



Croatian Islands

Centuries of architectural heritage

From 19 June until 23 October 2015

Concept: Adolph Stiller, Luka Skansi, Marijan Bradanović

Exhibition venue: Exhibition Centre in the Ringturm
1010 Vienna, Schottenring 30

Opening hours: Monday to Friday: 9 am to 6 pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays)

Press tour: Thursday, 18 June 2015, 5 pm

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Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein's Architektur im Ringturm series is dedicating an exhibition to architecture in Croatia's unique island landscapes for the first time. Devised in collaboration with the University of Rijeka, the exhibition spotlights the country's 1,200 islands – only 70 of which are inhabited – and their rich architectural heritage. Outstanding constructions from three major periods – covering the era from ancient times to the Middle Ages, as well as the 19th and 20th centuries and examples of contemporary architectural design – will be presented.

The focus is on well-known, terrific buildings and beautifully preserved historic old towns such as Hvar, Koržula and Rab. Less familiar architectural landmarks from the recent past and the present are also showcased.

The Croatian islands – a world of their own

Located just off the eastern Adriatic coast, stretching along the rugged coastal strip from the bay of Rijeka in the north to the Mediterranean city of Dubrovnik in the south, Croatia's unique island landscape is unlike any other in the world. The 1,200 islands are split into several groups: the Kvarner, Kornati and Dalmatian islands, the Brijuni and Šibenik archipelagos, and the Elpahites off Dubrovnik. Only around 70 of the islands are inhabited. The Adriatic islands are a popular place to live and an attractive holiday destination thanks to their natural beauty, mild climate and their architectural heritage.

Unique location in the Adriatic

Due to their size and strategic importance, the Croatian islands have played a significant role as protectorates of a succession of states down the years – from Ancient Greece, Byzantium and the Republic of Venice to Austria in the 19th and Italy in the early 20th century. The islands were also a magnet for settlers, mainly on account of the favourable climate, which opened up a range of agricultural options including olive, fruit and wine growing, fishing, sheep farming and wool production, and beekeeping. Traces of settlement and cultural artefacts date back as far as ancient times. In addition, specialist shipbuilding knowledge and expertise as well as nautical schools – some of them still exist to this day – also played a vital role, especially in the era of sailing ships. The imposing and majestic houses seen in many ports bear witness to the eminence and wealth of captains from times gone by.

As parts of the former Habsburg monarchy, Austria and Croatia have historic ties going back several centuries. During this time, the islands in the southernmost crown land formed the Kingdom of Dalmatia, and were under Austrian protection almost continuously from 1797 following the signing of the Treaty of Campo Formio until 1918. This was also one of the reasons behind the emergence of tourism there. The nobility and the upper classes were drawn to the islands as locations for winter residences and luxury tourism destinations in the late 19th century. Meanwhile, the municipal administration of Vienna also did its bit to forge relations, setting up a sanatorium for the capital's civil servants on Rab in 1906; the facility was closed after the dissolution of the monarchy.

Flourishing tourism – the spark for change

The establishment of the 'Hygiene Society' in Hvar in 1868 was followed in 1886 by the first tourism association, in Mali Lošinj, which introduced expansive pine plantations and a popular seaside resort. The same-named port was home to the first hotel, the Vindobona, which opened in 1887. Owing to the curative effects of the sub-tropical climate, Mali Lošinj and Veli Lošinj were officially designated as health spas by renowned physicians from the imperial capital in 1892.

Construction of the Südbahn railway line made the region accessible to aristocrats from Austria-Hungary, who saw it as a "domestic" alternative to the Franco-Italian Riviera. Emperor Franz Joseph built the Villa Karolina in Mali Lošinj (for actress Katharina Schratt), while the summer residence of Archduke Karl Stephan von Habsburg, situated in the park in Veli Lošinj, is now a clinic for allergy sufferers.

Infrastructure development

Access to the various towns by sea was an important feature of the changes that took place in the 19th and early 20th century. Previously, roads were little more than tracks and footpaths. This helps to explain the contrasting development and varying significance of the different towns, especially in comparison with the present day.

The modernisation of ferries and ports paved the way for transportation of modern equipment such as diggers, bulldozers and trucks to the islands, and this in turn enabled the construction of numerous roads that opened up the islands to private transport. However, developers often turned a blind eye to the environmental impact of mass tourism and the resulting encroachments onto the countryside. There are some exceptions, though, such as the Hotel Helios on Čikat bay in Mali Lošinj, which is skilfully and seamlessly integrated into the natural surroundings.

The increased popularity of summer holidays, which took off in the 1960s, gave added impetus to tourism, and since then many islands have become well-known and increasingly popular among holidaymakers. Every summer, people from all over Europe flock to the islands, with some 12 million travelling there each year.

Signs of transition

The transfer of property from the former Yugoslavia to the successor states – in this case, Croatia – and the gradual privatisation of these assets (which in some cases was never completed) gave rise to an unusual situation. One example of unsuccessful privatisation is a seaside facility close to Jelsa on the island of Hvar, which served as a children's home in summertime. After the collapse of Yugoslavia, there was no longer any use for the building. Following its transfer into Croatian ownership, an attempted privatisation failed to attract a buyer, and the high-quality construction fell into disrepair, possibly with a view to "clearing" a plot with outstanding development potential.

Icons of Croatian modernism

The islands are home to some of Croatia's best examples of classic modernism, including the Grand Hotel and Villa Vesna on Lopud, both designed by Nikola Dobrović, as well as two buildings on the island of Vis: the Army Cultural Centre in Komiza by Ivan Vitić and a school building from Neven Segvić.

Jože Plečnik's pavilion – Tito's summer residence – on Veli Brijun displays the architect's unique design language. More broadly speaking, the Edvard Ravnikar-designed memorial in Kampor on the island of Rab is another outstanding work, even though it does not represent architecture in the conventional sense of a spatial composition.

The Kosch building in the town of Malinska on Krk is an interesting work by Kazimir Ostrogović, one of Croatia's most important architects. Ostrogović came from the area and this construction – his first work – was an attempt to implement a design based on Le Corbusier's then-groundbreaking architectural theory.

A number of new buildings on the islands from recent years represent an attractive and high-quality continuation of the architectural culture. Examples include the Capsula residential development in Cres by Ivana Ergić, Vanja Ilić and Vesna Milutin; the Fran Krsto Frankopan school on Krk, designed by Saša Randić and Idis Turato; a sports centre including design of the entire space on Krk by Idis Turato; and the TV house on Silba, a project by Ljubljana-based team Bevk-Perović, which has attracted international acclaim.

The pavilion designed by Olafur Elisasson and David Adaye of Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary foundation is a sign of the commitment of private arts patrons. This unique walk-in work of art, which won international plaudits after it was presented at the Venice Biennale, has found its place in this outstanding setting.

Case example Krk – unique history and architecture

At around 406km², Krk is the largest of the Croatian islands. In terms of construction and cultural history, various schools of architecture have left their mark on its eponymous main town, ranging from the ancient and medieval to 18th and 19th century and modernist designs.

Traces of Roman occupation dating from 9 AD have been found. The Romans named the island 'insula aurea' on account of its unusual flora and fauna, and built powerful walls around the main town Curicum (Krk). Christianity reached the island around the fifth or sixth century, and Bishop Andrija attended a papal council in Rome in 680. The city walls, port, churches, monasteries and squares are testaments to the period, as is the unique Glagolitic alphabet, which dates back to the 10th century.

Krk was one of the most important centres of early Slavic writing. The island was conquered by the Republic of Venice in 1118. Ruled by relatively autonomous Frankopan princes, it remained under Venetian sovereignty until 1797. Krk was part of the Habsburg monarchy until 1918, apart from a brief period when the island fell under Napoleon's control. The Habsburgs were succeeded by the Italians between 1918 and 1920, after which Krk became Croatian territory – and part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – under the terms of the Treaty of Rapallo.

During the Second World War, control over Krk changed hands several times between Italy and Germany before the island was eventually liberated by Croatian partisans. Like all of the other islands, Krk was part of Tito's Yugoslavia until the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Following Croatia's declaration of independence and its international recognition as a sovereign state, the country's most recent geopolitical milestone came in 2013 with accession to the European Union. EU membership is seen as a springboard for the country's economic development, and hopefully this move will also have a positive impact on Croatia's cultural riches.

Catalogue

Architektur im Ringturm XLI, Kroatische Inseln – Baukultur über Jahrhunderte, edited by Luka Skansi and Adolph Stiller, with contributions from Anamarija Žic, Renata Filčić, Mirela Gotal, Marko Smoljan, Adolph Stiller und Luka Skansi. 200 pages, fully illustrated.

Price: EUR 28