

# INTERMEDIARY SPACES: THE SMALL-SCALE URBANISM OF JOŽE PLEČNIK

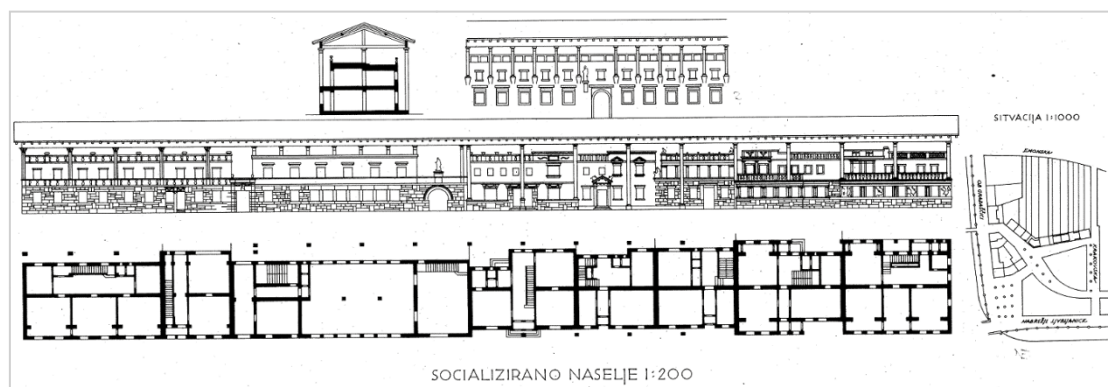
Miloš Kosec

**ABSTRACT:** The thesis of this article is two-fold. Firstly, Plečnik's wartime and post-war projects deserve more research attention than they have received to date. A certain level of under-appreciation of Plečnik's late work is probably a result of a lower number of realizations and perhaps also of insufficient research of this period compared to Plečnik's career before that.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the article attempts to prove that in the last fifteen years of Plečnik's life, the urbanistic character of his work was significantly upgraded. The focus lies on the changed urbanistic character of his wartime and post-war realized as well as unrealized projects. In them, the dissolution of the distinction between the interior and exterior of the buildings as well as between public, semi-public, and private programs was intensified, articulating a wide range of intermediary spaces that position many of his later works somewhere between architecture and urbanism. Plečnik's strategy of small-scale urbanism had a substantial influence on his disciples, including modernist architects such as Edvard Ravnikar and Dušan Grabrijan, who developed a distinct interplay between the principles of international style and original solutions based on local traditions.

**KEYWORDS:** Jože Plečnik, Small-Scale Urbanism, Communal Housing, Ljubljana Architecture School, Intermediary Spaces.

**INTRODUCTION:** The time of the World War II military occupation of Ljubljana and the eventual forced closure of the Technical Faculty together with its Architectural Department in 1943 turned out surprisingly productive for Plečnik and his selected circle of students and collaborators (Krečič, 1997, pp. 173-174). The intimate world of Plečnik's own house in the suburb of Trnovo, not far from the architectural school, provided a haven from the wartime reality. Completely isolated from the street behind two modest suburban houses that acted as a bulwark, the house and the garden around it still exhibit an introverted character

in line with the character of their creator. Plečnik House's tower-like annex and the glasshouse where the impromptu drawing rooms were set up during the war, surrounded by an extensive garden, became an ivory tower and a hot-house of ideas for the architect's projects, the development of which was halted by the war. Eventually, new projects began to emerge—some based on pre-war commissions and Plečnik's ideas on the future development of Ljubljana, while others were created as pure fantasy projects without known commissions or outside impulses.



01 Plan for the "Socialized Estate", 1944, by Jože Plečnik and Gizela Šuklje (collaborator). © Plečnik House Collection, MGML.

## CREATIVE ISOLATION IN THE MIDST OF A WAR

One of the better-known »fantasy projects« from this period is perhaps the most literal example of the development of Plečnik's thought in the direction of the dissolution of distinction between the house and the city. "Houses under Municipal Roof" and "Socialized Estate" [FIGURE 01] projects (Hiše pod občinsko streho in Socializirano naselje, 1943-44)<sup>2</sup> represent a simple but effective solution for providing affordable houses in Ljubljana without the risk of developing a monotony of the garden suburb or the anonymity and standardization of the municipal housing block. Drafted by Gizela Šuklje, Plečnik's former disciple and a close collaborator all the way until 1946, and probably also by then-student Anton Bitenc, the never-realized project survives in the form of three redevelopment plans of a part of the old Krakovo suburb near Plečnik's own home. In the immediate vicinity of the former city walls, Krakovo was by the 20th century an unlikely survivor of small-scale gardeners' and craftsmen's cottages surrounded by an increasingly urbanized city around it. Similar in its suburban archaic character to the district where Plečnik himself was living and also to the area of Ljubljana where he was born in a carpenter's family in 1872, Plečnik developed an idea about an all-encompassing "common roof" on columns extending along the length of a street.

The municipality was to provide for the construction of the monumental roof and the basic amenities such as water and electricity, while each individual house owner would build a terrace house of their own beneath the common roof. The bureaucratic particularities of this idea—whether this would exist as a cooperative or the plots would be sold to individual owners—are not known (and have possibly not been developed); nevertheless, the plan does suggest the direction Plečnik's urban thought was moving towards. The different heights, façades, façade lines, depths, and other marks of individuality of individual terrace houses are important. Even though all of them are fashioned in the recognizable idiosyncraticity of Plečnik's architectural language, their differences suggest the broad architectural and programmatic scope that the common roof could shelter. It is hard to say whether Plečnik imagined himself making plans for each and every one of the terrace houses or whether the municipality would leave the choice of the architect to each individual owner; at the very least, the setup of the complex and variations depicted in the plan strongly suggest that diversity of forms was a desired architectural (and, by extension, probably also programmatic) goal rather than a side effect of the idea, honoring the organic small-scale character of simple family houses in the Krakovo suburb. On the other hand, the unified roof resting on the columns has no precedent in the area; apart from a possible symbolic echo of Mary's

protective coat under which all peoples and classes find shelter,<sup>3</sup> it would provide a new, unified, and monumental superstructure above ground that would complement the spatial and visual variation of different houses on the ground.<sup>4</sup> The idea is, therefore, not a repudiation of either the garden city or of the urban housing block but rather an ingenious synthesis of the two most common solutions to mass housing in 20th-century European cities.<sup>5</sup>

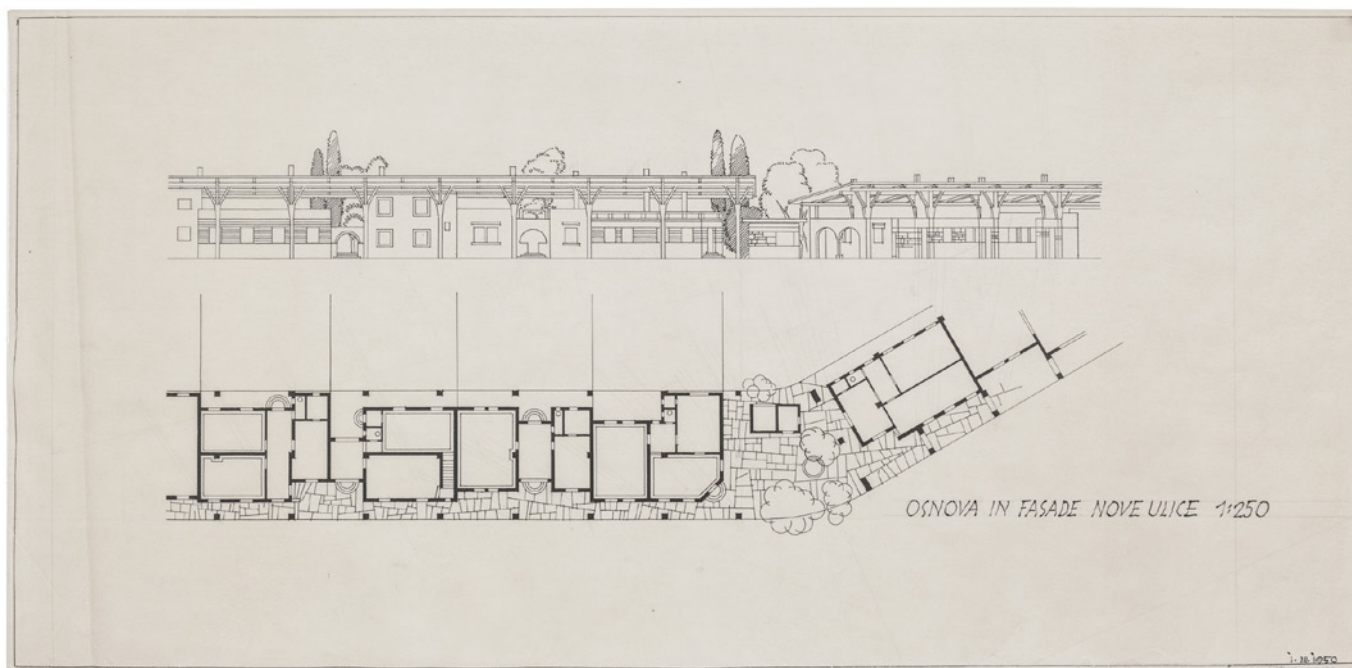
"Houses under the Common Roof" already points toward the attention to the spaces in-between: neither on the street nor in the interior, the covered corridors between the outer columns and varying façades of houses, the passageways between the street and the gardens behind, the terraces between the flat roofs of individual houses and the unifying, gently sloping »common roof« show a wealth of differentiated semi-public spaces architecturally mediating between the city and the house, between the community and the individual. In comparison, the obvious lack of attention to actual floor plans of individual units makes perfect sense: Plečnik was interested in how to urbanize suburban areas without letting go of the habitation qualities such as gardens and small scale. On the other hand, he articulated a solution where the neighborhood's new density and urban character would comply with the increased social, spatial, and infrastructural pressures archaic areas such as Krakovo were experiencing in the 20th century.

"Houses under a Common Roof" could be understood as a reworking of the concept of the Central Market complex in Ljubljana, a project Plečnik completed during the war in 1942. Even though the "houses" in this case consist of butchers' and fishmongers' shops, the basic concept is very similar: a colonnade on the side of the old market square and the wall with windows on the side of the river support a unified roof that extends over 300 meters in length and provides a monumental common roof for butcher's shops on the ground level and fishmongers stalls on the subterranean level that opens towards the river. However, due to the standardized program and its character as a public building, the rhythm between unified façades, loggias, and entrances is carefully maintained. This is why the informality and formal diversity of the Krakovo project is understandably missing. The free-floating roof is also a common motif of Plečnik's work elsewhere, realized at the Jožmurka pavilion in Begunje and at Žale Cemetery workshops, for example (Krečič, 1997, p. 176; Prelovšek, 2017, p. 382), as is the concept of a "house within a house" such as the realized "Glorietta" pavilion at the Bežigrad Stadium and the unrealized "Alexander's Propylaia" at Congress Square (Kongresni trg).

The Wartime Municipal Roof project is a development of an earlier school program for "Houses under the

Canopy" from 1937.<sup>6</sup> Drafted by Plečnik's student Zdeněk Sila, the basic elements of the "Municipal Roof" project are already here: diverse individual terraced houses with flat roofs, protected by a monumental common roof (its very gentle slope in line with the name suggests a canopy rather than the gently sloping gabled roof of the later projects). This project lacks a specified location. Despite the varying character of the street and garden façades, this is still merely a concept, waiting for its actual spatially conditioned realization. The last and least well-known project for urban housing under the same roof, however, was completed 13 years afterward. In the archives of Anton Bitenc and Vladimira Bratuž-Laka, Plečnik's students,

drawings with a description of a very similar concept were preserved. Dated to 1950, the style of the two drawings [FIGURE 02, FIGURE 03], the typography of the description, and some of the characteristics of the architecture itself suggest that perhaps the last "common roof" project was done on the initiative of the students rather than as a teacher's final reiteration of the old idea. Adaptation of the concept to the new post-war reality can be sensed in the stylized, proto-modernist design of columns and the roof (that is now sloping one way only, enabling higher façades on the street and lower to the garden side) as well as from the telling description of the concept, the only one preserved from any of the mentioned projects:



02 Plan for the "Houses under the Common Roof". © MAO Collection, 1950.



03 Perspective of the "Houses under the Common Roof" with the description of the concept. © MAO Collection, 1950.

*“For a working man to erect a home with a garden and a small household, freely and in keeping with his needs—and for such an estate to receive a strong urban and aesthetic form—that was the idea behind the common roof erected by a commune, be it a city, an organisation, or a factory, which provides for water supply and utility infrastructures, lighting, roads etc., and maintains them. It would be a new street with a distinctly plastic face, covered walkways, surrounded by greenery.”*7

The lack of discussion of individual houses and floorplans confirms the basic characteristic of this being primarily an urban planning project—but so do the attention, visual and rhetorical, to the spaces where the new estate interacts with the city around it. In this final reworking of the idea, the intermediary spaces and gaps between the individual units and the outer envelope of the columns and the roof are further widened, creating an extensive semi-public sphere of interaction between public and private, similar to the medieval arcaded square façades of Italy and Central Europe. Like in other Plečnik’s built and unbuilt projects in Ljubljana: the Central Market and the neighboring, never-realized New City Hall, it is the in-between, semi-public mediating spaces such as loggias, colonnades, passageways, visual gaps and terraces, that have the potential to “socialize” (as the name of one of the projects from 1943-44 explicitly states) or intertwine the existing city and its inhabitants with the new vision of an individualized yet urbanized 20th century Ljubljana.

The three “common roof” projects of 1937, 1943-44, and 1950 show Plečnik and his students’ continuing interest for the creative synthesis of individual and collective housing in the city of the 20th century. The insistence on the basic concept from 1937 while also adapting it to three very different social, political, and economic contexts (pre-war capitalism that was also defined by a strong network of cooperative organizations in the Slovene part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1937; war, occupation and war economy in 1943-44; and the new socialist reality with a redefinition of economic and social fabric in 1950) also draw attention to durability and flexibility of the concept—not only in the sense of accommodating different personal, aesthetic, and programmatic requirements of individual house owners/occupants but also in the concept’s potential appeal for different political conditions and social realities.

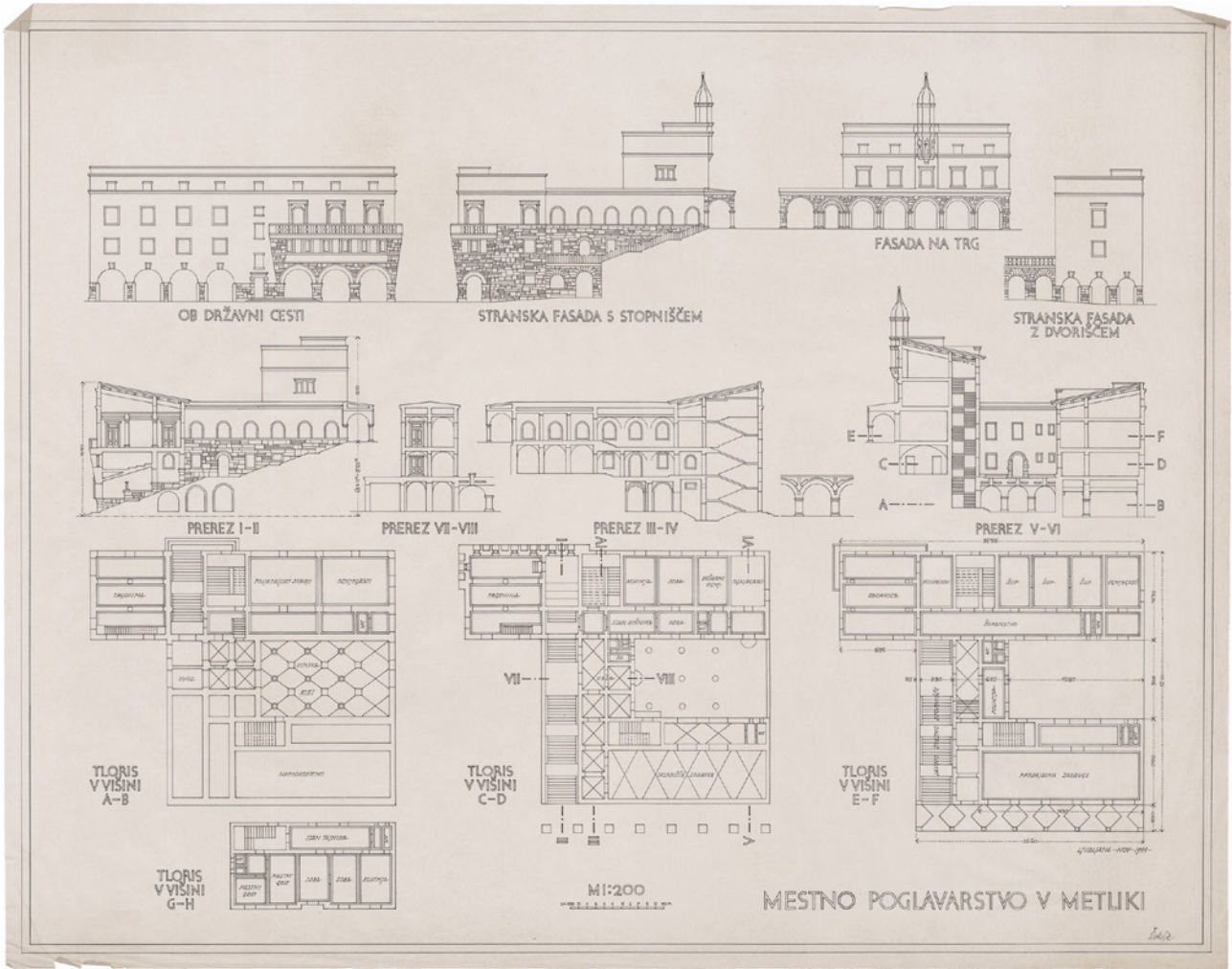
## METLIKA PROJECTS

The war years were particularly fruitful for cooperation between Plečnik and Gizela Šuklje. A number of urban revitalization projects for Šuklje’s ancestral medieval town

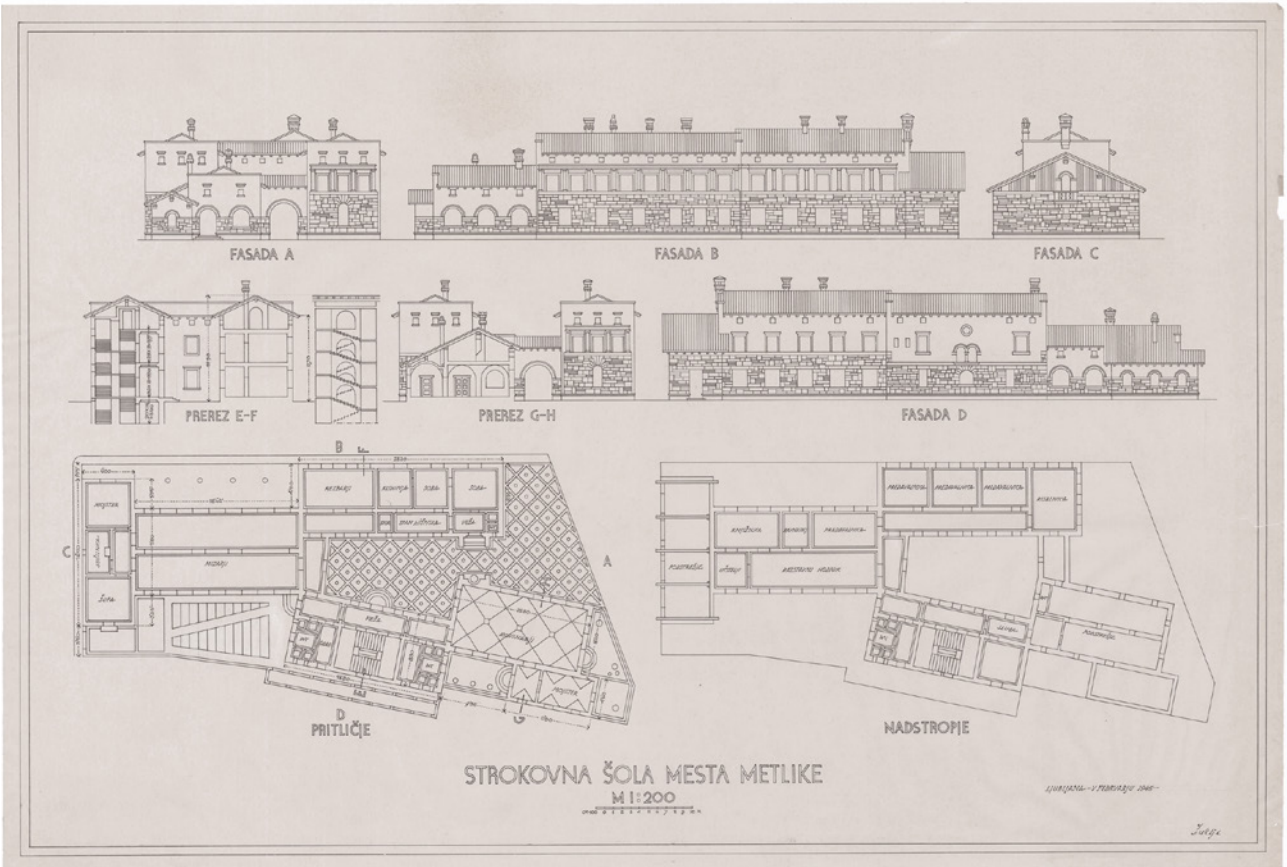
of Metlika in the south of Slovenia, although probably never meant for realization, testify to the further development of the “common roof” concept during wartime when construction sites mostly stood still. Rather than focusing on the redesign of squares and streets, in 1944-45, Plečnik and Šuklje prepared plans for a number of public buildings on the edge of the small town core that would provide new functions while also enhancing the town with new public and semi-public spaces (Čelik, Vardjan, and Zupančič, 2013, pp. 70-74). Among the Metlika projects, the plans for the City Hall [FIGURE 04] and Vocational School [FIGURE 05] both from 1945, in particular, outline Plečnik’s experiment with mixed-use and intermediate, semi-public spaces.

The City Hall<sup>8</sup> is a small but complex building designed almost exclusively based on the urbanistic considerations of its surroundings. The building links two town squares on different levels. In addition to providing a partially covered staircase linking the two squares with the small internal courtyard of the new building, the covered passageways on the sides of the two squares blur the line between the previous dichotomy of open and closed, public and private spaces with a rich array of semi-public, semi-open spaces. The building hosts multiple functions: the Mayor’s office, municipal assembly room, agricultural cooperative and warehouse, wine cellar, shop, fire-fighter station, two flats for the caretaker and municipal secretary, and a suite for a visiting town guest. Here, Plečnik develops the “socialized structure” of the “common roof” concept for a public program rather than private housing; mixed-use and a rich array of intermediary, semi-public, semi-open spaces help to dissolve the clear-cut distinction between closed and open spaces as well as between private and public spaces of the traditional Slovene town. The new building is conceived as a spatial and programmatic catalyst for Metlika, providing basic political, cultural, economic, and security services.

Similarly, the Vocational School<sup>9</sup> on the other edge of the settlement is a complex of varying interconnected pavilions with courtyards linking them rather than a single unified building. Separate workshops for woodcarvers, metallurgists, and carpenters on the ground floor are linked with courtyards and gardens on the ground as well as with the common programs of library and lecture rooms on the first floor. Like in the case of the City Hall, the complex blurs the boundaries between the house and the surrounding town, providing extensions of existing streets, walled gardens, passageways, and semi-public courtyards that constitute a new socialized fabric for the school and the town.



04 Plan for the new Town Hall in Metlika by Jože Plečnik and Gizela Šuklje (collaborator). © MAO Collection, 1945.



05 Plan for The Vocational School of the City of Metlika by Jože Plečnik and Gizela Šuklje (collaborator). © MAO Collection, 1945.

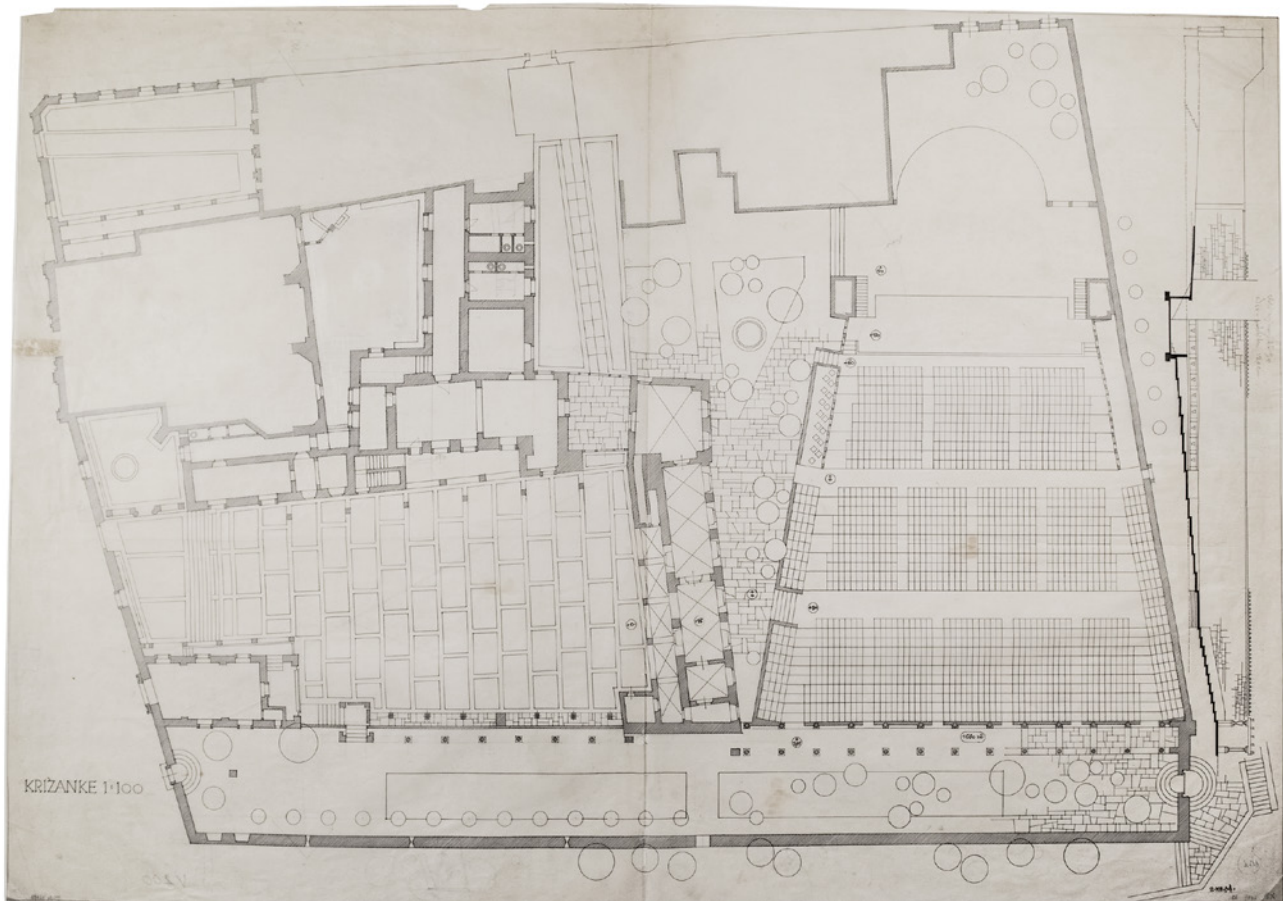
## POST-WAR REVERBERATIONS

While it is possible to see the Metlika City Hall plan as a provincial echo of the concept of New City Hall in Ljubljana (by this time, Plečnik must have suspected that the latter would never be built, even though detailed plans were prepared), the idea of the Metlika Vocational School will reverberate in Plečnik's most important post-war realization in Ljubljana: the renovation of Križanke Monastery into the new School of Crafts<sup>10</sup> and the seat and main venue of the Ljubljana Music Festival from 1952-1956 [FIGURE 06].

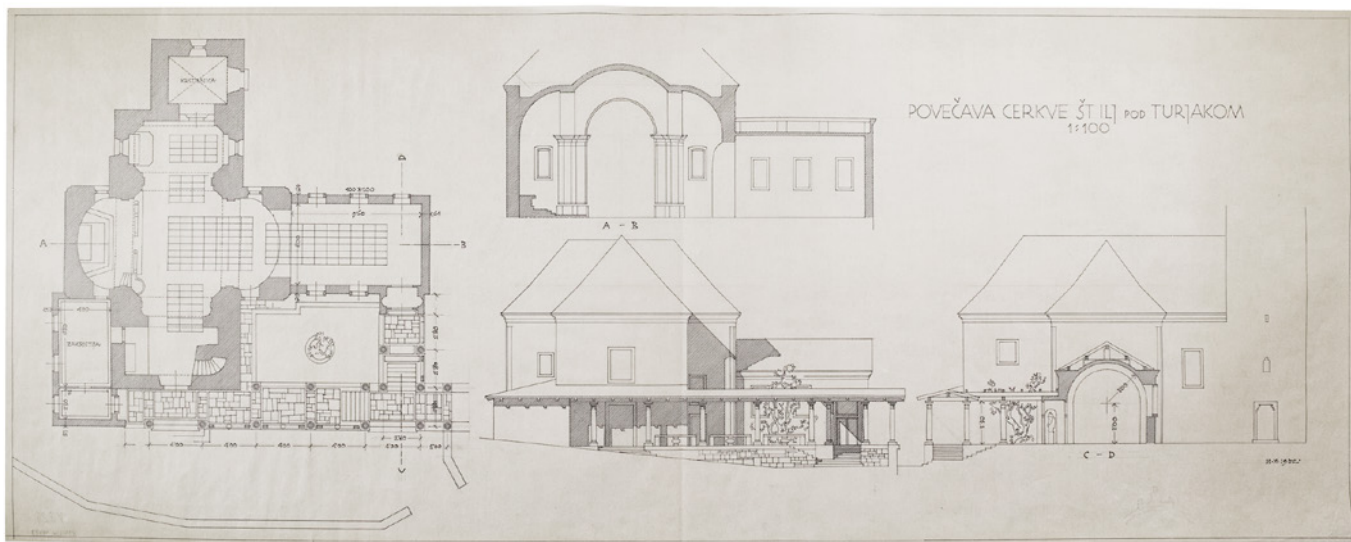
Mixed use of the complex and its opening to the city around it offer pedagogical as well as cultural functions: to be able to learn crafts within an environment rich in tangible heritage (centuries-old fabric of the monastery) and intangible art (open-air festival concerts) is a constituent element of Plečnik's renovation concept. The ancient seat of the Order of Teutonic Knights, an enclosed complex with a church, monastery buildings, and gardens next to the former town walls, is treated as a small city by Plečnik and his assistant Anton Bitenc (who completes the project after his teacher's death): walls are left in place but are perforated so that the complex becomes visually and physically intertwined with the city; newly-paved courtyards are linked to each other, creating a network of small streets and squares connecting semi-autonomous parts of the

school with the festival venues and the city; and the newly-built arcades, terraces and gardens provide for a rich new texture of intermediary spaces mediating between the new programs and old context as well as socializing the various function under its roof with the city around it.<sup>11</sup> Almost all of Plečnik's work is limited to the exterior spaces and façades, barely touching the disposition of existing interior spaces. In this sense, Križanke is a house turned inside out: rather than its concert hall or its lecture rooms, its heart is in the passageways and courtyards that double as communication and socialization spaces.

Plečnik's post-war commissions never reached the scale of his pre-war projects. Consisting mostly of small-scale monuments, the experiments of articulating intermediary spaces and mixed-use urban complexes developed during the Second World War could not be put to the test easily. Apart from the Križanke renovation and the renovation of the Kranj City Theatre,<sup>12</sup> one of the few outlets where Plečnik could experiment with intermediary spaces and small-scale urbanism was in the numerous commissions for the reconstruction of churches damaged during the war. Most of these projects were not realized, but surviving plans offer a glimpse into how lessons of Krakovo and Metlika could be adapted to even the most rural contexts, providing for a new urban nucleus of a village or a settlement.



06 Floor plan of the renovation of the Križanke Monastery by Jože Plečnik and Anton Bitenc (Collaborator). © MAO Collection, 1954.



07 Plan for the extension of the St. Ilja church in Šentilj under Turjak by Jože Plečnik and Anton Bitenc (collaborator), 1952. © MAO Collection.

Among these, one noteworthy, unrealized plan is the one for the extension of St. Ilja church in Šentilj under Turjak in the northeast of the country in 1952 [FIGURE 07].<sup>13</sup> Plečnik suggested extending the church with a new nave perpendicular to the old orientation of the church, transforming the main altar into a side altar and one of the side altars into the main altar—a solution based on his pre-war designs for transversely-oriented church spaces such as St Michael on the Marsh near Ljubljana. The resulting two competing naves of the church were to be rounded up with two columned and covered walkways leading to the old and the new entrance to the building while also enclosing an atrium between the walkways and the walls of the naves. In this small-scale exercise of diversification and urbanization of a country church, Plečnik provides the community not only with an enlarged interior but also with a series of intermediary, semi-covered mediating spaces that transform a church hall into a small urban complex, dissolving the clear-cut distinction between open and closed, public and private spaces of villages.

## CONCLUSION

In Plečnik's late work, the house as a small-scale urban complex with a wide range of differentiated spatial and programmatic regimes is fully articulated. Due to changed political and, above all, professional circumstances in the field of architecture, these articulations remain predominantly on paper. That does not mean, however, that the intense conceptual work during the war years left no consequences. A distinctly urbanistic approach to architecture, albeit with different formal qualities, would soon also characterize the modernist oeuvre of Plečnik's most celebrated disciple Edvard Ravnikar (1907-1993)<sup>14</sup> and his students. Dušan Grabrijan's analysis of qualities of vernacular housing tradition as a base for developing site-specific housing typologies is at least in part grounded in Plečnik's school and its long-running thread of reinventing

tradition for new urban situations. Later, concepts such as "Houses under the Common Roof" inspired the fascination of artists and architects looking for socially regenerative architectural approaches after the disillusionment of the asocial middle-class suburbia and mass housing of modernist estates of the 20th century.<sup>15</sup> In "Houses under the Common Roof" and his post-war projects, Plečnik offered an alternative vision of the role of space as a vehicle for social interaction and transformation. By focusing on the intermediary spaces of communication and generosity of space that breaches the established conventions of use and property, he offered a contemporary rereading of Leon Battista Alberti's notion of a house as a small city and a city as a large house. At the time often overridden by the instrumentalized modernity of the 20th century, Plečnik's late work of dissolving the boundaries of houses and programs, combined with overlapping otherwise strictly delineated zones through a series of intermediary spaces, already addresses very contemporary challenges of social interconnectedness and spatial sustainability of the 21st century.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In addition to the last fifteen years of his life, another similar grey spot exists that should be devoted to in the future: the Prague years between 1913 and 1920, again lacking in realisations. I believe it is no coincidence that the times of the two world wars are characterized by the understandable lack of realized architectural projects at the time and a surge of creativity with a changed character of Plečnik's work after it (in the case of World War I the work in Prague, Ljubljana and elsewhere; in case of World War II the post-war work throughout Slovenia). Perhaps Plečnik's two world-war periods should be reconceptualized into his intimate hothouse of rethinking, reorientation and experimentation, exploding into new surges of creativity soon afterwards.
- <sup>2</sup> Copies of plans are found in Gizela Šuklje's archive in MAO; originals are held in the Plečnik House Collection.
- <sup>3</sup> In Slovenia, this Catholic symbolism is best known from the gothic carved relief at the famous pilgrimage church of Ptujška Gora. It would also fit well with Plečnik's distinctive combination of a sense of social justice and an archaic, christianity-based paternalism.
- <sup>4</sup> The architectural motive of enveloping a house with columns is a long-running thread in Plečnik's oeuvre, although predominantly reserved for public buildings. The outer unifying collonade echoes precedents such as Palladio's classical envelope of the gothic Basilica in Vicenza, which Plečnik would encounter in his formative Italian journey (1898-99).
- <sup>5</sup> Plečnik's design for "Houses under the Municipal Roof" has an unexpected parallel in Le Corbusier's Plan Obus for Algiers (1933) where the extensive multi-storey concrete curve with the road on top is also a construction frame for individual houses to be built within. Despite the differences in height, length and relation to the urban landscape, both designs articulate an attempt to combine an individual housing solutions within a collective infrastructural framework.
- <sup>6</sup> The plan is preserved in the Plečnik House Collection in Ljubljana.
- <sup>7</sup> Text on the side of the visualization for "Houses under the Common Roof", 534:LJU;0041943, 1950. MAO Collection.
- <sup>8</sup> Plan 534:LJU;0029845, MAO Collection.
- <sup>9</sup> Plan 534:LJU;0029846, MAO Collection.
- <sup>10</sup> Gizela Šuklje, Plečnik's collaborator on the "Houses under the Municipal Roof" and Metlika projects, became a teacher at the newly-established School of Crafts in 1946 which found its home in the then still unrenovated monastery.
- <sup>11</sup> Plan 534:LJU;0042017, dated to 1954, MAO Collection.
- <sup>12</sup> In Kranj (1949), Plečnik constructed a new screen of arcades in front of the façade of the theater on the main square, thus providing another example of mediteranean-inspired urban intermediary space, not at all traditional for this Alpine town.
- <sup>13</sup> Plan 534:LJU;0041989, MAO Collection.
- <sup>14</sup> In Ravnikar's central work, the extensive Revolution Square complex in Ljubljana (1959-1983), Anton Bitenc collaborated with Ravnikar in adapting the ground floors of surrounding older buildings, creating a series of intermediary covered spaces that helped to breach the difference in scale between the old town and Ravnikar's new monumental complex.
- <sup>15</sup> Slovene architect and artist Marjetica Potrč created the "Ljubljana under a Common Roof" project in the De Appel Foundation for Contemporary Art, Amsterdam in 2004, and the "Under Municipal Roof" project in 2005-2008 where she compared Plečnik's concept with contemporary social housing ideas from Johannesburg (Potrč, n.d.) A number of academic researchers rediscovered Plečnik's project at the same time (Ferretto, 2012; Gallo, 2008). In Italy, a 2011 architectural realization near Parma was even partially inspired by the project (Colonna Architetti, n.d.).