VEDRAN MIMICA

THE BERLAGE AFFAIR

Preface by Kenneth Frampton

Epilog by Wiel Arets
6IX PACK:
CONTEMPORARY SLOVENIAN ARCHITECTURE

Published in 6IX Pack: Contemporary Slovenian Architecture.
Vale-Novak Publisher, Ljubljana, second edition, 2006

The following text is a result of a series of conversations with Igor Kebel and Mika Cimolini (the Berlage students from Slovenia) that took place at the Berlage Institute in spring 2005.

We are beyond good and bad.

Rem Koolhaas at the Berlage Institute, 1993

Double Exchange

Question Slovenia’s transition has either disappeared or has become reversed, namely, this transition is no longer so much about Slovenia approaching Europe; it is more about Europe approaching Slovenia. Under what circumstances did this reversal take place?

Vedran Mimica Slovenia entered a major transition after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, as did all the other former socialist states in Europe. One may officially declare the transition completed in 2004, when Slovenia was admitted as a full member to the European Union. Nevertheless, if one looks into Slovenian society, culture, architecture, and the economy, then one may witness the continuation of various processes of transition. Slovenia became European by a political decree. The discussion here, however, concerns the cultural and architectural issues linked to the country’s new political and economic processes. Since Slovenian culture and society are now the part of the larger EU, the promotion of any strategy must be framed within this larger European context. Obviously, Slovenia cannot forget its history, its culture, its links with the East, and the West. Being an EU member, Slovenia must contribute to the diversity of European cultures. This is a two way process – on the one hand, Slovenia comes to Europe; on the other hand, the EU coming to Slovenia also complements this process. Nevertheless, it is crucial that in the aftermath of the transition, Slovenia now engages in processes of consolidation, cooperation, and exchange. This creates a politically, even ideologically, and definitively economically and culturally, challenging state of affairs. Under what circumstances could this reversed process take place? Now there is neither extensive knowledge nor experience of such processes in Slovenia. Perhaps the architectural competition for redesign of Kolizej in Ljubljana could be deemed a first test of how to organize a big competition deploying practices which are regular in western Europe, how to understand the role of the developer, find how to select international jury. The fact that such a competition process was shocking, even unacceptable, to the local inhabitants and culture, proves that Slovenia has yet to appreciate and become conscious of the European way of doing things. After signing an incredible number of EU memorandums and agreements that frame the legislative package, the more challenging, performative aspect of relations with the EU has begun. This is where Slovenia, and all other countries new to Europe, will need a decade to start understanding, shaping and influencing these processes. No doubt, the shock of the rejection of the EU constitution by the referendum in France and the Netherlands has been unsettling for the most recently accepted states to the EU. Recently, the Polish prime minister approached Tony Blair to lift the deal made for Poland entering the EU in lieu of compensation of Polish peasants. Blair replied by saying that “it is not about money it is about principles.” However, the question is really what principles are we talking about? Ironically, the dynamism of EU politics is surprising to the new members, yet it is the very condition that they must understand and maneuver within. Three years ago, Dietmar Steiner invited me and a couple of other so called “eastern European experts,” including Andrej Hrausky and people from Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia, to discuss the Next Europe. Steiner organized this discussion in the Architekturzentrum Wien in Vienna. He argued that all these nations that were being accepted into Europe had indeed always been part of Europe;

Kolizej (Coliseum in German, originally Amphitheatre Flavian) is a type of a monumental multipurpose and multilevel building that emerged in Austria in the 19th C.t.
even if we go back 1000 years, they have always been a constitutive factor of European culture. The region's rich urban and architectural histories are European: the Diocletian palace in Split, Plečnik in Slovenia, and the modernism of Czech architecture. Today, these nations' architects, practitioners, and theoreticians, are new to Western Europe. Steiner claimed that the attitude of them being "new" to Europe is wrong, and insisted that we consider them as always having been European. We should concentrate on what they can teach western Europe through their tradition, architecture, culture, and recent production. This is an interesting viewpoint, and perhaps the right conceptual frame, by which to consider Eastern Europe. When one presents such an attitude in places like Prague, Zagreb or Ljubljana, then the cultural establishment starts talking about history. However, the so called New Europe is less interested in history than it is in contemporary performance. Obviously, Czech modernism was terra incognita before Šlapeta opened an exhibition at AA; Plečnik was terra incognita before the exhibition in the Pompidou center; and Croatian modernism will remain terra incognita until its legacy is either exhibited or published. By presenting these movements, one presents history. This, of course, remains important. It is, however, also necessary for all these countries to present recent work. To date, contemporary work has usually been presented through events such as the Venice Bienale, and other established occasions of the kind, as well as through a handful of magazines. This is absolutely not enough, since all of the curators of such big exhibitions and magazines are presenters of the establishment anyway. Slovenian architecture is something that could be presented as a contemporary movement, without any big manifestos, or big ideological statements. Recent Slovenian work could provide a basis for debate concerning local particularities within the larger frame of cultural transformations taking place in Europe. The quality of local performance vis-à-vis global pressures will be critical if one is to achieve a higher quality of architectural production.

Integration with Europe through culture and education, the merge is established between particular cultural heritages and with intrinsic heritages and with intrinsic values of local practices. As smallness is gaining attention, can we anticipate an exhaustion of bigness? Is "bigness" finally going beyond self-sufficiency or is this just a fake move? Is Europe a cultural melting pot?

Europe is culturally diverse and this diversity will remain. The more pressing questions are how are "little cultures" going to negotiate with "big cultures", and what is the level of EU integration with regards to education and other cultural policies? Education is now very important for the process of integration. According to the Bologna declaration, from 2007 onwards, every young graduate from any EU country will be able to study anywhere in EU and receive full recognition for these studies. This is an amazing concept – it will allow students to start their studies in Ljubljana, continue in Venice, graduate in London and receive one and the same diploma for their efforts! Interesting things will start to happen when, because of their multi-national education, these students will no longer be representatives of particular national schools. These processes are, almost by default, positive. Most east European educational institutions are, at the moment at least, not performing up to par. Because they did not reform their curriculum structures, make them more aligned with new west European practices in education. The intelligence of young people is already in striding conflict with the structures of these institutions. By creating a multinational educational environment, and encouraging mobility of students and teachers, the Bologna process will slowly change these institutions. They will be forced to change. At the same time, however, no one would ever want an educational institution in Ljubljana to be completely the same as a school in Edinburgh, for instance. Diversity and specificity should remain a competitive edge. In the future, one could study architecture in Ljubljana because of Plečnik or the Sixpackers;
precisely these differences will provide the positive context influencing the choice for studying in Slovenia. New Slovenian students will have a choice that was not possible in a society that previously had been too singularly determined. Education is an increasingly consumer oriented activity. Students or graduates from the high schools of the future will be shopping by looking into curricula, into lifestyle in a particular city; they will be choosing pleasurable or hedonistic settings. They will be critical of the life they will be living in a particular country. The boom of the schools in Barcelona is not at all surprising — the city has a pleasurable setting, while the interest in schools in London may be credited to its powers as a metropolitan magnet.

The so-called “little places" or “little schools" will not suffer in this process. On the contrary, especially the eastern EU countries are incredibly interesting for so called “westerners" as the East can offer something that does not exist in the West. In this sense, Europe's extension to the east is an extremely exciting project.

As the world of architecture becomes globalized, with many offices weathering with different addresses, and branches all over the world, or with the rise of big architectural offices such as Herzog & de Meuron or Foster that employ hundreds, it must be remembered that the majority of architectural practices nonetheless remain small and local. They are performing under very particular relations between architects and politicians or developers in particular setting. There is enormous space for local expression and for local specifics. The question then is — what is the quality of these activities and how can these local expressions gain some sort of more general qualities. One has to look at the work and then place or qualify the work within their particular contextual forces. These forces are never completely local nor completely global, they are always both.

Sixpackers' attitudes in resolving global issues through local practice. How is Sixpack dealing with the absence of heroic radicalism? What is Sixpack breaking, if breaking is no longer a necessity?

Sixpack, and the new generation of architects, are the best of what could have happened to Slovenian architecture, and to a certain extent Croatian architecture, too. In the beginning of the 1990s, there was a period in which the most dedicated and ambitious young architects from Slovenia simply felt that they needed additional education and experiences; this feeling was genuine and contextual. It was obvious that the desire for gaining knowledge through further education and to be able to operate in new contexts was the result of a completely conscious decision. I personally witnessed such an attitude among the Sixpackers from the Berlage and AA; these students were all infected with a particular architectural virus. They differed from the previous generation of architects in that they did not see Ljubljana or even Slovenia as their exclusive terrain/frame of operations. In the beginning of the 1990s, the Slovenian frame was too small, too traditional, and too “difficult." The younger architects could not accept the incredibly hierarchical social structure at play in Slovenia. The fact that one would have to work as an assistant in both the university or within an architectural office for the first 25 years of one's career was simply unacceptable to them. These people did not believe in this, they had a different point of view. Their attitudes were more reflective of the European standpoint, and this was in stark contrast with the more traditional, Slovene socialist frame of reference. Importantly, these people came to Western Europe with a particular pool of knowledge and skills that cannot be considered minor in any circumstances. On the contrary, their skills were comparative and on par to those of their colleagues from the West. It was important for them to understand that they had similar knowledge and an understanding of architecture as their colleagues from Western Europe. This was a critical discovery, because it imbued them with confidence and gave them a different view of the cultural setting from which they came. The main reason to study in London or the Netherlands was not to better understand
TERRITORIES, IDENTITIES, NETS: SLOVENE ART 1995 - 2005
eds. Igor Španjol, Igor Zabel
Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2005

Vedran Mimica: Three Rooms, Curatorial Politics

SIXPACK: CONTEMPORARY SLOVENIAN ARCHITECTURE
ed. Andrej Hreusky, Sixpack architects
DESSA, Ljubljana, 2005

Vedran Mimica: Sixpack: Contemporary Slovenian Architecture

Vasa Perović
Matija Bevk
Aljoša Dekleva
Tina Gregorič
Mika Cimolino
Igor Kebel
Tomaž Mechtig
Urša Vrhunc
Rok Oman
Špela Videčnik
Jurij Šadur
Boštjan Vuga
Vladimir Šlapeta
Tadej Glazer
Dado Kolušić
Hrvoje Njirić
these cultural contexts, but for the Slovenians to form new insights about Slovenia. Perhaps they could never fully understand Ljubljana and Slovenia if never lived and worked anywhere else. From personal experience, I can say that studies at the beginning of the 1980s in Delft were more instructive about Zagreb, for instance, than would have been the case if I had been doing research, lecturing and teaching in Zagreb.

Self-confidence of skills and knowledge, together with the possibility to learn more, and form a critical attitude towards the cultural setting of one’s origins, have been super important for the future instrumentality of Sixpackers. The Berlage and AA operate in terms of strategies and scenarios and these young architects immersed themselves in these ways of thinking that inevitably relate future performance to forces far beyond those that are merely local. In the mid-90’s, Slovenian political culture proclaimed that only the EU represented the future for Slovenia, and that EU standards had to be applied to various aspects of social, economic, political and other forms of life. Although a group of very different architects, the Sixpackers nonetheless have in common the fact that they worked within these EU standards.

Sixpackers as driving beyond the cultural, political and territorial boundaries in their break with historical and local movements, their break with icons of Slovenia’s past as well as local practices. With its Sixpack exhibition abroad, the group has made an impact on the local scene. How do you explain that? What is the potential of Sixpack? Conversely, what would a criticism of Sixpack consist of, what are the possible opportunities missed by the group?

In the context of Middle Europe that is one of Slovenia too, there is a great culture of debate in architecture. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Secessionist architects had an incredible conflict with the Historicist architects. Later, modernists became embroiled in a conflict with the postmodernists. There exists a culture of conflict. At the
ORIS 48
Zagreb, 2007
Vedran Mimica
New Tobačna, Strictly Controlled Smoking
same time, there is also a culture of a political control over certain markets. These two cultures do not easily coexist with each other, namely, the first culture involves a critical or cultural debate concerning new generations of architects, while the second includes political and economical maneuvers to control the market historically, and „the establishment“ has never been sympathetic to change. The nature of the establishment is such that it can perform well only if there is no change or only if it controls and accommodates change. The question then becomes if change is inevitable or positive? One could say that it is inevitable and possible with regards to Sixpackers cultural performance and if one would like to see the development of Slovenia architecture. I share the opinion of Herman Hertzberger – namely, that places such as the Berlage were explicitly established in order to equip the people with the knowledge of how to change local conditions. Recently, I was invited by Tadej Glažar and Tina Gregorič to curate an exhibition concerning the last ten years of Slovenian architecture. After one looms at the result of this, one that objectively selected 56 buildings, one understands that the buildings of the Sixpackers are fundamental to shaping the new Slovenian architecture. If one was invited to make an exhibition covering 2005-2015, it would without doubt be influenced by the Sixpack generation. This is very fortunate for Slovenian architecture. This balancing of global influences with local interpretations is an interesting prospect for the immediate future. Sixpackers and other Slovenian architects will define the models, prototypes, strategies, and urban scenarios in order to engage with Slovenia’s landscape. One would like to continue to see a difference, as introduced by the Sixpackers. The Berlage and AA somehow, innocently or incidentally, have influenced local Slovenian architecture and the international cultures of their institutions are indirectly linked to the fact that Slovenia has “allowed” foreigners such as Vasa Perović or Dado Katusić, to practice in its midst. Such openness has invariably enriched the otherwise very local culture. In this sense, it is interesting when people like Andrew Benjamin or Brett Steele, or other international professors are so fascinated when visiting such a small place as Ljubljana and discovering all the layers that it is made up of. Obviously, the last layer is one that has been fundamentally shaped by the Sixpack generation. Although it was not a strategy designed by neither Hertzberger nor Mohsen Mostafavi, one must admit that both the AA and Berlage network have been fairly efficient. On the one hand, the schools’ graduates were supported and moderately promoted; on the other hand, all the work that is done by Sixpackers is hard work done by professionals. It has nothing to do with the Berlage and AA networks, but is simply due to the performance of these architects locally. But being in the network, knowing people, knowing the right information, knowing the different theories and strategies, and being linked with knowledge, is super important in contemporary global society. If you are disconnected from this network, you are in an invalid position. The position of the Sixpackers was a position in which one was able, in a rather limited amount of time, to accumulate performative knowledge. This knowledge anticipates that architecture needs more layers of mediation. Architecture has to be mediated through perhaps tangential disciplines such as literature, film, narratives in general, and journalism. It would be very difficult to establish an architectural production in a society by remaining only architectural in the strict sense of the word. Architectural production needs to adopt strategies from the media and the market in order to present itself better to the world at large. What seems to be incredibly important for the future, is the relation between the architect and the client. Architects will be more and more in a position of educators; they will be those who bring clients up to a higher level of understanding. Finally, as architecture is a material practice, it is the knowledge of technology, of new materials, and evolving lifestyles, that will be a most interesting field of operation. Slovenia’s Sixpackers will have great responsibilities and opportunities in building the next European architectural culture. We are looking forward to the upcoming productions.
Ljubljana, as a "new" European city, is searching for development strategies to move toward a European milieu. Architecture and urban planning should uphold this ambition, presenting new values and methods for planning, programming, "management" and construction of a new European Ljubljana. The city government and developers engaged many local and international experts in the task of creating a vision for a new Ljubljana. This should culminate in the presentation of a new general master plan and all strategic projects for the upcoming period, when it will be possible to use EU cohesion funds to the fullest.

Recently a new city government assumed office in Ljubljana, headed by the agile Mayor Janković and Deputy Mayor Koželj, an authority on architecture and urban planning. It was Janez Koželj who in a development study for Ljubljana, produced in 2004, listed almost forty large-scale projects for city development, of which none were implemented, with the exception of a bypass, several public institutions and the BTC shopping center. The question that arose in 2005, particularly after the Kolizej case, was more than obvious: why is Ljubljana not developing, why were the great expectations after Slovenia joined the European Union not fulfilled, and what were the reasons for such a state of affairs? The Berlage Institute was asked by the City of Ljubljana to prepare an independent view of the city's urban development opportunities.

The constantly changing municipal political environment leads to ambiguity and a non-existent strategy and long-term vision for the development of the city.

After the first phase of transition from (liberal) socialism to (controlled) capitalism, there is still a lack of strategic planning tools, proper legislation and clear policies, a lack of knowledge and resources in the city government and incomplete organization (for example, there is no a city development department).

A lack of clarity in matters of land ownership due to the denationalization process (even the city government is currently unaware of its own status of land ownership), which makes it very difficult to implement new zoning laws, the main driving force of development.

A lack of understanding of the development mechanism and public and private responsibilities in it, together with a lack of trust between public and private parties due to blocked or failed projects, bureaucracy and lack of structure, legislation and policies,
results in a lack of freedom and opportunities for private parties.

On the one hand, the city fears change (for example, the cultural heritage protection program is exaggerated, resulting in difficulty of renewal or redevelopment).

On the other hand, expectations for the future are high due to joining the EU. But being a part of the EU does not necessarily and automatically result in Slovenian development. The state of frozen development results in higher demand than supply for real estate. Together with high expectations from the “EU-effect” this results in relatively very high rents and prices of construction land and real estate, which can have a negative effect on the facilitation of new projects implementation.

The Berlage Institute study Light Capital: Urban Scripts for Ljubljana was presented at the Venice Biennale in 2006. After Venice, it was also presented in Ljubljana City Hall as an exhibition and public discussion. I believe that the exhibition, and in particular the subsequent public discussion, also resulted in the invitation to the author of this text to participate in a jury for the conversion of a former tobacco factory complex near the center of Ljubljana. After visiting the site of the former factory, and particularly after initial talks with IMOS representatives, we were once again convinced that the analyzes of the difficulties in Ljubljana’s development were very precise. Still, the idea that a private investor in agreement with the City and the Slovenian Chamber of Architecture and Physical Planning would announce a competition and initiate development of the center of Ljubljana seemed interesting. It was interesting in the sense that the Kolizej case should not be repeated, and that cooperation between the private and public sectors would finally generate the desired results in Ljubljana. The invitation for a jury was interesting to this author also with reference to verification of the results of the Berlage Institute study in an “actual reality.”

Namely, after the Kolizej case, which, due to the specific organization of the competition, the controversial program and the volume of construction, postponed project development for over three years, the competition for conversion of the tobacco factory, New Tobočna, was carefully and exhaustively prepared. All aspects of a new city business, housing, cultural and commercial center were carefully analyzed and measured. A critical assessment of the existing facilities was particularly well elaborated concerning protection of the cultural heritage, traffic accessibility and general user safety. To a certain extent, such elaboration was slightly paradoxical, but also strongly contextual with reference to legislation and the character of transitional processes and cultural discussions in Ljubljana.

The first slightly paradoxical argument was the idea that all more or less preserved halls of the former 19th century factory should be preserved as a memorial and even identification landmark of Ljubljana in the 21st century. We could surely develop a very open critical discussion by asking if it is inevitable that the development of Ljubljana be subjected to a high degree of protection in the central zone, to what extent such protection protects the true value of the historical heritage, and to what extent it is an expression of bureaucratic mechanisms that persist from past times. What values of ordinary, functional 19th century industrial architecture are to be included in the creation of new memories of contemporary Ljubljana? By asking these questions, we by no means favor
bulldozing all historical buildings, but we do want a very critical discussion of the possibilities of creating new identities by using the historical background. By using them, and not inevitably by protecting them, particularly when they have lost all connections to contemporary life.

The second paradox is that the competition program elaborated in detail the housing, business, cultural and commercial content, as though it implied nostalgia for the times when the system was able to build such city complexes. Namely, it is clear that IMOS as the construction organizer would have to “sell” certain parts of the New Tobačna complex to various investors who will certainly have their own ideas and demands which will probably not fully comply with the projected competition program.

The arguments for defending these two paradoxes are certainly in the domain of Ljubljana’s development, where the Kolizej spirit is still present, as well as the IMOS wish to simply attract new investors by “high resolution” projects regarding the real presentation not only of urban design but also of the architectural and typological characteristics of single complexes. Despite the “high resolution,” or precisely because of it, we somehow cannot resist the impression that architects again “spent” their time relatively unfocused on certain aspects of the project which certainly will not influence implementation in the future.

The competition finally resulted in a series of very well elaborated projects, which we hope will be used for the elaboration of a detailed and hopefully flexible plan for further planning and design of a very prospective part of metropolitan Ljubljana’s urban core.

If we look closer at the list of awards for the New Tobačna, we may conclude that a generation of young Slovenian architects, which presented itself through the exhibition and publication Sixpack a few years ago, “grew up” very quickly and showed that it was fully capable of solving complex urban development tasks. Dekleva and Gregorčič, Kebel and Cimolini, and Sadar and Vuga employ the knowledge which they accumulated during their postgraduate studies in London and Rotterdam, the experience from numerous competitions and clear understanding of the situation in which they work. Their work is perhaps the closest to the idea of an “up-scale” Ljubljana, a Ljubljana with an enhanced and denser scale. As we have already pointed out, their work is significantly influenced by the task at hand, but they manage to present an almost “natural” increase of a scale for the development of a new complex urban density.

The first prize that went to Dekleva and Gregorčič team is characterized by an extremely intelligent reading of the spirit of the city of Ljubljana, and of a historical matrix of the urban complex of the old Tobačna. By overlapping and analyzing these two scales, they create an operative three-dimensional diagram for the organization of new typological complexes on the site. Dekleva and Gregorčič have carefully and thoroughly designed a series of new typologies of housing, business premises, a representative hotel, cultural facilities and hybrid complexes, probably anticipating the potential process of a development of the site. We must hope that at least something of this almost encyclopedic product will be preserved and implemented in the detailed projects for the New Tobačna.