



Daniilo Fürst, Cultural Center, Bled, 1938-39. © Miran Kambič.

Edvard Ravnikar and *The Heart of the City*. The genesis of cultural centers in Slovenia and in ex-Yugoslavia

BY NATAŠA KOSELJ

This article discusses Cankarjev Dom and Republic Square in Ljubljana, Slovenia, by Edvard Ravnikar with the focus on three stages of the genesis of cultural centers in Slovenia, starting with the pre-war Slovenian cultural centers by Max Fabiani, Danilo Füst and Gustav Trenz. The second phase is represented by the cultural centers of the architects Oton Gaspari, Marko Župančič and Emil Navinšek from the 1950s built in the Slovenian industrial towns of Trbovlje, Velenje, and Zagorje, and the third phase by Edvard Ravnikar and his students such as Biro71 and Marko Mušič from the late 1970s and early 1980s built in Ljubljana, Skopje (Macedonia) and Kolašin (Montenegro).

Edvard Ravnikar, Republic Square and Cankarjev Dom

On the edge of the major hubs of the Modern Movement, squeezed in between the East and the West, Slovenia has developed into a boutique-like European country, strategically located between the Adriatic Sea and the Alps, surrounded by Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia. Having been part of the Habsburg Monarchy, Illyrian Provinces, Austro-Hungarian Empire and part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and after having experienced three totalitarian regimes, Slovenia continued as a member of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for 46 years before achieving independence in 1991 and joining the European Union in 2004.

The WWII proved a radical cut in Yugoslavia's history, and from 1945 it became known as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with Marshall Josip Broz Tito as its leader. Until the so-called "Informbiro" crisis in 1948, when Tito split from Stalin, there had been a strong Soviet influence. Tito's decision to reject USSR rule shaped Yugoslavian main political orientation during the Cold War. "Non-aligned" Yugoslavia increasingly opened its borders towards the West and started a new path away from communism, through a period of self-management, towards a market-oriented society, or from a rather totalitarian state into a democracy. Experimentation became the core in Yugoslavia's move away from its past reliance on agriculture, with craft traditions being replaced by industrial prefabrication, and with Scandinavia now being the new point of reference. Historic conservation, urban planning, industry, housing, education, healthcare, culture and tourism became increasingly the main architectural tasks in non-aligned Yugoslavia.

This is clearly visible in the genesis of Republic Square (former Revolution Square), which was originally planned as a political space and, therefore, a certain degree of aggression was needed, for example the 20-story towers and the conversion of the convent garden into a concrete wilderness. Economic reform in 1964 led to a change of developers (from the state to the NLB bank and the Iskra company) and, consequently, changes to the project. The tower blocks became lower and were additionally widened at ground level, while the asymmetrical tops of the towers softened the previously symmetrical composition. The monument to the revolution, originally intended for the center of the square, was moved to the edge.

The concept of new spatial dynamics, in the sense of an intertwining of the functions outside/inside, above/below, public/private, religious/secular, old/new, found particular expression in the Republic Square complex, where the focus of the composition is the empty central space and the north-south axial orientation which, through the positioning of the prismatic towers, intensifies the movement of the wind in the space between them, thereby further emphasizing the compositional axis. Today Republic Square is integrated by a department store, a covered shopping street, restaurants, a church, a nunnery, a school, a bank, embassies, the parliament building, apartments, a square designed for public gatherings, which has also been appropriated by alternative urban sports and an underground car park, the archaeological finds of Roman Aemona, a park and the Cankarjev Dom cultural and congress center, with the opera house and a museum in the immediate vicinity. It thus incorporates almost all historical periods in the city's development, from Roman Aemona, via the baroque, to the neoclassical period and pre- and post-war Modernism.



01 Edvard Ravnikar, Republic Square, Ljubljana, 1960-1980. © Damjan Gale.

Ravnikar himself said:

It is necessary to strive for the city as a process, not the city as a view. Fullness of content develops on its own, in the flow of time, during the process. It is a matter of finding an architectural language that becomes, at the architectural level, highly differentiated, rich and exciting. Aesthetics must necessarily appear here with one principal social role, that of taming the omnipresent fear of geometrization and the stark usefulness of modern cities, of the slavery of functionalism as a merely calculative power of production. With an influence on the psyche, when the architect can add the emotive to the intellectual basis, like a sum of the real and the imaginary — until the development of something like a social anthropology of space.¹

Such thinking coincides with the philosophy of Social Dynamism (Peter Smithson) and with Action Painting in art. Ravnikar formally developed these ideas at the School of Architecture with compositional exercises for students of the new B-stream course that he devised, following the Bauhaus model, in the early 1960s, just at the time that he won the Republic Square competition. His pedagogical model was based on an erudite knowledge of history and architectural issues, a solid concept, the scientific method of analysis and synthesis, and experiment conditioned by doubt. The composition exercises of the B-stream students are full of rhythmic movement caused by the folding, shifting, layering and rotation of basic geometric figures, with their starting point in the golden ratio. It was from this stream that the first industrial designers in Slovenia emerged. The influence of these exercises can be particularly felt in the structuring of the volumes, façades and interiors of Cankarjev Dom, which was completed in early 1980s.

With the Republic Square complex, Ravnikar endeavored to create a democratic, dynamic and modern space

for urban dwellers, which, despite originally having been conceived as a monument to a revolution and what was then an authoritarian regime, does not erase collective memory but instead, with a rare sensitivity for human values and the existing, re-establishes it through movement in the flow of time. The basic distinguishing element is the diagonal, which appears both in its urban plan and in its structures, details, façades and roofs. The diagonal is the leitmotif of practically the whole of Ravnikar's architectural oeuvre. We may therefore say that his architecture is the architecture of the diagonal, of sliding, of bold experiment, the architecture of the inclusion and simultaneous transcending of the existing.

The genesis of the cultural centers in Slovenia and in ex-Yugoslavia

The first cultural centers in Slovenia were essentially buildings attached to churches that were used for cultural events within the parish. In many cases they were later converted into cinemas. An example of this is the Cultural Center in Bled designed by the architect Danilo Fürst. Built between 1938 and 1939, it directly connected the parish church to an existing building.

The Narodni Dom in Trieste, designed by Max Fabiani (1904-1920), was a special case. In 1900 the Slovene community in Trieste decided to erect a building that would combine the functions of a savings bank, a cultural institution and a hotel with a café. The building was completed in 1904 and henceforth became the central financial and cultural institution not only of the Slovene community but of all the Slavs living in Trieste. In 1920 the building was burnt down by Italian fascists. Although it was later rebuilt, it never again served its original purpose. A new Slovene Cultural Center in Trieste was built between 1951 and 1964 to plans by the architect Edo Mihevc. The project was self-financed by the local Slovene community and the center is of inestimable importance to Slovenes. The building itself is a modernist Mediterranean palace with a reinforced concrete skeleton.

Another interesting example of the pre-war concept of a cultural center is Šeškov Dom in Kočevje, which features a rationally symmetrical design and was created between

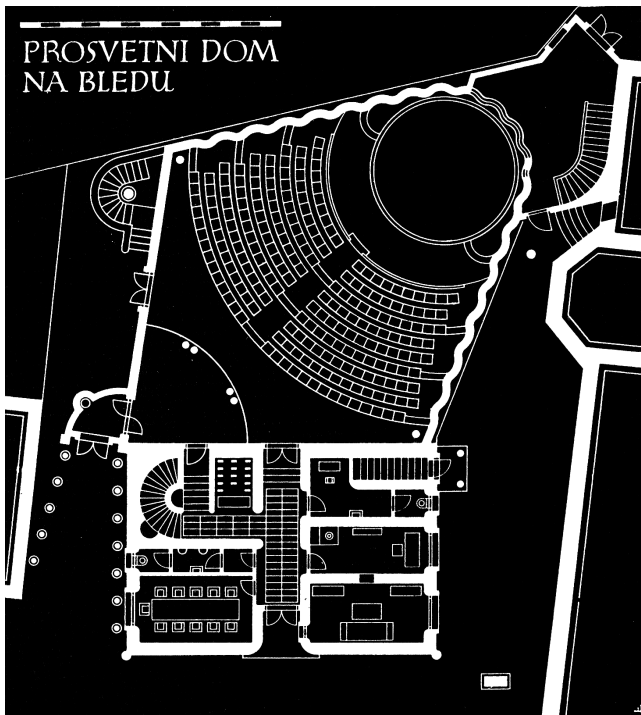


02 Edvard Ravnikar, Republic Square, Ljubljana, 1960-1980. © Damjan Gale.

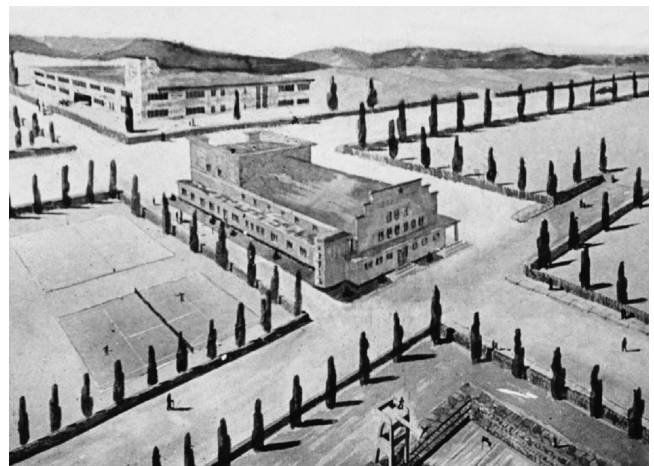
03 Edvard Ravnikar, Cankarjev Dom, Ljubljana, 1980s. © Damjan Gale.



04 Max Fabiani, the arson of Slovenian Cultural Centre, Trieste, 1904-1920. © Personal archive of Nataša Koselj.



05 Danilo Fürst, one of the plans for the Cultural Centre, Bled, 1938-39. © Personal archive of Nataša Koselj.



06 Gustav Trenz, Šeškov Dom, Kočevje, 1936-38. © Pokrajinski muzej Kočevje.

1936 and 1938 by Gustav Trenz. This was the first modern multi-purpose building in Kočevje. It centered round a large gym that simultaneously served as an auditorium, with a stage for theatrical performances. It was here that the assembly of delegates of the Slovene nation — the first directly elected representative body of an occupied nation in Europe during the WWII — took place in 1943. Dating from that period, and still present today, is the inscription over the stage reading “The nation will write its own verdict” — a quotation from Ivan Cankar’s satirical drama *The Serfs*.

Within the context of the development of the architecture of the Modern Movement in the 20th century, it is necessary to shed light on some of the important factors that influenced the building of cultural centers in the second half of the 20th century in order to gain a better

understanding of the development and importance of such centers; The eighth congress of the CIAM, which took place in Hoddesdon, England in 1951, was entitled *The Heart of The City* at the proposal of the members of the British group MARS (Modern Architectural Research). This coincided, both chronologically and in terms of content, with Martin Heidegger’s Darmstadt lecture *Bauen Wohnen Denken* [Building Dwelling Thinking], in which one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century discussed what it means to dwell and how the concept of the building coincides with the concept of dwelling. If during the pre-war, pioneering period of Modernism the focus was on economy, “mechanical aesthetics”, *ratio*, function and hygiene, in post-war Modernism it is the concepts of feeling, *locus*, history, archaeology and synthesis that become important. Writing in the middle of the last century, CIAM



07 Edo Mihevc, Slovenian Cultural Centre, Trieste, 1951-64. © Marko Korošič.



08 Emil Navinšek, Cultural Center, Zagorje, 1949-60. © Zagorje Municipality.

secretary Sigfried Giedion claimed that a shift occurred in the 20th century “when feeling became more difficult than thinking”. In short, if the pre-war world had striven for the rational division of life by functions, the post-war world once again pursued the old ideal and attempted to re-establish a view of life as a whole, without divisions.

In the 1950s, Yugoslav architects followed CIAM’s model and organised a conference on the topic of the “heart of the city” or cultural centers, which at that time were known as community centers. They found that in Yugoslavia, too, the first post-war modernist settlements were “without a heart”, without true centers, and that cultural activities for the most part took place in existing school buildings in the afternoons. In 1960 Vladimir Braco Mušič published an article entitled “Our Community Centers” in the sixth issue of *Arhitekt* magazine³, relating to precisely these new findings and to the new qualitative criteria of modern architecture. New community centers, the new hearts of cities, were not to be conceived as monumental buildings standing alone, but as living social organisms, as modern urban complexes blending culture and shopping, a technological vision of the future and history, where external and internal spaces were treated equally and holistically. Models in this period came above all from Finland (Espoo) and Sweden (Vällingby), which many Slovene architects visited in the 1950s.

Zagorje Cultural Center (1949–60) by the architect Emil Navinšek was a brand-new concept for a building in this predominantly mining town and the first large reinforced concrete structure in Zagorje. Set in the midst of greenery, the building has a large monumental plaza in front of its entrance. Like Navinšek’s corridor-free schools, it is designed around a central core, without corridors. Its different parts are connected by halls and staircases. The main hall has a circular design. The façade is a combination of travertine and rhythmically articulated glazed areas. The entrance façade is divided into three parts.

Trbovlje Cultural Center (1953–56) is the work of the architect Marko Župančič, who studied with Plečnik and Le Corbusier. It stands on the site of the former coalminers’

hall and, together with the large monumental plaza in front of it, represents a central feature of Trbovlje. The main entrance is accentuated by a dramatic canopy and three reinforced concrete columns. The white stone façade on the front of the building is adorned by a large mosaic by Marij Pregelj. Inside the building are two halls both decorated with original artistic details.

Velenje Cultural Center (1959) by the architect Oton Gaspari is the most important monumental building in Velenje’s main square. It opens towards the square with a central, concave façade, in the middle of which is a relief by Stojan Batič, flanked by stained-glass windows of a design that recalls a Mondrian painting. On either side of the windows, to left and right, stone façade panels create an intarsia effect. Stairs leading to the halls are located on the sides of the building. The building has a symmetrical ground plan. The side walls are covered with textured stone and emphasised by large concrete “lacework” panels.

Cankarjev Dom (1960–80), designed by Edvard Ravnikar and a group of his students within the context of Ljubljana’s Republic Square represents the biggest investment in architecture in Slovenia in the second half of the 20th century. In terms of both concept and appearance, it is a complex and convincing expression of the new architectural and planning paradigms of the second half of the 20th century that are described above, and the most important example of Slovene structuralism. It represents the heart of modern Ljubljana and the cultural heart of Slovenia.

Skopje Cultural Centre (1968–81) by Biro 71 (Štefan Kacin, Jurij Princes, Bogdan Spindler, Marko Uršič) is a complex of cultural facilities on the bank of the river Vardar in Skopje, Macedonia. Covering a total area of 60,000 m², the complex comprises an opera house, a concert hall, an academy of music and a cinema. In its center is a multi-level plaza that links the individual halls of the complex into a single, monumentally plastic whole, blurring the boundaries between architecture and urban planning, architecture and sculpture. The composition builds on the asymmetric tectonics of fragmented masses, de-centralized views and sharp angles.



09 Oton Gaspari, Cultural Center, Velenje, 1959. © Miran Kambič.



10 Marko Župančič, Cultural Center, Trbovlje, 1953-56. © Janez Kališnik.

Kolašin Memorial Center (1969–75) by the architect Marko Mušič is one of the most poetic examples of neo-regionalist and neo-cubist architectural design, the metaphorical language of which derives from the morphology of the scattered Montenegrin village in the center of which it is situated. The influence of Louis Kahn, for whom Mušič worked for a time, can be felt in the design. The ground plan is distinctly structuralist and divided into square sections or modules, which the architect develops prismatically on the vertical axis in various directions. The interior thus receives a mysterious zenithal light that heightens the drama of the intimate interior spatial experience.

Conclusion

To conclude, the development of the concepts of cultural centers in the 20th century went from the multipurpose structure (Slovene Cultural Center in Trieste, Šeškov

Dom in Kočevje) or church connected structures (Bled Cultural Center) of the pre-war period, via the monumental modernist stand-alone structures in industrial settlements, whose aesthetics drew on the ideas of the avant-garde art of the first half of the 20th century (cultural centers in Zagorje, Trbovlje, Velenje — it is interesting to note that it was from these towns that notable Slovenian *avant-garde* groups such as Laibach emerged), to holistic architectural/urbanistic/artistic solutions that blur the boundaries between art, architecture and urban planning, between exterior and interior, between past and future. This architecture is based on the ideas and philosophy of structuralism, brutalism and regionalism developed by the younger members of CIAM, Team X, in their (sometimes polemical) discussions of new social dynamics, the anthropology of space and a gradual approach to planning as the basis of the growth of the modern city (in contrast to Euclidean modernist designs entirely planned in advance). Examples of buildings conceived on this basis are Cankarjev Dom, as part of the Republic Square complex in Ljubljana, Skopje Cultural Center and Kolašin Memorial Center. As quoted above, Edvard Ravnikar noted in one of his diaries that it is necessary to strive for the city as a process, not the city as a view, since fullness of content develops on its own, in the flow of time, during the process. Understanding the changed relationship of space and time and the synthetic treatment of architectural problems is therefore of key importance when it comes to identifying the characteristics of the planning of cultural centers in Slovenia and ex-Yugoslavia in the second half of the 20th century.

Notes

- 1 Edvard Ravnikar, *Trg Revolucije* [Revolution Square], Ljubljana, IZTR 1961–1976, 2, 1976.
- 2 Vladimir Mušič, “Naši družbeni centri”, *Arhitekt*, 1960, 81–84.

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11 Biro71, Cultural Center, Skopje, 1968-81. © Damjan Gale.