

THE X FACTOR

Interview with Dominika Batista
August 2010

Interviewed by Maja Ivanič, Tanja Barle

portrait photo/ photo Damjan Jermančič

We have known Dominika for half our lives. At the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana, where we studied together, she stood out with her vivid and ever-changing hair colour, her extravagantly unique but perfectly coordinated fashion combinations, and her jewellery - actually, the electrical wiring around her neck... Clever transformations... That's what Dominika's architecture is like - unique, exploratory, inventive, self-expressive and meticulous in detail. Complex. Architecture that lets you know that it is the thoughtful result of context, the client's wishes and the architect's creativity. Batista's houses, ambiences and elements - furnishings, clothes, jewellery, architectural décor... are daring living experiments that push boundaries and open mental horizons. And they surprise time and time again.



1

Architecture is a kind of mirror of its creator. Your modus vivendi is not quite ordinary - you don't read the newspapers, you don't follow daily political events, but you travel a lot to deserts, you dance and perform, you cook..., you watch one movie a day, you take care of animals, you grow spices and prune trees... All this can be read in your work...

Some time ago I consciously stopped reading newspapers and daily political events. I had this déjà-vu moment. Nothing new, nothing really big. It was as if the millennium flight had come to a standstill. I had a habit of flicking through the newspapers during breakfast. So quickly, from the back, just the topics that interested me. Ten minutes for the newspaper, and I would read the article I had chosen when it was time. Over the years, I have found that I have been flicking through for thirty minutes at breakfast. I go diagonally through mediocre and irrelevant things that have nothing to do with me. And because I know from my own experience how half-true the daily news is, I took a break. I don't know how long it will last. I am an abstract person who needs a detached view from the everyday, the mediocre, the trivial ... Nature with its patents and dance are endlessly inspiring.

2

Is a journey into the glorious emptiness of the desert a journey into oneself?

When I spent my first month in the Sahara, right after returning to Europe, was the first time, I found Europe ugly. We are systematically exploring the 9 400 000 square kilometres of the Sahara, seeing these natural wonders every year on new pistes. It takes a couple of months every year to prepare for the venture, to assemble the team, to equip the cars, to prepare the travellers. Travelling to the classic deserts, African or Arab, is a unique purification of the brain's wrinkles.

Algerian Sahara, January 2010, <http://www.tom-cruiser.net/> photo Dominika Batista



3

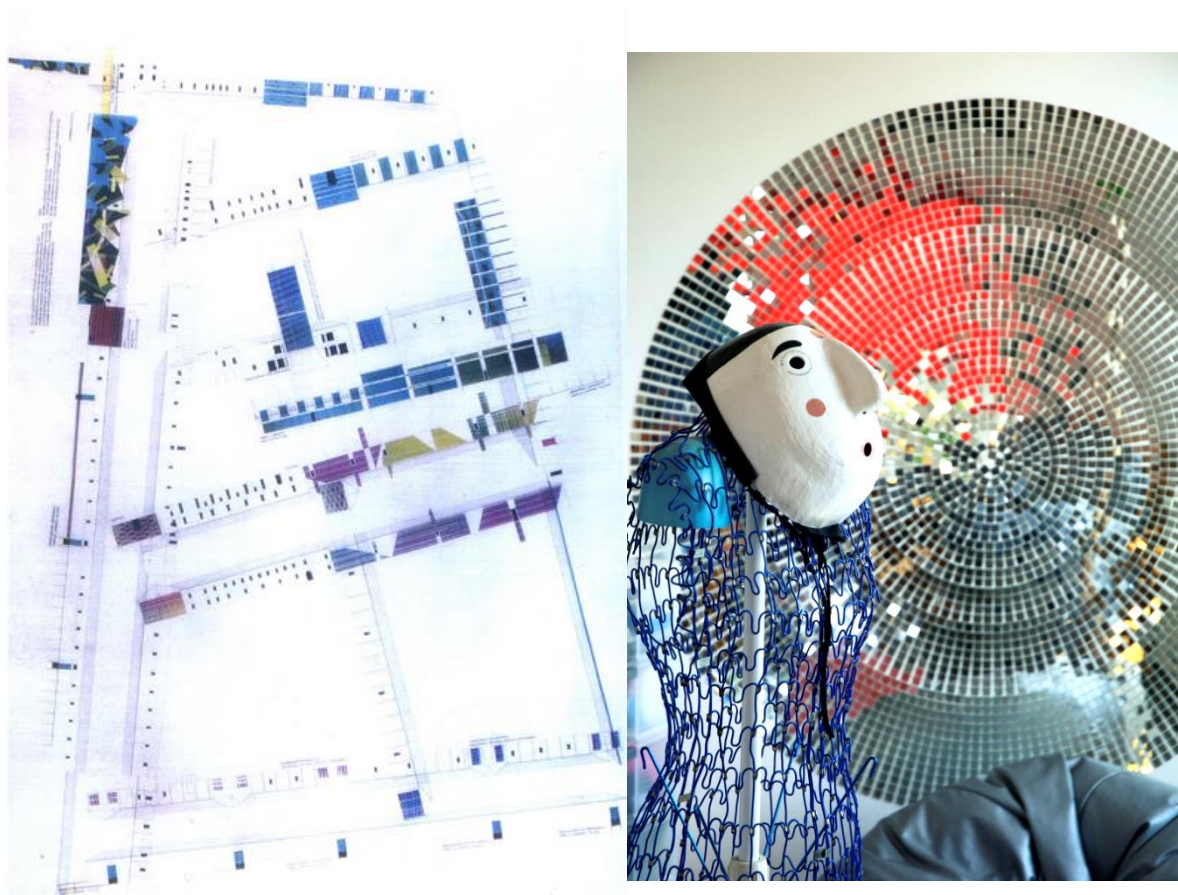
Compared to Arab and African culture, European culture and architecture seem barbaric. You are also fascinated by the tribal way of life. Why?

Especially in comparison with Indian. European culture and architecture have been colonialist exploitation fed for centuries in Africa and India. The great architectural gems of architecture, the way of life, the national grandiosity of India and Europe cannot be compared at all. This is probably also due to the climatic conditions, the amount of sunshine per day. Europe is dark, cynical. As far as the tribal way of life is concerned, I would say, as it is incredibly popular and well-understood today, to say that it is as 'eco' as possible. Even in an emotional sense. European marriage is a kind of cage.

4

After graduating, you gained architectural experience at the Atelier of Jurij Kobe. In your opening speech at one of his exhibitions, you said that when you asked Kobe how to draw something, he replied, "In a way that makes it beautiful". This sentence seems to have marked your work. Your design and graphic products, fashion creations and architecture always have a special beauty. What is beautiful to you - in architecture and otherwise?

One either has the 'beautiful' in oneself or one does not. If he does, I find it necessary to share it with the world around him. In fact, he does it automatically instinctively. I consider myself honoured and lucky to have been able to do this for a while together with Juri Kobe.



Competition for the conversion of the 'quarantine island' Lazzaretto Vecchio into a gallery centre, 1997

Project Flat20 - Duplex apartment F20_decoration, 2005/photo by Miran Kambič

5

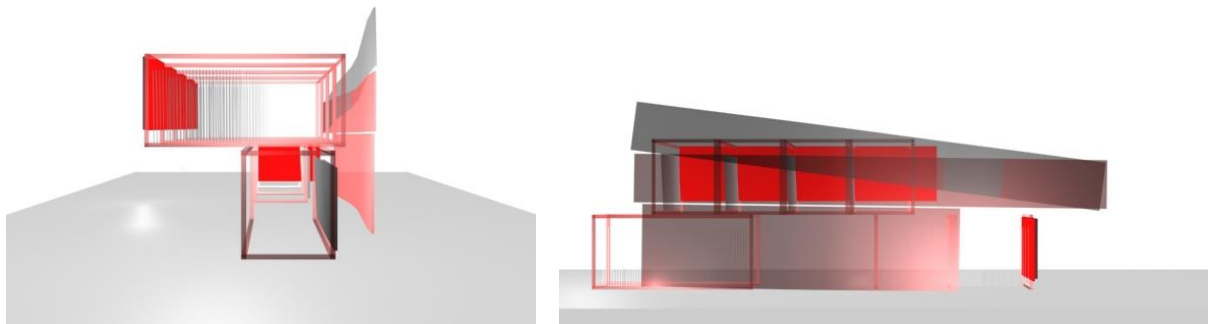
With your experience as a designer, you returned to the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana and started teaching as an assistant under Prof. Miloš Florijančič. What knowledge does a professor need to pass on to students?

First of all, the most important thing is that the professor is able to provide stimuli that awaken, shock and spark the student, so that he starts to search for knowledge on his own, so that he starts to research, and a professor guides him with his experience. If this is not the case, any transfer of knowledge seems to me to be a state of affairs, no progress.

6

*In 2001 you defended your PhD thesis *Alternative Approaches to Architectural Design and Planning* at the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana. At that time, the computer was not yet an architect's tool of choice, so the idea of 3D computer-aided design was quite revolutionary. Many of the jury members didn't even understand what you were talking about. Today, the virtual world is closer to us. How is architecture - and not just parametric architecture - responding to it?*

I remember that for the publication of my PhD I put little posters on the FA, such beautiful, transparent, coloured posters, but within a couple of days they were all "stolen", they didn't last until D-Day. Yes, in 2001, for my PhD thesis, I organised a trip to an architectural virtual world in 3D world. Each participant got 3D glasses, there was sound, there were films, there were avatars. The big hall was packed. Quite revolutionary for the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana. When I wanted to set up a kind of laboratory or course for 3D design after my PhD at the FA, I didn't find much enthusiasm, let alone support. At this year's Venice Biennale we saw two similar presentations: the Kazuyo Sejima and the Australian Pavilion. Nine years later ...



Infodomus, study of multifunctional space for work, living, recreation, year 2000

7

Is binary communication with computers even a suitable way of creative architectural thinking? Does the computer have its own creative moment or is it just a tool?

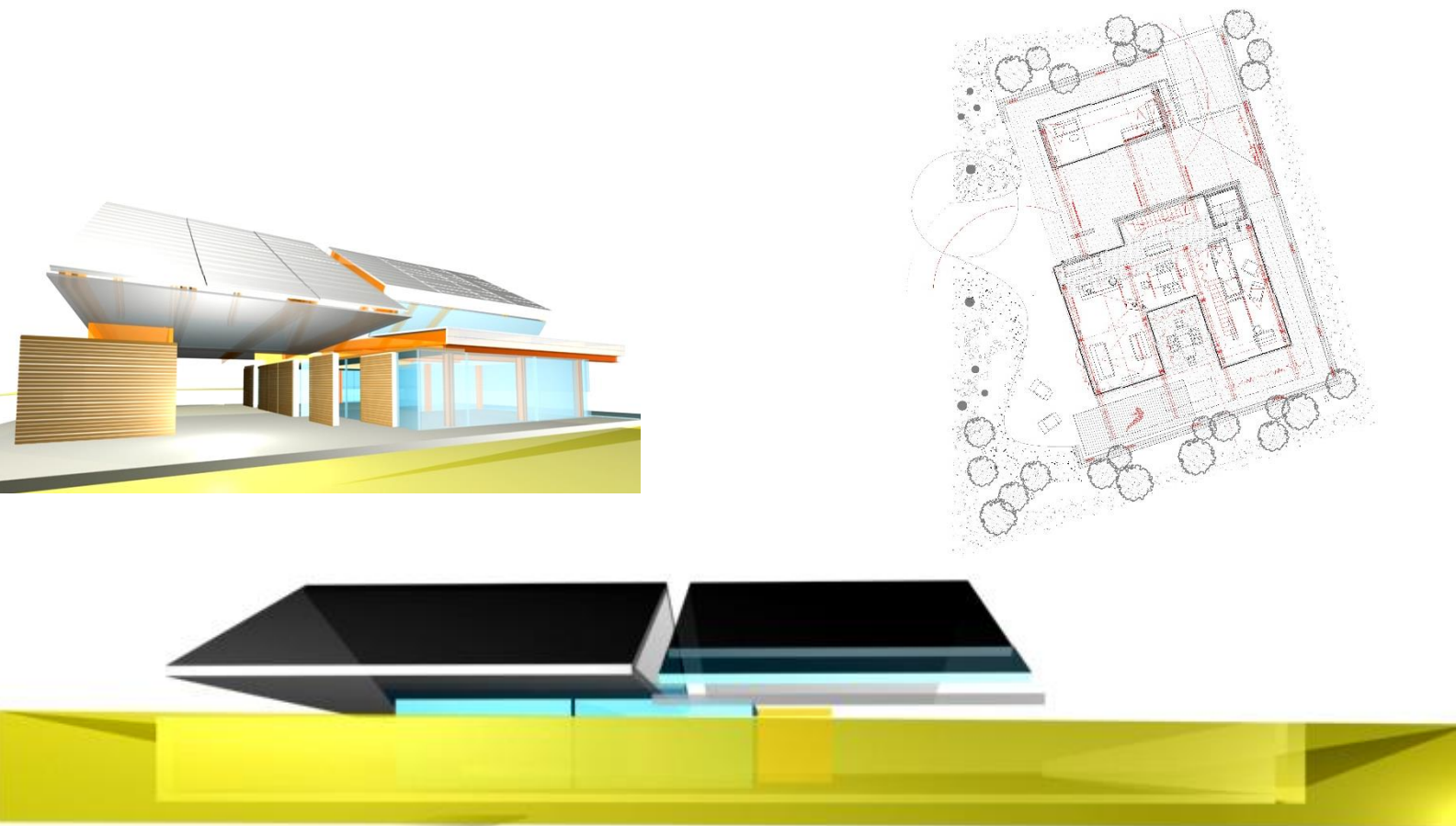
Just like pencil and paper of centuries past. You have to learn to sharpen it well, properly. To choose the right hardness of graffiti. To select the quality of the colour. Know how to handle stencils, curves and rulers. Choose the right pulp type and format. The computer is only the another type of all these tools for the next centuries. I suggest you master it as soon as possible! Someone can be creative with a piece of white paper, another can't be with even the

richest box of crayons. A creative moment? It's like with the 'beautiful', you either have it or you don't.

8

It seems, with the use of computers, architects to have lost two of the most important senses of spatial design - a sense of scale and a sense of the third dimension...

Yes, very interesting. The more luxurious the means of design and planning, the poorer architecture and space become. Is it a lack of control over the tools? Or is it perhaps the poverty and limitations of the rich Western world: the total exploitation of the square metre, the "perfect" climate economy? I think these are the two real trump cards for the total impoverishment of environment and space.



Project for the Triangel garden house, render and floor plan, Podutik, Ljubljana 2007

9

Modern architecture is box-like - "box architecture" is a well-established term - and two-dimensional. It is no longer sculptural. The façade band, which used to develop in depth, has now narrowed to about 30 cm of structural envelope... Architects no longer seem to be able to think spatially, but only superficially, like graphic designers. And this is also reflected in most contemporary architecture - which is really just a wrapping of the structure with graphically designed façade surfaces ...

Although he is not my role model, I have to agree with Frank Gehry: "Let me tell you one thing. In this world we are living in, 98 percent of everything that is built and designed today is pure shit. If that is shocking to hear, it is true. And the truth often hurts.

10

Paradoxically, despite the achievements of modern technology and new materials, contemporary architecture is boring, uninventive. The whole of Santiago di Compostela, for example, is built in the same material, stone, but it impresses with its variety, its ambience. Contemporary architecture, however, is no longer about ambience, but about design. With plastic, polyurethane foam, silicone ... we have banal architectural details ... Has the over-supply of technology on the market led to a decline in architectural skills?

It seems that too many resources, technologies and materials for design and planning are stifling creativity. It is well known that the most beautiful things are easily contained in one. By the same token, they can be so complex. The technological offer is a real pollution of the environment. As much damage as is done by the production of non-organic building elements will never be undone by so-called ecological approaches such as passive houses and similar delusions. The house must be active! The damage is already done at the start.

I propose to the European Community to abolish plastic windows by decree, and many other needless stuff, ... We would be the most ecological if we moved en masse to warm places. The banal has become original. Everything would be glued down, nothing would be screwed up anymore. We would no longer wear a jumper in the house in winter, we would rather have 40 cm of insulation. We would rather have forced ventilation than open a window. We would rather have a medieval smallest facade opening than a beautiful panoramic window with a view of nature. All in the name of ECOlogical ECONomics. Dreadful!

11

Today, few architectures impress the general public and their architectural peers. Usually the one in which we can discern the basic rules of Vitruvianism. Otherwise, contemporary architectural designs and concepts are only understood by the authors themselves - and even they don't always ...

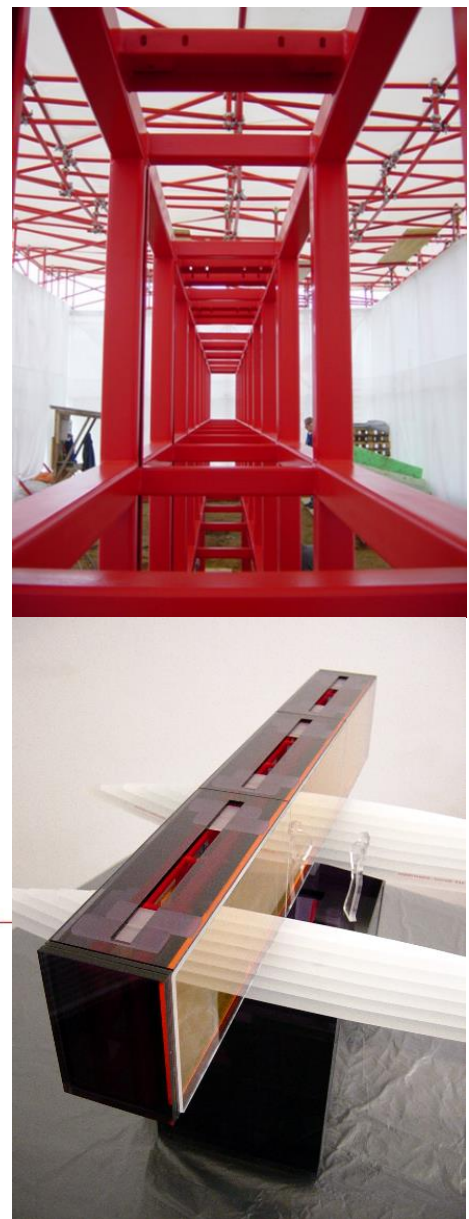
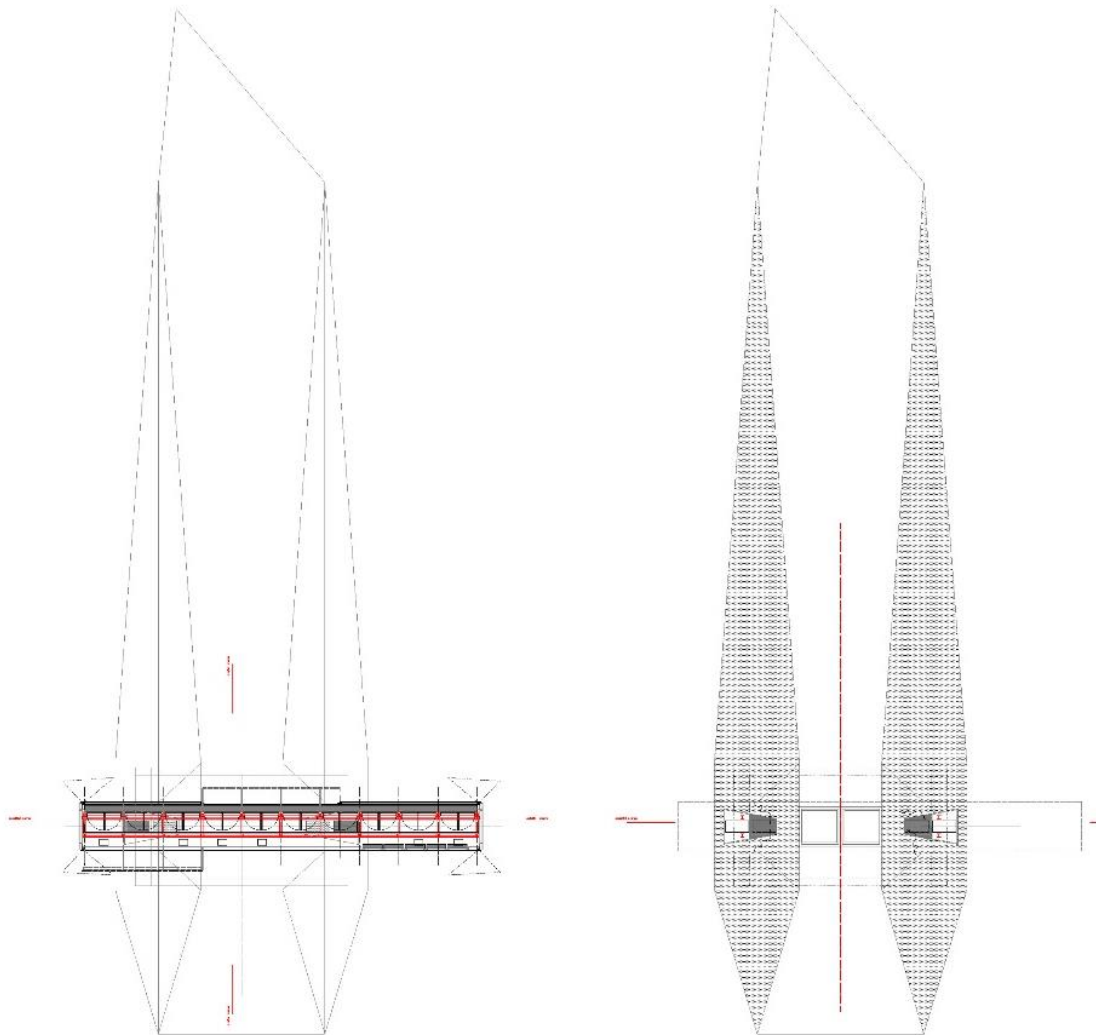
I'll speak for myself, as a professional. After many years, the world has just got real architecture. Unfortunately, it is not an environmentally friendly one, which, in a time of climate crisis, is only one that does not exist. A National Museum of Qatar - Ateliers Jean Nouvel, is grandiose architecture with a capital letter.

12

Walking through the national exhibition of the prize-winning Slovenian architectural competitions recently, we were disappointed to find that most of the winning solutions were very mediocre. That there is no desire for inventiveness, for boldness in Slovenian architecture, neither among architects, nor among clients... Space is solved in a very partial way, without long-term and complex visions. Architects blindly follow narrow competition starting points, the jury can be convinced by beautiful renderings ...

It is as if inventiveness is alien to the subalpine valley. Let's just look at how we have reached this state of affairs as a country. Instead of building on the specificity of two million people with their own language, we have, on 20,273 km², knelt down to the standard proposal of a

country otherwise suited to countries with a much higher critical population mass. This laid the foundations for the mediocrity of everything - national mentality, national projects, national consciousness, etc. We have adopted models that are not suitable for Slovenia, and this will paralyse us for a long time to come. All because there were no real ideas, no leaders with visions. We do not have boldly leaders. There is no originality in the concept of the state - just think of our national symbols! And all the way down the ladder. A Slovene does not open 'stuffed dumplings from Idrija' or a 'Slovenian (wal)nut roll' restaurant, but a spaghetti-eria or a pizzeria. And so in architecture. We have become the country of Spar and Hofer. Unfortunately, France Bučar, Taras Kermauner, Alma Karlin or Maria Theresa are too rare. Enlightened absolutism is what Slovenia needs!

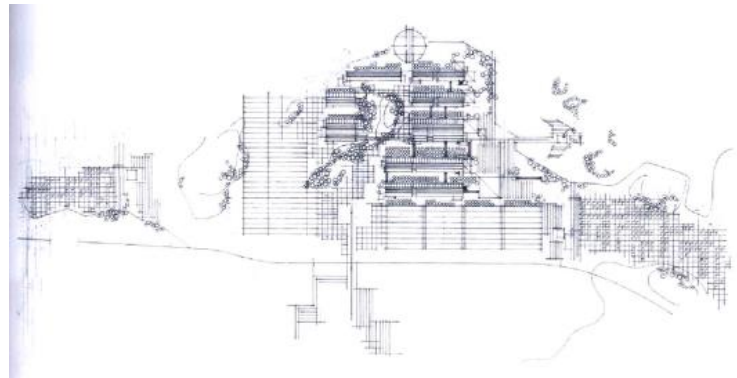


*Digital monument to Srečko Kosovel, model and construction site in Tivoli returned to zero point, 2004
/photo studio db ai*

13

Does architecture need its abstract moment? If we look at Ravnikar's competition presentations, for example, the drawings are very abstract. Only the basic concepts, the spatial ideas, are resolved. Ravnikar always left himself enough room for further reflection. Today, however, the competition solutions are already fully worked out. What is missing is that moment of abstraction - in the solution and in the drawing, which allows (the architect and the client) to "dream" further... Should renderings, which are actually misleading because the final solution is never like that, be banned in the competition phase?

Ravnikar's architectural drawing had the peculiarity that grids and auxiliary lines were drawn across the sheet in "infinity". This resulted in an abstract grid that inspired the artist with its graphic appearance and regularities. And this is how I was taught by Prof. Miloš Bonča and Prof. Miloš Florijančič. I am the generation that drew the whole diploma on tracing paper. And there you could see who had the head-hand control, or who had the manual dexterity. Who knows how to make a move with their hand. Who can think abstractly. The rendering technique is just one of the tools that can be used badly or well. Bad designer, bad renderer. Good planning is like a good film that offers the end of several options. Let's be afraid of renders that mimic the impoverished image of reality! That is the end of the dream!



Edvard Ravnikar, sketch for Espoo City Center, Finland

14

In architecture, you design mostly single-family houses. All of them are unique, tailored to the context and the client's living preferences. They are all a multi-ambient experience. You are always looking for new, modern living concepts to offer the owner. What is, or should be, modern living? How should this be reflected in the spatial design of the house? And how do clients react to your proposals, given that you often turn their perspective/expectations around 180°?

When I set up my micro-studio Studio db ai, most of the realisations were in the field of individual houses. Although we work on a wide variety of projects in the studio, from urban designs to monuments, from chandeliers to national symbols. If I'm interested in a topic, if I think it's important for the city, for the country, we do it. We approach each project in a unique way, each project has research done for it. No copy-paste. Always new concepts, tailor-made for the clients, tailor-made for the location - the micro-environments to which these built objects will belong... Modern living should be liberating, quirky, brightly connected to nature. Simple concepts, as little ballast as possible. Transitional spaces, as many intermediate, overlapping spaces between exterior and interior as possible, as many as possible ... Projects in our studio start with the clients telling us what they want, and I tell them how and in what way their wishes will be realised. If the clients follow this, trust and

persevere until the end of the "educational process" or after the construction is finished, they are pleasantly surprised.



Luxurious Atrium A, Ljubljana, 2005/ photo Miran Kambič

15

Marcel Breuer said that an apartment should not have a particular style, but rather an impression of the owner's character. The architect creates only half of the apartment, the owner the other half. Is that the case with your houses? Your houses seem to have a reciprocal relationship - the house adapts to the owner, but at the same time requires the owner to adapt to it.

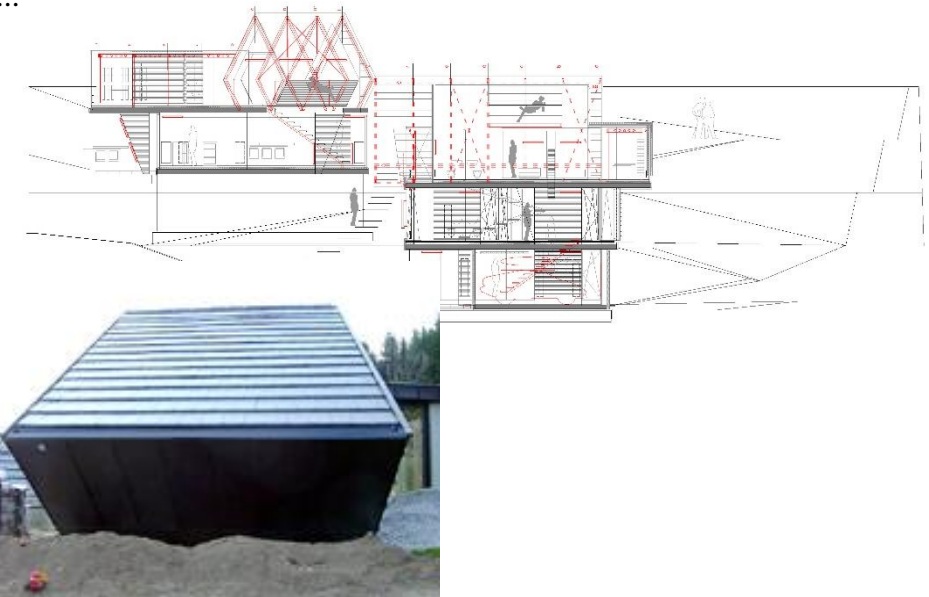
And how right he was! That's the only way to create unique and original ambiances, because man is Unikum (Each human being is for him a world in itself, a unicum) and if people are really prepared to explore architecture in this way, the results are fascinating. What I want the client to do first of all is to write down how he wants to live ideally, regardless of his already known location if he is going to build a house, or regardless of his apartment if it is going to be renovated. He must write down his philosophical inner attitude towards everyday things, how he wants to eat, how he wants to sleep, how he wants to work, how he wants to relax, without space and time constraints. This is an extremely difficult step for the client, but once he does it, we have the green light to work together. I then translate and design this content into architecture in a specific micro-space. Without that, there is no good project.

*Office architecture PP 9002, 2009/ photo studio db ai
Official office landscape Imad, large meeting hall, 2009/ photo Damjan Švarc*



You always name the architecture, the environments and the elements you design... the house of hanging trees, the sitting area, the electro-doll, the book tower... Why? Do the names give them a character and make them real in the client's mind?

Nomen est ..., well, not to use Latin! Naming things is as important as naming people. By naming we distinguish, distinguish one from the other. A motto, a slogan, whatever you want to call it, is indispensable to make sense of things in the right way. It gives them a distinctive character and ... Because I'm always remembering or inventing something new through my projects, it's necessary to name it, and so I come up with a new term for this new thing. I have a vivid imagination. If I think of some of the names from recent projects ... multi-pillar bookcase, school of two butterflies, majlis sofa, working pinwheel landscape, hidden entrance, indoor forest, soft wall, formal office landscape, sleeping island, creative rug, large spatial window, electro-jewellery ...



Amphibian house on five levels, Senično, Slovenia 2006 / photo studio db ai



17

In Contemporary mansion D1 transpolis in the 'Dog Valley', you used the house's plumbing as the visible interior decor of the space. Does architecture have its own jewellery?

When I walked onto this, my first independent building site, I was immensely amazed at how many beautiful building and installation elements are hidden forever under concrete, screeds, etc. The thing that sticks in my mind the most was the underfloor heating panels that completely repainted the house in orange for a couple of weeks, and how beautiful the pattern of the plastic pipes in those system panels was. I immediately decided that part of it would stay in the floor display window. And so we did. Later on, the electrical installers came out and again we left the orange bundle of electrical pipes under the glass as wall decor. Then on to the more sophisticated details - the visible wiring to the light fittings, to which we added flatness and shine with aluminium tubing, and so the electro-jewellery was born.



*Electrodoll, Chandelier light, 2006/ photo Bogdan Zupan
Youth suite design MA 19 _ electro-jewellery, Brdo, Ljubljana, 2002/ photo Miran Kambič*

18

Greenery is an important part of your architecture and ambience ...

I was brought up with that. We had one of the most beautiful gardens at home. With all kinds of things - trees, even exotic ones, shrubs, climbers, flowers ... Native nature is also very close to my heart. As a child, I used to spend whole afternoons on weekend house in the woods ... What is a house without a tree? Nothing. In more sophisticated times, there was no castle without a park, no mansion without gardens. Today, we plant a cypress tree in a concrete pot, right where we could plant a tree. And that is how it is done in the city, and that is how house owners do it. Ljubljana would solve all its traffic congestion if it went for the PPD concept (©park under a tree). If they planted tree-lined avenues in the places of all the iron teeth, i.e. the confines, and left parking spaces in between. There is more than enough road space. Such useful road narrowings would also help to limit speed. Greenery is essential for the well-being of a city, just look at Barcelona. Ljubljana should not be a city of teeth, Ljubljana should become a city of tree-lined streets. Flower plantations at major traffic junctions are also sad. So distasteful and humiliating for flower species that really have no place there. Totally inappropriate and, to top it all, uneconomic! And how Slovenian cities could drastically improve the ambience of residential areas if we got rid of wooden, metal, concrete, plastic fences and replaced them with hedgerows, shrubs and trees. A tree and a bush! A tree and a bush!



Water pebbles garden A, Ljubljana, 2011/ photo studio db ai

Roof terrace with wall sculpture, Ljubljana, 2002/ photo Miran Kambič

19

Most of your architectural works are renovations, alterations of what already exists. Is this a coincidence or a reflection of your thesis that there is too much built in Slovenia and especially not enough of good quality. In the future, should architects focus more on renovating the poor existing building stock, rather than mercilessly eating into the most beautiful thing we have - nature? You have developed (published) the rules of the 9 points of quality renovation - 9 steps to victory! On national platform Arhišektura.si, and we have worked together on the PICO.NATURA.REGION project ...

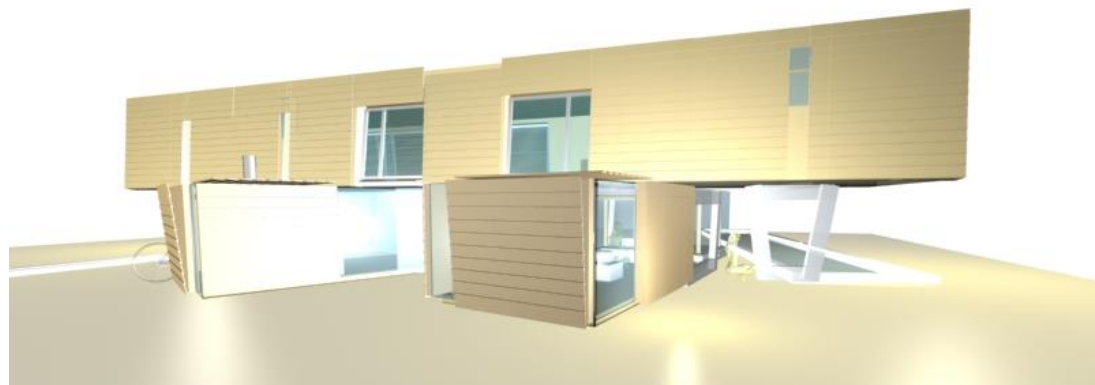
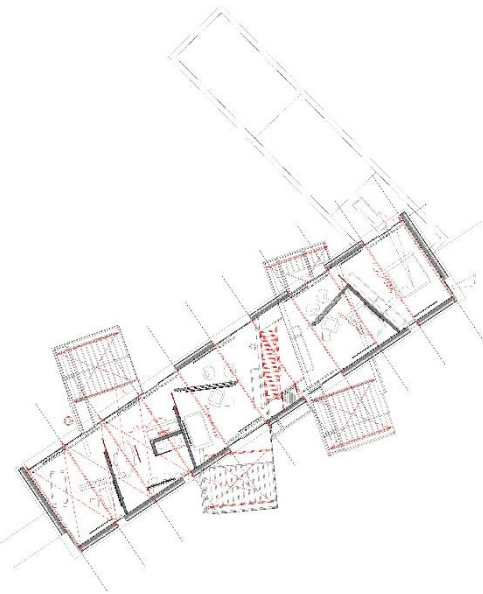
First it was a coincidence. Then suddenly I realise that looking for beautiful locations to build some great architecture is completely misguided. That it is more important to protect beautiful locations, natural landscapes, and to build, create on problematic, "ugly", already built-up locations, and to make them of high quality, beautiful. To turn ugly into beautiful! This is the thesis of the PICO.NATURA.REGION project at the level of a single-family house... It is a nationwide project: a regionally considered renovation of the existing stock of 431,884 individual houses, to fix the bad, to curb new encroachments on the natural landscape. With this project, we have and still want to make the public aware that space, regardless of ownership, does not belong to the individual, and therefore cannot be arbitrarily encroached upon.

20

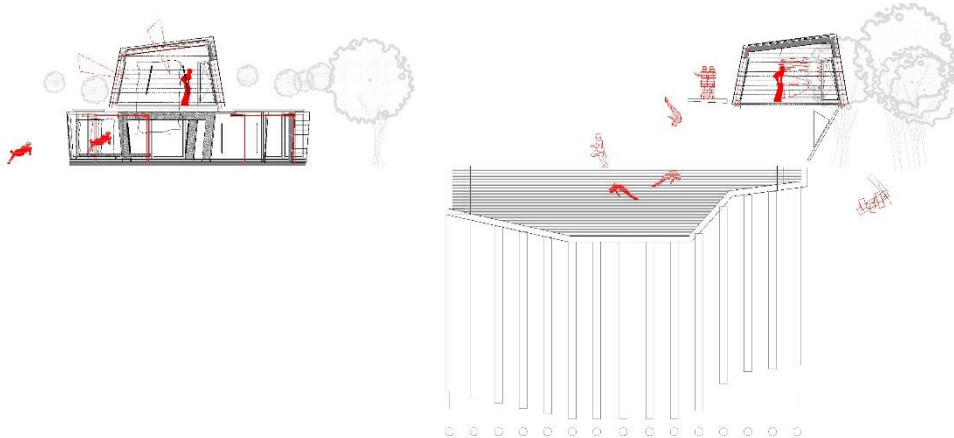
Slovenia should concentrate on renovation and, given the small and limited size of the natural landscape, new construction should be virtually banned. Paradoxically, we are renovating things that should only be renew, and almost everything that is more than 100 years old is protected, regardless of its architectural, spatial, artistic or living quality...

I have written in articles many times that New York. gave up the most beautiful Waldorf-Astoria in the world almost 80 years ago. in order to build the Empire State Building.

Ljubljana cannot sacrifice long-standing "ghetto" suburbs for modern projects in key urban locations? I will tell you about the catastrophic encroachment on one of the most beautiful parts of the Ljubljana basin, where I also worked on a project. This is the Black Village in the Ljubljana Marshes, where the so-called Tomaž's House is protected by monument protection. It is a ground-floor wooden ruin that is almost unnoticeable anymore, because nature has almost outgrown it. When we drew up the plan for the single-family house near Plečnik's church in the marshes in 2004, we were supposed to take into account the design features of Tomaž's house. We preferred to look to Plečnik for inspiration, and the big problem was that our design concept of house did not meet the design guidelines of the monument protection.



House of two lamellas H2L_business and residential unit, Ljubljana marsh, project for tende; ground floor plan and render, 2004



21

*Is Ljubljana a capital in architectural terms (greenery, traffic, litter, visors, size, scale...)?
Answer.*

It is important to realise that Ljubljana has been spatially stagnant for almost a quarter of a century. It was so sick and tattered before the last mayoralty that I decided to write an article in 2006, *The Capital is Collapsing*. An initiative to the government, ministers, the President of the country ... Our bureau did our own research on the ground, we took pictures of the actual situation, we made photographic evidence 2005/2006. The findings were of course appalling,

as you could read and see in the newspaper Delo in 2007. And of course we set out our vision. When the last mayor, who is still in office today, was elected, we sent him the article. We did not receive a reply. Let me just list some of our visions for the future capital: a new urban icon is needed, a new La Défense in a uniquely Ljubljana way, the urban fabric must be densified and not expanded beyond the ring road, the concept of Ljubljana's centre must be redefined in the minds of institutions and individuals, the old quality spatial icons of the whole city must be revived immediately, the temporary uses of the abandoned properties of the centre must be established immediately, the edges of the two famous green wedges should be re-categorised as Ljubljana's "Beverly Hills", Zaloška should be the most beautiful city bypass street, the traffic-urban environment should be addressed both by regulation and by alternative micro-solutions (PPD, park under the tree), the immediate recruitment of knowledge, will, resources, etc. is needed. And now, three years later, the signs of cosmetic surgery in the city are visible and commendable, but Ljubljana needs serious heart surgery - that is, deepening the railway tracks - otherwise the patient may die urbanistically. And the state must be a partner in this great capital project.



Dominika Batista in her fashion combination/ photo Damjan Jermančič

Dominika Batista, clothing sketch, 1995

22

"Collezioni" and "Book" - a collection of fashion creations is indispensable in your architectural book collection. How are fashion and architecture connected? And dance and architecture? Do you find details in fashion and dance that you can transfer and use in architecture?

Collezioni and Book are catalogues of all the important annual alta moda - haute couture and prêt-à-porter shows. It is an insight into the creativity of all the world's best fashion creators. Yes, I often buy. And then I leaf through, daily. As with nature, I have grown up knowing what fashion is, what a good 'stuff' is. That's how it was in our home. Good textiles were

bought abroad. My grandmother knew how to design clothes and sew. In the days of socialism, I was labelled a strange child for this reason. I never wore jeans. I just didn't have them. Fashion and architecture are cousins. Dance and architecture, cousin and cousin. In some places the real thing, in others the second cousin. As far as I'm concerned, every day is a day for fashion excess. As Virginia Woolf says in Orlando: "Dresses change the way we look at the world and the way the world looks at us", and yet "A dress is a symbol of something hidden underneath".

23

Your style of dress is extravagant, original, witty and unusual. You design and make your own clothes. A few years ago, you also successfully participated in the Smirnoff fashion competition... Your architectural design is based on basic, almost Vitruvian principles. What are the parallels?

As an architect, I would argue that the dress is the first space one enters.

24

Your style of dress is extravagant, original, witty and unusual. You design and make your own clothes. A few years ago, you also successfully participated in the Smirnoff fashion competition... Your architectural design is based on basic, almost Vitruvian principles. What are the parallels?

As an architect, I would argue that the dress is the first space one enters.

25

The last Venice Architecture Biennale, entitled "Beyond architecture", left you rather cold, with the exceptions of the contemporaries, the Japanese Yunya Ishigami, and the late Danish architect Yørn Utzon, among the elders. The prevailing exhibitionism of the contributions/projects of the architectural stars actually made you very "tired". Why?

Architectural production is too fast and too massive, too productive to be a qualitative surplus.

26

Are you more optimistic this year, given that the main curator of the Biennale is a woman?

No. But I am in favour of 'women power'!

27

In 2010, two contemporary art museums of completely different concepts, MAXXI (Zaha Hadid) and MACRO (Odile Decq), opened in Rome this year. Do women in the field of architecture seem to be doing better than in the past, when architecture was primarily a male domain? Do you think that women are creating a "different" architecture?

I can't say anything, I haven't seen it in person (yet). They are certainly creating more and bigger projects than in the past. But it is hard to say who is doing the good, groundbreaking projects. The male half in women architects, or the female half in men architects. Who would

know. But female creatives or male creatives in the field of architecture - either they have that X factor that gives excess, or they don't have that X factor. Time will tell. For me, Jean Nouvel has that X factor. Before him, there was long time nothing, and after him, there is longtime nothing.



House 4002, house of two hanging trees, reconstruction of an existing house Prelog 2007/ photo Miran Kambič

28

In his latest book Content, Rem Koolhaas, winner of the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at this year's Venice International Architecture Exhibition, says that architecture is primarily a matter of politics, economics, fashion, even posturing, that success in architecture today depends more on strategies of public speaking than on the solutions offered. In short, what is happening is that architecture is more dependent on those who can sell what little cleverness

they have, than on those who have enough, but think it is too little to sell. Do you agree with him this time?

I agree. He is in the group of the former, and I am in the group of the latter.

29

Dominika, what are you dreaming about?

The kind of freedom that allows me to keep dreaming!

Oris magazine 70, magazine for architecture and culture, Jul 2011

Contemporary mansion D1 - transpolis, 2001 / photo Miran Kambič





*Published
Oris magazine 70, magazine for architecture and culture, Jul 2011*