

ARCHITECTURE SLO



Maja Vardjan works as an architecture editor of **Ambient** and writes for several other publications including **A10 New European Architecture**.

Sprawl games Young Slovenian Architecture in the Making

In the latter half of the 1990s, it became obvious that something curious was going on in Slovenian architecture. A number of buildings with a surprisingly fresh image and strong identity popped up across the country, and the authors of these various architectures were largely younger generation architects. But the reason behind this phenomenon was decidedly not a sudden emergence of new architectural talent; rather, the development of a "new Slovenian architecture" must be put in a wider perspective.

Lucky Opportunities

The establishment of a new Slovenian nation with a declaration of independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 unleashed, among many things, the development of a new architecture. A once socialist republic dominated by a single political party was transformed overnight into a capitalist parliamentary democracy with a free market economy. The rules of the hitherto new and unknown global information society created new conditions which changed the very definition of the city and its architecture. This radical shift created many opportunities for the young architects who found themselves freed from the burden of the past and quickly re-oriented themselves in this new social climate. The air was full of optimism, for it had become clear that high-quality attractive design was a great tool with which to draw attention and construct the identity of a new state.

As the curators of the exhibition *Territories Identities Nets* observed, "While the 1985-1995 decade was characterized principally by an intensive and prolific production of theoretical works, the predominant trait of the 1995-2005 period seems to be a refocusing on high quality built works."¹ Open public competitions

provided younger architects with opportunities to participate in the design of significant public architecture: museums, stadiums, state institutions, and more. An anonymous public competition for a Chamber of Commerce and Industry Building in 1996 which was unexpectedly won by the newly-established Sadar Vuga Arhitekti office resulted in a building with a striking image that marked the (local) breakthrough of a new generation.

Direction West

Jože Plečnik, Edvard Ravnikar, Savin Sever, Saša Mächtig ... this small country has contributed significantly to the world of architecture and design. But while it took the international public quite some time to recognize the striking uniqueness of 20th-century Slovenian architecture, contemporary Slovenian architecture enjoys considerable exposure in important international publications. The flow of information runs both ways. Many young Slovenian architects decided to do their postgraduate studies abroad in various prestigious western institutions. They returned to a land in transition, relieved from the heavy burden of a traditional national identity and full of desire to participate in the global world. Sixpack², a traveling exhibition of Contemporary Slovenian Architecture, is based on just such a loose concept, on study-abroad students come home. Nevertheless, Sixpack came to grow into a real phenomenon, spreading the news of the young Slovenian scene from Genoa to Buenos Aires, from Rotterdam to New York. This little curiosity of a country is now worthy of attention.

Splintering Urbanism

But the reality of contemporary Slovenian architecture is entirely different from the glossy presentations in local and international publications. One of the most obvious effects of the transition phase is the ongoing privatization of once-public space. Cities are developing by individual initiatives which lack any sense of coherence – or coherent sense.

→ **National Library, 1936**
architect: **Jože Plečnik**



↑ **Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1999**
architects: **Sadar Vuga Arhitekti**



↑ **BTC Shopping Centre**



→ **Trg Republike, 1976**
architect: **Edvard Ravnikar**

Such splintered urbanism is full of buildings which, by all means possible, try to compete for the attention of a dazzled consumer whose idea of community has been reduced to the enclosed space of the shopping mall. Housing – the architecture which constitutes the actual décor of Slovenian lives – is largely bad and banal, too. Since the 1970s, the Slovenian landscape and suburbs have been overwhelmed by near-identical single-family houses designed and built with no reference to the environment whatsoever. Instead of becoming a menacing reminder of the mistakes of the past, this type of catalogue architecture still represents the much-desired dream house for the majority of the country's middle class; it has become the main protagonist in the culture of sprawl.

Enigmatic Objects

In this complex new climate, architects with a sense of social and environmental awareness – including the members of eleven young offices presented at Wonderland – developed a strategy of how to work within the given situation. The fast-changing free market economy affords no room for big ideological statements. Projects and building construction have to be completed quickly and efficiently and at as low a cost as possible. Still, these architects manage to find some scope to design quality architecture which goes beyond the dictates of the market. Unfortunately, due to the absence of consistent urban planning and a demand for diversity and individuality on the part of the clients, they have to focus on singular objects of architecture.

Even if these projects cover a wide range of views and themes, the visual appearance of this architecture has a similar alienating effect. Whether rising out of a landscape of urban sprawl or a picturesque countryside, it works like an isolated form which unfolds from the organization of its program, the concept of its inside, and not its surrounding. Many projects are being built that focus on their own internal world without even having a chance to give some thought to the idea of public space.

Still, this architecture has a very positive effect. Contrasting

with the anonymous surroundings, it works as an intelligent engine of stimulation, outlining the possibilities of future development. Its enigmatic appearance raises questions, it attracts, disturbs in a positive way; it breaks the established codes of what a building should be and look like.

Even if this architecture may appear as a kind of imperfection in its environment, the structures themselves are designed to perfection. These buildings often have unique interiors (interior design is another strong practice in contemporary Slovenian architecture) and excellent detailing. Regardless of whether it is a new addition to the library in the old castle or a warehouse in the industrial area of the city, the details are exact, demonstrating not only architectural skills, but the power of craftsmanship as well. The use of materials and three-dimensional facades introduce references to the local tradition, even an element of the absurd, even the bizarre, related in some way relating to the unconventional architectures of Jože Plečnik and Edvard Ravnikar.

Fields of Experimentation?

Contemporary Slovenian architecture has an interest in more than just implementation and aesthetic aspects; there are also more experimental, innovative positions. Unfortunately, most of these projects, (with the exception of some private houses) remain speculative paper architecture. The average Slovenian client and user is not yet ready for experimentation, a fact that becomes most obvious on the newly-opened testing ground of Slovenian architecture – housing. A pronounced shortage of apartments has resulted in extensive public and private investment, generating many architectural competitions, of which numerous were won by young architecture offices again. The fresh, attractive image of many newer housing estates has surely had an impact on the paralyzed socialist notion of what dwelling in a block of flats should be.³ But have any new living concepts been developed? Commercial developers are still well inclined toward tried and proven models engrained in the collective imagination. Even the so-called advanced projects are

largely a repetition of archetypes accommodated within safely conventional standards. Experimentation remains relegated (again) to the building's surface. In many cases, playful visual games transform the architecture into an impressive design object. But what is the purpose of single particles if they do not catalyze a process of crystallization?

Fading Optimism

Unfortunately it seems that the almost sensational revival of Slovenian architecture in the late 1990s is losing steam – and strength. The days which sparked off optimism are over. New competition rules together with complicated bureaucratic procedures eliminate the young and not-yet established architects before they even get started. When the government lacks the ambition to leave its mark on the design of its cities, it seems Slovenia will remain, at best, a fragmented landscape of architectural incidents. The future task of the new generation of architects is, therefore, huge.

–Maja Vardjan

¹ Tadej Glažar and Tina Gregorič, 2005; *Slovene Architecture 1995–2005*, Introductory Remarks, in: **Territories, Identities, Nets: Slovene Art 1995–2005**, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

² **Sixpack, Contemporary Slovenian Architecture, 2005**, Dessa, Ljubljana. The catalogue accompanies the touring exhibition presenting Bevk Perovič Arhitekti, Dekleva Gregorič Arhitekti, Elastik, Mächtigt Vrhunc Arhitekti, Ofis and Sadar Vuga Arhitekti.

³ For more on Slovenian housing see: Maja Vardjan, 2005; *Subsidized Housing*, Ljubljana and Izola, in: **A10 New European Architecture**, no. 6, A10 Media BV, Amsterdam.