Jože Plečnik (1872-1957) and Ivan Vurnik (1884-1971) and subsequently, in the 1950s and 1960s, with the multiform mission of Edvard Ravnika³.

While the Slovene architect and historian Dušan Grabrijan (1899-1952) limited his view only to the Plečnik's school⁴, we owe

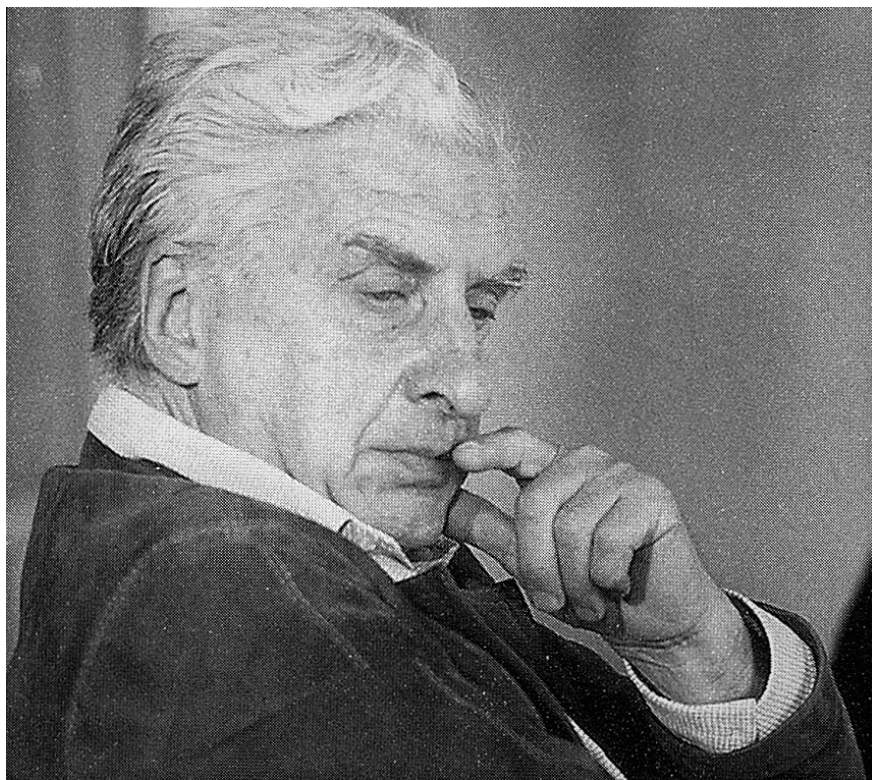


Fig. 0.1. Edvard Ravnikar almost 80 years old, private archive of the architect Jurij Kobe.

the historiographical definition of the so-called “Ljubljana school of architecture” to the critic Stane Bernik (1938-2019), who believed that the “originality” of Slovenian architecture was a recent fact; While we may acknowledge it in Max Fabiani’s works in Ljubljana and in the buildings from the beginning of the 20th century which were inspired by the *Wiener Sezession*, it actually starts with the works of Jože Plečnik and Ivan Vurnik and their students. In Slovenian architectural history and criticism from the 1990s, for instance in Peter Krečič’s (1947-) writings⁵, nonetheless, the equivalence between the school of Ravnikar and the school of Ljubljana *tout court* became established⁶.

Ravnikar's personality and range of interests were exceptional in the history of Slovenian architecture: the witnesses of his teaching and design activities always emphasized his extraordinary culture, charm and versatility: Peter Krečič spoke of an incisive and inquisitive personality, sensitive to a wide range of design themes, from architecture, urban planning, industrial and graphic design, to theory⁷; the Serbian critic Ivica Mladenović (1937- 2020) compared him to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti⁸, while, already in 1960, Marjan Mušič (1904-1984), a refined critic and historian who was also Ravnikar's colleague for many years, stated that:

writing about Ravnikar and his work means narrating the ideals and battles, paths and achievements of Slovenian and therefore Yugoslav architecture, because we may hardly find any great issues and problems where Ravnikar was not present both as an architect and as a figure capable of influencing or giving a firm judgment⁹.

His students who graduated in the years spanning from 1973 to 1980, when he retired from University, recall how high and ambitious the cultural background he asked for was. Aleš Vodopivec (1949-), for instance, remembers that he expected his pupils to read a book in only one week; Ravnikar was curious about every field of knowledge and his readings were not only essays on urban planning and architecture but also philosophy and literature. He was interested in Edvard de Bono's theories on the development of creative thinking. He was also passionate about the theory of lateral thinking and went in search of different points of view, studying authors different as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Konrad Lorenz. His interests were very broad, not only related to the artistic field. In addition to the visual arts (he was a painter), he knew music. He pushed for a certain interdisciplinarity with the arts and philosophy, in a wider project¹⁰.

But which were the common denominators of the Slovenian architectural debate during the last two decades of the past century?

First of all, an attitude of scepticism and crisis towards the socialist management of the city, a critique of the methods, strategies and urban aesthetics produced by the public administration emerged. However,

the reason for this criticism was not so much the search for a new aesthetic, than the strive for alternative approaches. Proof of this is the content of a long interview (1985) when Aleš Vodopivec talked to Edvard Ravnikar, then almost in his eighties, in *Nova Revija*, the literature and philosophy journal edited by the most heated Slovenian autonomist political dissidence. Vodopivec solicited from the master some opinions on his original expectations towards the advancements of Socialist Yugoslavia, which were later to be disappointed. The first issue was the incoherence between urban planning and its concrete perception from people, a hiatus that would end up encouraging illegal building. Then other critical points were discussed: “anonymous residential suburbs, individual family buildings degrade the territory, Nova Gorica and Velenje¹¹ are far from our expectations, a chaotic road system; the output is an urban planning debacle”¹².

Ravnikar was also interested in the issue of illegal building, a very widespread concern for urbanists and politicians not only in Slovenia but all over Yugoslavia. He began publishing articles on the subject after 1968; however, he did not legitimize it as a practice. He considered it, instead, as a stimulus to rethink urbanism in a bottom-up way: “Those who build in black, usually do not know existence of architects. Nor do they imagine what are the skills of the architects of their potential help.”¹³ Then, Aleš Vodopivec stimulated Ravnikar to talk about the most acute issues in town planning, emphasizing the clash between his expectations about Socialist approach, particularly about the social role of the architects, and his real experience¹⁴.

Ravnikar’s response focused on a sore point, the demise of his projects for Nova Gorica in 1948, where even his proposals on the width of the new main street of the town had been turned down by the Ministry of Construction: “Also in this sphere we believed that we would ‘reach and surpass the West’. How we would have benefited today from a broader discussion of the issues related to urban plans, which we have abandoned to total fragmentation!”¹⁵.

Finally, Vodopivec turned himself to the perception of the urban image, almost exasperating- beyond the truth- the appearance of Ljubljana as an Eastern European city: “Today, thirty years after those optimistic forecasts, you note with resignation that Ljubljana is a

‘socialist’ city, that is, dead and boring, miserable and dirty, essentially devoid of interest.”¹⁶

Furthermore, Ravnikar, sharing this reflection, condemned a methodology which had marginalized the sense of human measure, order and the care of the historic center:

Ljubljana is very similar to all the other cities of the East, built with a coarse municipal mentality, with immense dimensions of emptiness and areas without interest, which is more similar to the effect of a marshalling yard than to the experience of the famous historical urban centers”¹⁷.

The elderly architect, however, went on to identify the causes of that situation and spoke of political decision-making interference on programs and realizations; he also explained how the planners stood in silence in the face of the political decisions and blamed the obstinate political bureaucracy that led to an unsuccessful urban policy¹⁸.

This negative evaluation was contrasted, in the authors of the *AB* group, by the search for a narrative which put together architecture and the city, following a theoretical path parallel to Aldo Rossi’s one¹⁹. In 1980, commenting in an extensive essay on the recent trends of Slovenian architecture, Vodopivec negatively assessed the urban setting of the Dom Španskih borcev [House of the Fighters of Spain] cultural center (**fig. 0.2.**), a work by Oton Jugovec (1921-1987), awarded with the “Borba” prize for the Slovenian republic in 1981, the most prestigious Yugoslav prize for architecture²⁰.

Vodopivec defined it as a clear example of the disagreement inherent in the paths of Slovenian architecture. The building introduced a scale into the urban structure, a hierarchy and a semantic field that was necessary to make the city “readable.” But the irrational logic of customary urban planning ideology that shaped the design of the area had deprived Jugovec’s work of its real meaning, impoverishing its message. Vodopivec compared the effect of the Dom Španskih borcev to a sort of “Breitfuss” model, “a tragic nonsense between architecture with a vertical impact and anonymous urban planning, which is the eloquent demonstration of the complete divorce between architecture and urban planning in Slovenia”.²¹