

Architecture.Slovenia Masters and scene

15th April to 30th May 2008

Curators: Luka Skansi, Adolph Stiller

Press tour: Monday 14th April, 10.30

Official opening: Monday 14th April, 18.30

Exhibition venue:

WIENER STÄDTISCHE Versicherung AG
VIENNA INSURANCE GROUP
Exhibition Centre in the Ringturm
A-1010 Vienna, Schottenring 30

Opening hours:

Monday to Friday: 09:00 to 18:00, admission free
(closed on public holidays)

Enquiries to:

Alexander Jedlicka

T: +43 (0)50350-21029

F: +43 (0)50350-99 21029

e-mail: a.jedlicka@staedtsche.co.at

Formerly part of the Yugoslavian Federation, Slovenia has undergone remarkable change: independence in 1991, accession to the EU in 2004, introduction of the single currency in 2007 and – the very latest – the EU Presidency in the first six months of 2008. Not least, this has resulted in the strengthening of international interest in Slovenia and its culture. The exhibition explores the architectural scene in Slovenia over a period of approximately one hundred years – a scene which is surprisingly broad, of which little has been known until now and which has developed against the backdrop of such well-known masters as Jože Plečnik, Max Fabiani and Edo Ravnikar.

In the first half of the 20th century the hallmarks of the architecture of the region which makes up the modern-day Republic of Slovenia, which must be seen in the context of the forces within society and the art movement at that time, were its dynamics and complexity. The most important Slovenian architects of the period did their training in Vienna: amongst these, **Max Fabiani** (1865–1962) and **Jože Plečnik** (1872–1957) in particular established themselves in Vienna. Apart from a small number of Slovenians, the architects and master builders who were working in Ljubljana before and after the earthquake of 1895 were predominantly Germans, Friulians, Czechs and Croats.

The biggest Slovenian city at the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was Trieste with its multi-ethnic society. Here Slovenian institutions gradually emerged, e.g. *Narodni dom* (“People’s House”, Max Fabiani, 1905), the school of the Society of SS. Cyril and Methodius at Sv. Jakob in Trieste (Josip Costaperaria, 1912) or Fabiani’s *Trgovski dom* in Gorica (Chamber of Commerce, 1905). The endeavours of the Slovenian elite to make Trieste the heart of the nation came to nothing after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the swift occupation of part of the Slovenian territory. Soon afterwards the *Narodni dom* in Trieste and other Slovenian institutions in the coastal area became the targets of Italian fascistic excesses.

The collapse of the Hapsburg Empire and the setting up of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 together with the foundation of the University of Ljubljana in 1919 brought about a marked turning point in the development of Slovenian architecture. **Ljubljana University**, where **Ivan Vurnik** (1884–1971) was beginning to create a **Department of Architecture**, became the domain of new generations of Slovenian architects. Vurnik wanted to attract both Max Fabiani from Vienna and Jože Plečnik, who since 1911 had been teaching in Prague, to be its professors. Fabiani preferred to devote himself to the reconstruction of the devastated province of Gorizia (Goriška), whilst Plečnik accepted Vurnik’s invitation. The aim of the nationally conscious Slovenian elite was to turn the provincial city of Ljubljana into the national centre. Whilst teaching in Ljubljana, Plečnik was still busy redesigning the Hradšchin in Prague and was unable to start any major projects in Ljubljana until the mid-1920s. Meanwhile Ivan Vurnik abandoned the Nationalist style and associated himself with **Functionalism**. When Vurnik and Plečnik fell out in 1926, the differences between them became more and more marked. At around this time young Slovenian architects were returning to Ljubljana after completing their studies abroad. Together with Vurnik’s students and the malcontents from the Plečnik School they formed a modernistic but differentiated opposition to Plečnik’s understanding of architecture.

Between 1925 and 1933 Functionalism was in the ascent, amongst other reasons as a result of avant-garde periodicals for which architects from Zagreb and Belgrade also wrote. Scholarships were offered by the French government, and among the younger generation there was a gradual shift from the traditional orientation to the West.

Plečnik, however, received more and bigger commissions in both urban development and sacral building: **from the end of the 1920s onwards he completed numerous projects in Ljubljana**, including the building for the Vzajemna Insurance Company (1928–30), the *Tromostovje* (“Three Bridges”, 1931–32); the National and University Libraries (1936–41), All Saints’ Garden (1938–40), the locks (1939–45) and the market halls (1940–42). That left only private commissions for the functionalists: for example, blocks of flats and villas on the outskirts of the city, e.g. the *Šahovnica* (“chessboard”) residential block in Ljubljana designed by the architect Josip Costaperaria. Modern trends and contemporary technical achievements were combined by Vladimir Šubic in his *Nebotičnik* (skyscraper; Ljubljana 1930–33). The return to traditional trends in architecture that began in 1933 coincided with the period of economic crisis and the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia in Marseille at the end of 1934.

In view of the increasing amount of information available about Le Corbusier, the Perret brothers and other contemporary architects and trends, the younger generation of Plečnik graduates became increasingly dissatisfied with Plečnik’s insistence on traditionalistic standpoints in architecture. In the 1930s no less than nine young architects (seven of them Plečnik’s students) moved to Paris.

The Slovenian architecture of the **second half of the 20th century** is characterised by the work and ideas of **Edvard Ravnikar**, who had established himself as the central authority on the subject in the whole of Yugoslavia (as it was at that time) soon after the end of the Second World War with a whole series of competition wins. Ravnikar was Plečnik’s most outstanding student and after completing his studies had spent another two years as his closest collaborator in the drawing up of the plans for the building of the University Library. In 1939 Ravnikar went to Paris where he worked with Le Corbusier for several months. Following the end of the war he became Professor at the Department of Architecture of the Technical University in Ljubljana. With his buildings, his projects, his commitment to working with the media and above all his charisma as a teacher, Ravnikar made a permanent mark not only on Slovenian architecture and urban development but also on design.

However, **Slovenian Modernism** was not only shaped by Ravnikar’s work. His influence can be found in the best works of his students and also in works that are still coming into being today. Without having any affinity of form, they are nonetheless expressions of related architectural points of view. In contrast to the Plečnik school that relied above all on the genius of the teacher, Ravnikar’s school was geared towards the system and the exploration of architecture. The architecture of the so-called “**Ravnikar school**” is characterised by a clear architectural concept that is always the reflection of a larger space, by an inventive conception of form that also takes the tiniest details into account and by an audaciously thought-out, plastic construction that determines the starting point for the design of the building.

Structural and Constructional Realism is best seen in the architecture of **Savin Sever**. His designs are classically symmetrical, with a typical geometry. Freer, organic grouping of the ensemble of buildings distinguish the work of **Milan Mihelič**; the buildings of **Stanko Kristl** are characterised by the extremely functional organisation of space and a subtly designed composition of the facade which is often referred to as virtually the “graphics of the cladding of the building”. **Ilija Arnautović** has achieved a modern standard in public residential buildings with extremely consistently thought out ground plans for his apartments. He researched the possibilities for industrialisation and prefabrication in residential building work and proved that even with prefabricated buildings it is possible to create architecture of good quality.

The dialogue between modernity and tradition is more recognisable on buildings that have been constructed outside the urban environment. Local contributions to “regionalism” can be seen in the pioneering work of **Janez Lajovic** (Hotel Prisank, Kranjska Gora, 1961), **Majda Dobravec-Lajovic** (elementary school in Kranjska Gora, 1965–70), and especially poetically in the work of **Oton Jugovec** (reconstruction of the church in Reteče 1970–74).

The second generation of Ravnikar's students – also present in the other constituent republics of Yugoslavia with significant buildings following successes in competitions – was just as aware of how important it is to maintain the “identity of space, form, tradition and temperament”.

At the **end of the 1990s** there sprang up a multitude of young studios that are establishing themselves in the local scene, be it with actual projects or publications: first the studios of **Bevk-Perović, Ofis** and **Sadar-Vuga** (all of them students at distinguished international training schools such as the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam and Architectural Association School of Architecture in London), more recently the **Enota** and **Arhitektura Krušec groups**. In terms of the way in which they have developed, these studios form part of a panorama encompassing different generations of architects who graduated from the School of Architecture in Ljubljana in the 1970s and '80s.

On the one hand these include **Vojteh Ravnikar, Aleš Vodopivec, Jurij Kobe, Janez Koželj, Miha Dešman** – architects who made their mark on the 1980s scene with valuable editing and didactic work as well as theoretical and project-related studies. On the other hand there are **Matej** and **Vesna Vozlič, Andrej Kemr, Nande Korpnik, Miloš Florijančič, Janko Zadavec**, who embody a generation of skilled craftsmen for whom the opportunity to assert themselves came only relatively late – after the economic crisis of the 1980s. This resulted in the rich and varied landscape of contemporary Slovenian architecture which it is difficult to summarise as individual trends. Without doubt the new Slovenian Chamber of Commerce – the work of architects **Jure Sadar** and **Boštjan Vuga** (both still not yet 40 years of age) – represents the **start of a new era of Slovenian architecture**. The potential of this building, completed in 1999, gives out a strong signal to new generations.

The latest development in particular is very promising and has won international respect: the Mies van der Rohe European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture in the *emerging architecture* category was awarded this year to the Slovenian team of Matija Bevk and Vasa J. Perović – otherwise known as **Bevk-Perović arhitekti** – for the Institute of Physics and Mathematics at the University of Ljubljana.

The exhibition is divided into three significant periods. The first part is devoted to the period between the two World Wars (1918 -1941), the second deals with the years of Socialist Yugoslavia (1945 – 1991) and the third covers works after independence (since 1991). The highlight is the appreciation of Edo Ravnikar's outstanding importance for Slovenian architecture in the years after Plečnik with the first comprehensive exhibition of his work, including numerous original drawings, models and furnishings. Also on exhibition are items loaned by the Ljubljana Museum of Architecture, the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Ljubljana, numerous private collections and architectural practices.

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Academic consultants: Aleš Vodopivec, Bogo Zupančič

Ravnikar section of the exhibition: organised by the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Ljubljana, Prof. Aleš Vodopivec and Rok Žnidaršič after the concept created by Rok Žnidaršič, Majda Kregar, Miha Kerin

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