

architecture / fashion / design

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Far from Home: Contemporary Slovenian Architecture in the Making

"Six Pack", an architecture exhibition of six young Slovene architects practices, started its European tour at the beginning of 2004, shortly before Slovenia joined the EU.

Petra Čeferin explores in our magazine the way the exhibition and the projects were received and analyses the search for differences and the local aspects.

Not only a Slovene, but also a European problem.

Just before Slovenia entered the European Union, a book and a travelling exhibition of contemporary Slovenian architecture was arranged by a group of young Slovenian architects. The timing was perfect: foreign eyes were trained on our part of the world, ready to see what we had to show. From Genoa, Rome and Florence this exhibition travelled to London, Dublin, Ljubljana, Buenos Aires, Beijing, Rice University in Texas and Rotterdam, where it was displayed as part of a larger exhibition called Collage Europe.

What is particularly curious about this exhibition and the book is that although they represent architecture of a particular place – Slovenia – they make no explicit references to this place. Rather than with an image of a characteristic “national” landscape, the book opens up with a group portrait of the architects whose works are exhibited. Dressed in black, carefully groomed and with contemplative expressions on their faces, they appear as yet another group of cool contemporary architects who are able to project their daring visions on the urban reality below, the heroic planners of today. The selection of the shoot-site – the flat roof of a Ljubljana residential block, inspired by Le Corbusier’s Unité – suggests that for this group, the architectural reference lies not in the buildings of Jože Plečnik which today are regarded as characteristically Slovenian but in the architecture of international modernism. This carefully composed portrait is followed by the CVs of the offices, which suggest that the group chose as their connecting factor, as that which constitutes them as a group, their studies at (renowned) foreign institutions. These CVs are indeed presentations of what the offices can offer: “SVA operates in an open, integral and innovative way”; “Machtig Vrhunc Architects value subversive narrative behind the effective, emotionally rich and commercially successful design”, and “the aim of the Ofis is to work interdisciplinary” write the architects. [1] The group doesn’t even try to mask the fact that the exhibition and the book aren’t simply presentations of a contemporary Slovenian architecture but certainly a promotional channel for their practices. The actual title of the exhibition readily confirms this: Six Pack, a commercially ready-packaged and self-defining product launched on the international architectural market. The message of the young Slovenian architects is clear: “we are ready to take part”. The exhibited and published projects – presented with a mix of compelling computer simulations and carefully composed photographs, thus blurring the border between the imagined and the built – appear no different than the oft-publicised architecture of architectural centres today. These young offices are clearly not concerned with advancing a quality of difference; rather, they want to be, and work at being, the same.

However, the foreign critics who are invited to contribute to the book with their critical reviews are interested precisely in the opposite – the difference. According to Andreas and Ilka Ruby and Neil Leach, the exhibited architectural production is clearly “theirs” as opposed to “ours”, while for them “they” simply means the “East” and “us”, the “West”. The critics also continue to refer to something specifically Slovene – either mode of being, genius loci, architectural culture or simply architectural identity.

The Rubys begin with Ljubljana, the place where the architects come from. Ljubljana at first appears as an ordinary place, they write, “yet every now and then you can register from the corner of your eye a slight irritation, (...) the time outs of the ordinary.” [2] This out-of-the-ordinary is what the critics set out to examine and in so doing – as they put it – feel like archaeologists, that is, like explorers of the material remains of past cultures, wondering “how they managed to survive here”. [3] And they identify the features that supposedly structure the city’s difference precisely in those elements that are commonly recognised in the West as the characteristic elements of Eastern Europe’s urban reality. [4] According to the Rubys, Ljubljana has it all: the kiosks, the wide boulevards, typical socialist housing (Plattenbau), and fascinating scenography. It seems that its out-of-ordinariness lies precisely in its preserved East European character. Yet another feature that the Rubys identify as specific to the architecture of Ljubljana is the “sampling of foreign”. [5] In their view, this process is indeed essential in fostering the architectural identity of Ljubljana. An excellent example of this attitude they find in Plečnik’s Church in Barje; in their view, this church is a strange mixture of Swiss Alpine chalet and an Indian cultic hut, which finally results in a perfect setting for a Greek-Orthodox ceremony. If sampling the foreign is a characteristically local tradition, than one can assume that the young Slovenian architects with their explicit reliance on the international architectural trends are indeed faithful followers of this apparently local tradition.

Neil Leach too recognises in the work of the young Slovenian architects the followers of a characteristically Slovenian “mode of existence”, distinguished by a constant interaction between the domestic and the foreign. As an example of such a mode of existence he offers the studying of the young Slovenian architects in what he describes as “the Western epicentres of architectural culture”. He argues that through this interaction both sides benefit: Slovenian architects are becoming Western and the Western world is becoming Slovene. [6] Yet for Leach this interaction is not an interaction of two equivalent entities: in his view the Western centres supply architectural ideas, while Eastern and Central European students (including Slovenians) supply talent. As he puts it: “These educational spaces can be perceived as architecture-orchid-centres in a worldwide web of architectural institutions. They become the points of radical trans-pollination of architectural ideas. (...) Architect-wasps from Central and Eastern Europe may benefit from this interaction, but the West also benefits from this influx of talent.” [7] East, it would seem, isn’t the place of ideas, it is the place of potential, one that can be constructively channelled with the help of Western educational centres. The Rubys indeed express a similar attitude when they “feel like archaeologists”: the East supplies the material, that which is to be analysed, explained, conceptualised by the West.

This curious dichotomy inherent in the reading of Slovenian contemporary architecture closely resembles the situation in Finland in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This was a time when Finnish architecture was intensely promoted internationally. [8] The Museum of Finnish Architecture arranged a number of travelling exhibitions in which a very specific image of Finnish modernism was shown, which confirmed the belief of Finnish architects that Finnish modernism was simply a constitutive part of the international architectural production. Only those buildings that were

constructed using the most technologically advanced methods were shown, and were represented in a way that they appeared most modern.

Yet in the carefully constructed photographs of those buildings, the foreign reviewers recognised a difference. They referred to them as products of craft rather than industry, as made in tune with Finnish nature rather than technology, as slightly irrational, strange, even exotic. The critics found the explanations for these supposed deviations from the modern in Finland or, more precisely, in the cultural stereotypes that for the foreign view constituted what Finland was. Indeed, the critics were hardly interested in the buildings as such, for their intrinsic (formal and other) qualities. Rather, they observed them in relation to the architecture they considered the norm and explored the reasons for the deviations of the Finnish examples from this norm.

It seems that similar mechanisms are at work today and that the attitudes of the West towards the East haven't changed much over the last half a century. Just like Finnish architecture then, contemporary Slovenian architecture is viewed through a very specific framework of what Slovenia (Ljubljana) represents for the West: East Europe and (accordingly) a less developed country (echoed in the statement: we have the ideas, you have the talents); a mixture of the Balkan – oriental, exotic - and Alpine worlds (echoed in the description of Plečnik's church), an eastern country (and thus out-of-the-ordinary). The projects of Slovenian architects aren't discussed as such - just as the exhibited Finnish buildings were not – but they are treated simply as a phenomenon determined by its “origin”.

Roemer van Toorn, the third invited foreign critic, is actually the only one (of the foreign critics) who analyses the presented projects as such; thus he is the only one, it seems, who is taking them seriously. He accords them an equal place on the architectural scene and accordingly, approaches them in relation to the architecture that is today considered of the highest relevance, such as the work of Rem Koolhaas, MVRDV and Jean Nouvel. In his view, the problem of the Sixpack architects is indeed the problem of most contemporary architecture today that is its inability or unwillingness to produce a symbolic and ideological content. [9] In the case of contemporary Slovenian architecture, Van Toorn sees a way of approaching this problem precisely in taking seriously certain aspects of the local. He too, however, identifies these aspects in the “amazing strangeness, even bizarreness of the architecture of Slovenian architect Edvard Ravnikar”. [10] (*my italics*)

The situation today, however, ought to be different from the situation in the 1950s, when Finnish architecture was evaluated by the cultural centres of the West. The West can no longer be seen as holding the exclusive position of the “commanding point” that sets standards and determines values for the rest of the world, according to its own measures. This model of “Western Universalism” is to have been replaced by a new paradigm, according to which the contemporary world is determined by the experience of “otherness”, while the West is to be understood as simply one of several equivalent “others”. Well in tune with this idea is the project of the European Union to promote a common cultural area of Europe, characterised by a cultural diversity and shared cultural heritage. The new members, commonly referred to simply as the former East Europe, are encouraged to take part in the common cultural arena while preserving their differences. A project that was formulated with this objective is Collage Europe, a set of exhibitions and lectures on architecture and urban planning of Eastern Europe recently featured at the Netherlands Architecture Institute (mentioned in the beginning of this text).

Yet the aim of this project doesn't appear to be a simple presentation of the architecture of East Europe to Dutch audiences. Its objective seems to be to help the East. This is what the director of the institute, Aaron Betsky, suggests in his introduction; he writes that this project “may map out a

series of possibilities, some of them collaborative, for a well-designed future in Eastern Europe". [11] A similar sentiment emerged from the introduction to the event published on the internet, with the editor writing: "Now that the Eastern European countries are faced with the challenge of redeveloping their cities we must ask how architects and town planners will react to the altered architectural demands in these countries." (my italics) [12] What is it that entitles, indeed, compels the Netherlands Architecture Institute to ask how development in Eastern Europe proceed? This and many other examples indicate that the patronising attitude of the West remains preserved. The Western cultural epicentres remain the places where architectural norms and values are set, where "differences" are recognised, interpreted and evaluated. As the art critic Igor Zabel puts it: "The East is still the East, although it is now called "the (former) East". Does anyone speak about the "former West"?" [13] Through this project both sides will learn, Betsky concludes his introduction, yet will never be the same: the situation in Eastern Europe "will always remain 'there' for us here". [14] Thus it actually seems that positing Slovenian architecture in the Sixpack exhibition as no different from prevailing global architectural trends was the best way to get the attention of the Western critics and architectural media. Not only because certain pronounced sameness (with a shade, or perhaps six shades, of difference) and correspondingly contemporary look is sought today, rather than the vernacular and its historical roots. [15] But also because for the Western critics it is more fascinating to see the architecture of a country like Slovenia represented with colourful imagery that clearly belongs to the 21st century, than with black-and-white photographs of mass produced housing, so poetically captured in the films of Krzysztof Kieslowski, in effortless accord with what is expected from the East.

I have to doubt, however, that this was a conscious marketing move on the part of the young Slovenian architects. For it actually seems they formulated their exhibition project less in relation to the international architectural production, than in relation to the architectural production in Slovenia. More precisely, they defined it through a distance from everything that is, in the architectural circles at home, understood and appreciated as characteristically Slovenian. Paradoxically, I would maintain that this is why this exhibition is actually crucial for the fostering of local architectural identity. By breaking with the existing understanding of Slovenian architecture (within Slovenia), the young Slovenian architects opened a possibility to re-think this supposed entity, and allow for different expressions within this framework to emerge and develop. This break, however, represents only a beginning; whether it will be fully taken advantage of demands more than the efforts of a group of ambitious architects alone. For this, conditions within the country have to be established that will enable diverse architectural production of the highest quality. Through this intense production, a Slovenian architectural identity will (in retrospect), be (re)formulated and hence its continuity ensured.

If Slovenian architecture continues to be promoted as in tune with current architectural trends, it may actually be noticed and seriously evaluated. Its international image may no longer be determined by a common understanding of an imagined entity known as (the former) East Europe. Once Slovenia no longer enjoys the status of a curious newcomer in the European Union, however, it won't be enough for Slovenian architecture merely to be the same in order to provoke the interest of the "commanding points". Instead, it will have to demonstrate and emphasize a certain "surplus". As long as the centers of architectural discourse are located in the West, however, this surplus will likely remain recognized as the result of the characteristically Eastern in Slovenian architecture.

Petra Čeferin is a freelance architect and researcher in Ljubljana, Slovenia. She received her

M.Arch. from Helsinki University of Technology, and her PhD from the University of Ljubljana. She has published extensively on the promotion of modern architecture, in particular on Finnish architecture and is currently focusing on the architectural production in Slovenia.

The 6 architectural offices involved are:

Bevk Perovic arhitekti (Matija Bevk, Vasa Perovic)
Dekleva Gregoric arhitekti (Aljosa Dekleva, Tina Gregoric)
Elastik (Mika Cimolini, Igor Kebel)
Maechtig Vrhunc Arhitekti (Tomaz Maechtig, Ursa Vrhunc)
Ofis arhitekti (Rok Oman, Spela Videcnik)
Sadar Vuga Arhitekti (Jurij Sadar, Bostjan Vuga)

[1] Hrausky Andrej and Sixpack architects (ed.), 2004: Sixpack: Contemporary Slovenian Architecture: 8, 9. Založba Vale Novak, Ljubljana.

[2] Ruby Ilka&Andreas, 2004: Why Ljubljana, of All Places? In: Sixpack: Contemporary Slovenian Architecture: 17.

[3] Ruby Ilka&Andreas, 2004: 17.

[4] In the exhibition Collage Europe, currently featured at the Netherlands Architecture Institute, which focuses on the architecture and urban planning of the former Eastern Block countries, these elements are listed in a handy dictionary of the basic terminology one needs to know in order to help understand the East European architectural reality. Collage Europe. The Architecture Newspaper, Netherlands Architecture Institute, no. 51: 13.

[5] Ruby Ilka&Andreas, 2004: 20.

[6] Leach Neil, 2004: Slovenian Wasps. In: Sixpack: Contemporary Slovenian Architecture: 37.[7] Ibid.

[8] For more on the international promotion of Finnish architecture and the construction of its image see: Čuferin Petra, 2003: Constructing a Legend: The International Exhibitions of Finnish Architecture 1957 – 1967 SKS Publishing, Helsinki.

[9] Van Toorn Roemer, 2004: International Architecture. In: Sixpack: Contemporary Slovenian Architecture: 34.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Betsky Aaron, 2004: Collage Europe – There and Then, Here and Now. In: Collage Europe. The Architecture Newspaper, Netherlands Architecture Institute, no. 51:

3.[12] http://www.nai.nl/e/calendar/activities/ce_exh_e.html

[13] Zabel Igor, 2000: Dialogue. In: Čufer, Eda and Misiano, Viktor (ed.): Interpol. The Art Exhibition Which Divided East and West: 125. Irwin, Ljubljana and Moscow Art Magazine.

[14] Betsky Aaron, 2004: 3.

[15] An exhibition that presented the vernacular architecture and an entire history of Slovenian building activity would certainly (no doubt) evoke little interest. As such, such an exhibit would best suit a museum rather than a biennial of contemporary architecture.