

ORIGINS OF MODERNITY: PLEČNIK AND GRABRIJAN

Architecture between the Classical Canon and Structural Honesty

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ABSTRACT: The first part of this research is based on the analysis of several articles published by Dušan Grabrijan in the late 1940s and early 1950s, his book *Plečnik in njegova šola* (Plečnik and His School), and the analysis of Grabrijan's teaching method rooted in Auguste Choisy's book *Histoire de l'architecture* (Choisy, 1899), published as a study script. The book *Plečnik in njegova šola* (Grabrijan, 1968) is based on Grabrijan's published and unpublished texts, some of which were originally written during his WWII imprisonment. It attempts to critically contextualize, evaluate, and present Plečnik's work. The book was edited by his wife, Prof. Nada Grabrijan, and published posthumously in 1968.

One of the first three of Plečnik's graduates, Dušan Grabrijan, is the author of the Memorial to Slovenian Modernity in Ljubljana Žale Cemetery (dedicated to Ivan Cankar, Dragotin Kette, and Josip Murn, with Oton Župančič's memorial added later, designed by his son, architect Marko Župančič), built between 1924-25 as a result of a winning student competition in Plečnik's seminar. The memorial was commissioned and funded by Milena Rohrmann. The composition is tripartite, with a reference to Mount Triglav, consisting of three joint columns, of which Ivan Cankar is the tallest and placed in the center. The memorial follows Plečnik's design principles. The final part of the paper will examine Plečnik's modernity and his classical yet modern understanding of the architectural discipline, his 'flexible classicism' with his inventiveness, playfulness, daring upcycling, experimentation with materials, forms, and structures, all within the frame of highly developed local crafts, not industry. Indeed, the building industry only really developed after WWII in socialist Yugoslavia. Dušan Grabrijan and Juraj Neidhardt were among the first architects in the region to face the new challenges in architecture. They were trying to answer the new questions: How to connect the new role of an architect, industrialization, and new social needs with the mosaic of local cultures, contexts, and communities, and how to apply Plečnik's human scale to the modernist architecture of the Balkans?

KEYWORDS: Memorial to Slovenian Modernity, Jože Plečnik, Dušan Grabrijan, Juraj Neidhardt

*"The weather is unstable, my heart is unstable.
Preferably I would like to go to the top of Mount
Triglav and cry there."*

Jože Plečnik, 8th of August 1923¹

INTRODUCTION: History repeats itself, and unstable times, as expressed in Plečnik's letter one hundred years ago (Grabrijan, 1968), are here again. Plečnik came to teach in Ljubljana from Prague in 1921, two years after the University of Ljubljana was established and three years after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

Ljubljana was then part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which changed its name in 1929 to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Plečnik, whose Gutenberg memorial project, his concrete church, and his academic position, all in Vienna, were either criticized or rejected mostly because he was Slovenian, came back to Ljubljana with only one ambition: to share his knowledge, experience, and talent with his home town, his birth country, and local people. Dušan Grabrijan was one of Plečnik's first three graduates and was soon aware of the radical dichotomy between Plečnik's school and the Modern Movement. Besides stressing the importance of the monumental, the



01 Grabrijan's tombstone at Žale Cemetery, designed by his friend and collaborator, architect Niko Bežek in 1952. © Marjan Smerke. Photo from the book *Ljubljanske Žale* by Milena Piškur (2004, p. 96).



02 Grabrijan's tombstone at Žale Cemetery, current condition. © Nataša Koselj, 2023.

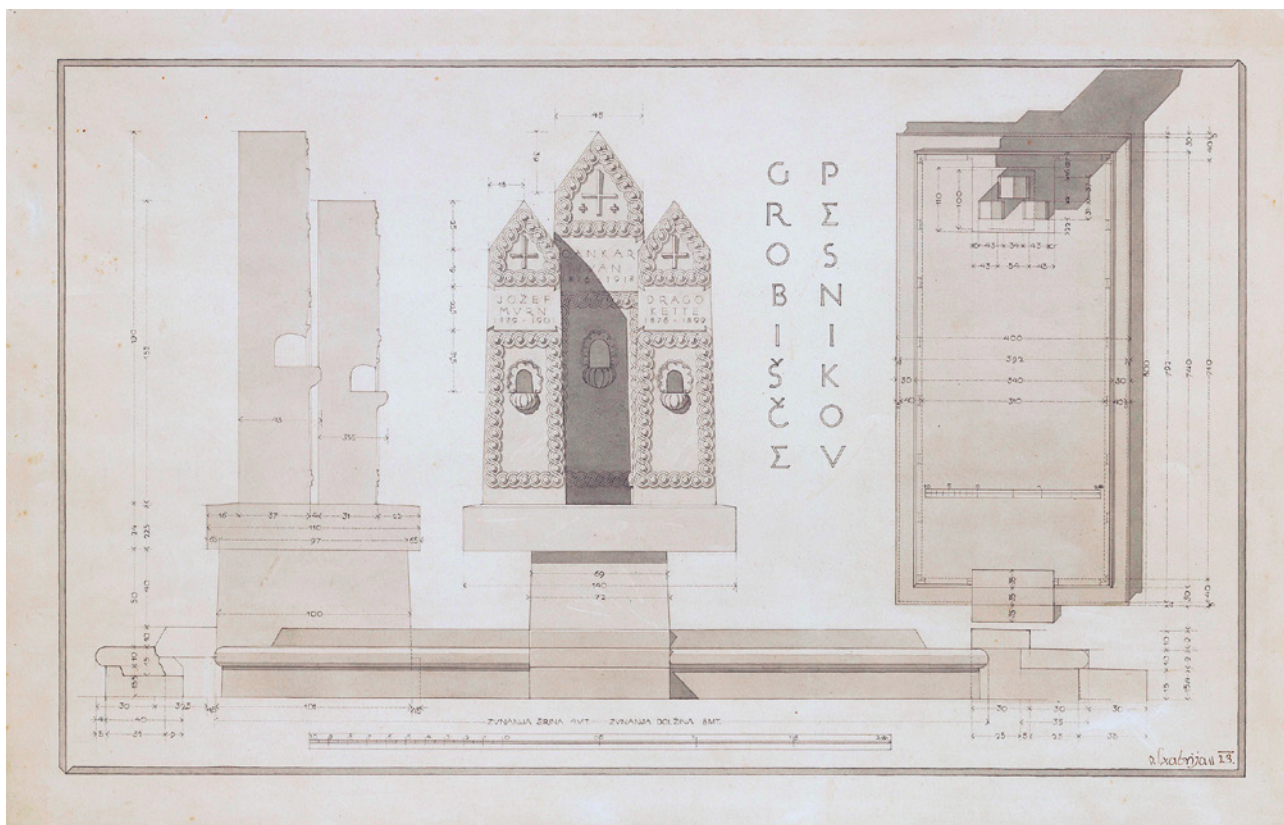
local, and craftsmanship, Plečnik was teaching the canon of historical styles, which in those years was strongly rejected by the Bauhaus and CIAM. As there was no local building industry developed in the country at that time, his school was based on the local crafts. Plečnik's floor plans were classical and static, but it was his personal inventiveness, creative interpretation of local traditions, and experimentation with materials and techniques that gave his work a modern *esprit*. The only area where he was really radically modern was in the church floor plan design, where he drew on early Christian influences. Thus, already in the first part of the 20th century, he put the altar on the longer side of the basilica, i.e., he created a horizontal nave instead of a longitudinal one (St. Michael's Church in Črna vas near Ljubljana, 1925-39) with the main goal to reduce the feeling of a hierarchy and enable closer contact between the altar and the people. This approach was only officially recognized in the Second Vatican Council in 1962, making Plečnik a real pioneer of the modern church plan.

PLEČNIK AND HIS SCHOOL

Dušan Grabrijan was the first among Plečnik's students who systematically, analytically, and critically wrote about the master's work, his school, and his love of his homeland. Although Grabrijan was Plečnik's student, he passed away five years before his teacher in 1952 due to surgery complications. Thus, most of his articles and books were published posthumously and were edited by his wife, Prof. Nada Grabrijan (*née* Čeh), and by his close friend and collaborator Prof. Juraj Neidhardt, who also designed a sketch for Grabrijan's tomb in the shape of an open book (this sketch was published in the introduction of their seminal book *Architecture of Bosnia and the Way towards Modernity* in 1957 (Grabrijan & Neidhardt, 1957). Ultimately, Grabrijan's tombstone, in the shape of an open book at the Žale Cemetery, was realized in 1952 by another of his friends, architect and also Plečnik's student, Niko Bežek [FIGURE 01, FIGURE 02].

Early on in his work, Grabrijan noted that Plečnik's school was based on a monument as he mentioned in numerous articles, such as: *Razvoj naše arhitekture* [Development of our architecture], *Tovariš*, 1947, pp. 371-372); *Šola za arhitekturo na ljubljanski univerzi: ob tridesetletnici univerze* [The School of Architecture at the Ljubljana University: At the Thirtieth Anniversary of the University], in *Slovenski poročevalac: glasilo Osvobodilne fronte* (1949, p. 3.), and in *Spomeniki in nagrobniki narodnoosvobodilnega boja* [The Monuments and the Tombstones of the National Liberation Fight]. *Likovni svet*, 1951, pp. 9-41) and in Grabrijan's posthumously published book *Plečnik in njegova šola* [Plečnik and His School], (Grabrijan, 1968). He also writes about Plečnik's lectures on historical styles and about his student's practical tasks (*klavzurne naloge*) on rhythm, proportion, and composition, based on both the classical and local. The book contains numerous Plečnik quotes that Grabrijan had written down in secret during lectures as well as excerpts from Plečnik's letters to his first three students (Dragotin Fatur, France Tomažič, and Dušan Grabrijan). Grabrijan realized that Plečnik was one of the very few architects who managed to express his personal philosophy, the regional and the local through his uniquely classical canon, which was later defined by Edvard Ravnikar as 'flexible classicism.'

In 1925, Grabrijan got a stipend to study at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris for one year. Coming back to Ljubljana, he, together with France Tomažič and Dragotin Fatur, was among the first architects who introduced the work of Perret and Le Corbusier to Plečnik's students. Auguste Choisy's book *Histoire de l'architecture* (Choisy, 1899), introduced to Plečnik already in Wagner's school, was studied in Plečnik's seminar. When Grabrijan started to teach history at the Ljubljana School of Architecture in 1947, he put together a textbook following Choisy's method, presenting the axonometry of the building plan, the section, and the façade in the same drawing. This

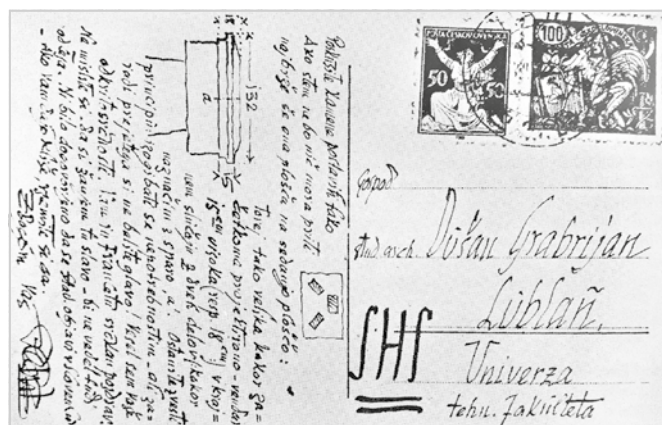


03 Dušan Grabrijan's winning student competition project for the Memorial of Slovenian Modernity at the Žale Cemetery, which he won while attending Plečnik's seminar, Ljubljana, 1923. © Andrej Peunik / MGML, Plečnik's Collection of the Museum and Galleries of the City of Ljubljana.

textbook was still being used at the school more than three decades after his death. He also used Choisy's analytical axonometric approach to present Bosnian and Macedonian traditional architecture and introduced this study method to his pupils at the Secondary Technical School in Sarajevo in the 1930s. Much of this material is presented in the book *Architecture of Bosnia and the Way towards Modernity* (Grabrijan & Neidhardt, 1957). Choisy, a civil engineer, understood the development of architectural forms in close connection to the changes in building techniques. Grabrijan writes in his book *Plečnik in njegova šola* [Plečnik and His School] (Grabrijan, 1968) that Plečnik was often quite depressed, thinking this was because his architectural approach, based on the classical canon, was out of time. Indeed, Plečnik's timeless architecture needed some time to be understood and appreciated. Today, after many different trends in the development of 20th-century architecture, including post-modernism, Plečnik's architecture is evaluated and validated on more complex foundations which Grabrijan emphasized.

MEMORIAL TO SLOVENIAN MODERNITY

1918 saw the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. It was also the year when Ivan Cankar, considered one of the three pioneers and the most important figure of Slovenian modernist literature, passed away. His last love, Milena Rohrmann, commissioned and partly financed the Memorial to Slovenian Modernity at the Žale Cemetery. Plečnik opened a design competition in his seminar in 1923, and Dušan Grabrijan won. Besides Ivan Cankar,



04 Plečnik's postcard to Dušan Grabrijan from Prague with the design suggestions regarding Grabrijan's Memorial of Slovenian Modernity. Plečnik writes: Try to place the stones like this (sketch). If this will not work, another slab should be placed above the existing one (sketch). Therefore, as large as previously designed, but 15 cm high (resp. 18 cm), in two parts, if not otherwise, as shown 'a' (sketch). Stay faithful to the principle to avoid unnecessary things — but do not worry about this post. I am glad of your frankness. Kind regards to you and France (Tomažič). Do not think that I reap fame here — I do not even know for what. It was not agreed to publish the Stad. in Slovenec. If they give you a cliché, take it. With God, Yours, Plečnik. © Plečnik and His School (Grabrijan, 1968, p. 126).

who was originally buried in the Rohrmann family tomb in Žale, this is also a memorial to Drago Kette and Josip Murn, whose graveyards were moved from St. Kristof's to Žale Cemetery. Grabrijan started with sketches of three mounds with crosses, continued with three pyramids with crosses, and ended with three columns placed on a joint pedestal. His final competition project is tripartite and reminiscent of Triglav, the most important national symbol drawn from nature, which also became a symbol of the Slovenian Liberation Front (OF) during WWII [FIGURE 03].

The pedestal, a simple rectangle in Grabrijan's original design, was later enhanced with a classical frieze,



05 Front of Dušan Grabrijan's Memorial to Slovenian Modernity in Žale Cemetery, 1925.
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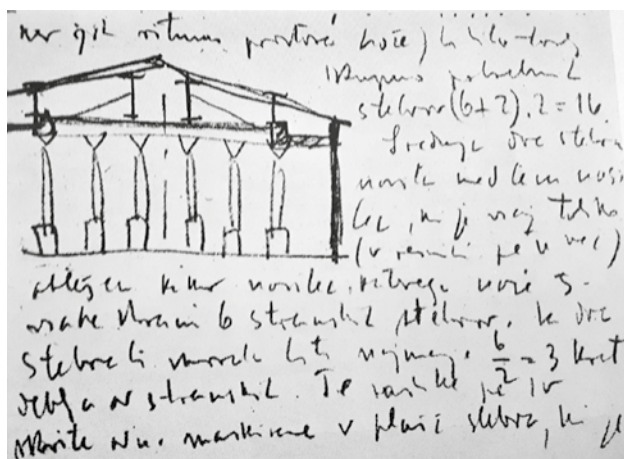
06 Back of Dušan Grabrijan's Memorial to Slovenian Modernity in Žale Cemetery, 1925.
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as suggested by Plečnik in a postcard that he sent from Prague [FIGURE 04].

Plečnik wrote: "Try to put stones like this [sketch added]. If this will not work, another slab should be placed above the existing one [sketch added]". He adds: "Stay faithful to the the principle to avoid unnecessary things. (...) I am glad of your frankness" (Grabrijan, 1968, p. 126). This suggests that Plečnik felt adding a classical frieze was absolutely necessary in this context. The memorial is made of grey local stone. It emphasizes the importance of Ivan Cankar by placing his name on the highest column in the middle [FIGURE 05], also with a different stone surface used for his column on the back of the monument, stressing its significance [FIGURE 06].

Grabrijan added a classical frieze, as Plečnik suggested, although he obviously thought this was unnecessary. His understanding of what is necessary in relation to Plečnik's design principles was clearly expressed in his critique of Plečnik's St. Francis of Assisi Church in Šiška (1924-31) in the chapter 'Weaknesses and Greatness of Jože Plečnik' (Grabrijan, 1968, p. 154), where he also added his sketch of the supporting columns, some of which were, in his opinion, 'unnecessary' [FIGURE 07].

In the same text, he also writes about the qualities of 'frankness' and 'necessity' in modernist architecture. He



07 Grabrijan's sketch with manuscript regarding his critique of the number of columns in Plečnik's Šiška church. © Plečnik and His School. (Grabrijan, 1968, p. 161).



08 Jože Plečnik's St. Francis Church in Ljubljana-Šiška, 1924-31. © Miran Kambič, 2017.



09 Auguste and Gustave Perret's Church of Notre Dame du Raincy, 1922-23. © Paroisse du Raincy, 2023, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2024.

compares Plečnik's church in Šiška (1924-31) [FIGURE 08] with Auguste and Gustave Perret's reinforced concrete Church of Notre Dame du Raincy (1922-23) [FIGURE 09] and writes: "The space is definitely not the same as for example at Šiška church, but considering the whole, there is much, much more frankness".

The Monument to Slovenian Modernity is, therefore, a result of Plečnik's school and his design principles. His school is authentic and monumental at its core. This monument, designed when Grabrijan was still Plečnik's student and realized between 1924 and 1925, is today considered the most recognizable of Grabrijan's built works that

remains standing. However, it might be better seen as an expression of Milena Rohrman's eternal love and dedication to Ivan Cankar than a monument to modernity. As the Plečnik quote notes at the beginning of this article, the time was unstable and, therefore, Grabrijan might have thought it would be good to address this instability with a stable, symmetrical, and classical composition in the form of the strongest national symbol—Mount Triglav itself. The addition of Oton Župančič's hexagonal tombstone in 1955, designed by his son, the architect and student of Plečnik and Le Corbusier, Marko Župančič, which breaks the symmetry of Grabrijan's monument, as well as the



10 Grabrijan's Memorial to Slovenian Modernity (1925) together with Marko Župančič's tombstone to his father, the poet Oton Župančič (1955). The composition as a whole is asymmetrical and has a modernistic expression. © Nataša Koselj, 2023.

planting of much greenery around it, means that today the whole composition has a more asymmetrical and therefore more modernist appearance [FIGURE 10].

ORIGINS OF MODERNITY

Grabrijan's lifelong systematic research into the traditional architecture of the Balkans had one main goal: to prove it had similar links to the Modern Movement as the traditional architecture of other countries that had already been studied, presented, and promoted by modernist architects around the world. This is proved in his articles: *Naše orientalne i savremena kuća*. [Our Oriental and Modern House] (Grabrijan, 1950); in *Dediščina narodov federativne ljudske republike Jugoslavije v Arhitekturi*. [The Heritage of the Nations of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in Architecture] (Grabrijan, 1951); in two posthumously published books *Arhitektura Bosne i put u savremeno* [Architecture of Bosnia and the Way towards Modernity] (Grabrijan & Neidhardt, 1957) and in *Kako je nastajala naša sodobna hiša* [How our Modern House was Created] (Grabrijan, 1959). Grabrijan saw this region, situated between the East and West, with a mosaic of different traditions and influences, as an extremely important basin for studying the development of the modern house and modern city. Plečnik's school gave him a very solid basis for his research in this regard, suggesting that the roots of the modern are in the past. Plečnik's modernity and his classical yet modern understanding of the architectural discipline, his 'flexible classicism,' inventiveness, playfulness, daring upcycling, experimentation with materials, forms and structures, all within the frame of highly developed local crafts, provided an important foundation

for the rise of regional post-war modernism.

The building industry only really developed after WWII in socialist Yugoslavia. Dušan Grabrijan and Juraj Neidhardt were among the first architects in the region to face a range of new challenges in these years, such as how to connect the new role of an architect, industrialization, and new social needs with the mosaic of local cultures, contexts, and communities, and how to apply Plečnik's human scale in the modernist architecture of the Balkans.

Their seminal book *Architecture of Bosnia and the Way towards Modernity* (Grabrijan & Neidhardt, 1957), published five years after Grabrijan passed away, was edited and designed by Juraj Neidhardt. It consists of Grabrijan's studies, along with the presentation of Neidhardt's architecture and children's drawings from Zoran Didek and Mica Todorović's Sarajevo Art School. The subtle elements presented in the book, besides the architecture, show the parallels of the traditional social structure of the region with various ethnographical, ethnological, anthropological, and archeological features, its diverse geography, trees, plants, and views, along with Le Corbusier's foreword, and make this volume a very important, yet until recently almost forgotten, milestone in the heritage of global architecture. In 1953, a year after Grabrijan passed away, two important events happened that changed the world of architecture: Team X's critique of CIAM at its Aix-en Provence congress and an exhibition at the ICA in London titled 'Parallel of Life and Art,' edited by Alison and Peter Smithson, Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Ronald Jenkins. Grabrijan's and Neidhardt's book has a very similar intention and layout



11 Jože Plečnik's tombstone in Žale Cemetery in Ljubljana. © Nataša Koselj, 2023.

to these two events: a parallel presentation of life as a whole, without separations, which was, according to Sigfried Giedion, the main goal of post-war modernism, and is also in line with the intentions of the CoBrA movement some years earlier (1948-51). This book can today be reread and re-valued as an early regional modernistic attempt at creating a better world with regard to the importance of seeing its architectural, artistic, social, ecological, and human resources as a whole, without separations.

CONCLUSION

As pre-war modernism saw the ideal of progress in the radical division of functions in the machine, in rationalization, hygiene, and technology, the post-war modernist's ideal was presenting life as a whole, without divisions, having in its midst the anthropological side of its social structure. Grabrijan and Neidhardt walked this path from one pole to the other together, hand in hand, as friends. While for Grabrijan, Plečnik was the key starting point with regard to the study of local and regional traditions and human scale, for Neidhardt, the most important influences in terms of Modern Movement architecture were his two teachers and collaborators: Peter Behrens and Le Corbusier. Within this constellation and working in the territory of what is today former Yugoslavia, they managed to construct a unique and very important, two-fold intellectual link between the main European streams and the Balkans.

We can see Dušan Grabrijan's importance in his presentation of Plečnik's work and, as one of his first three students, his first-hand presentation of the characteristics of Plečnik's school. To this, we must add Grabrijan's theoretical and pedagogical work as a professor in the secondary technical school in Sarajevo in the 1930s, and as a professor in the Ljubljana School of Architecture in

the post-war period. Most of all, Grabrijan's greatness is in his extensive analytical research on the traditional architecture of the Balkans and his aim of presenting this architecture and ways of life as an important resource for the development of modern house and modern city.

Slovenian modernity, starting in literature with Ivan Cankar as its main representative, has always been strongly linked with the national question and the Slovenian language. Plečnik's architectural language, based on both classical and local traditions, strongly influenced Eastern Europe in general and the Balkans in particular. While he was criticized by his pupils, including Grabrijan, for being too eclectic, at the same time, his critics were aware that Plečnik's architecture contains very important developmental elements of modernism, such as inventiveness, experimentation with material, form and structure, social awareness, human-scale urbanism, his approach to urban greenery, his attitude towards re-use of materials and forms, and, most of all, his radical and pioneering approach to the orientation of the church nave. All these factors position Plečnik as one of the most important pioneers of the Modern Movement, even though he was not a modernist architect [FIGURE 11].

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Mount Triglav (in Slovenian triglav means 'three heads') is the highest mountain in Slovenia (2.863 m) and is the most important national symbol drawn from nature. Jože Plečnik in his letter to France Tomažič (Grabrijan, 1968)