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Chapter 12: Slovenia

The (Lost) Gifts of Independence and Market Economy in Slovenia

Peter Bassin*

TEMPORA MUTANTUR ET NOS MUTAMUR IN ILIS.

With the start of the fourth dimension, the once perpetual former Austro imperial, Italian and Yugoslav army barracks are slowly disappearing from the mental picture of Slovene cities. The barracks, together with hospitals, breweries, tobacco factories, train stations, gas and electrical power plants formed the almost impassable urban quarters, the so-called “gray zones” of oblivion. The anti-urban characteristic of these huge architectural ensembles radiated negative vibrations throughout their nearby proximity where, even today, we sense these negative influence.

I. A SHORT OVERVIEW OF URBAN RENEWAL IN THE LAST THIRTY YEARS

After the renewal of historical urban centers with mostly poor housing program in the seventies, renewal in the eighties focused on the historical industrial locations. Some of the fastest growing industries and infrastructure services moved from almost central locations to new industrial zones located on the outskirts of the cities. This renewal drastically changed the derelict industrial urban structure in terms of building structures and programs. Very often the process wiped out the industrial urban structure, leaving a free building site for the next generation of urban grain.

In the nineties the independence of Slovenia provided the potential for urban renewal of the once perpetual military barracks.

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Open public programmatic and urban design competitions were chosen as a method of obtaining the vision for these potential new programs and architectural forms that the huge space of the former barracks now offered.

II. THE LONG TERM SPATIAL PLANS AND URBAN DESIGN COMPETITIONS AS A METHOD OF CHANGING THE PLANS

As a general statement, one can draw the following conclusion: In most of the recent reevaluations of long term spatial plans throughout Slovenia, the urban zones still occupied by military barracks already were destined to more attractive urban uses, e.g., central areas, institutional and educational zones, and, only rarely, new housing developments. At the same time, however, the total lack of any real time horizon regarding when the change would actually take place left the long term spatial plans in the zoning phases only. Thus, the participants in the competitions, mostly architects, were left to their own programmatic visions without any profound guidance as to how and for what best urban purpose these derelict zones of military barracks should be redeveloped.

The new owners, or future investors, who bought or obtained the derelict zones of military barracks organized the public programmatic and urban design competition for each zone. In most cases the chamber of architects and the local community services helped them. The fact remains, however, that detailed programmatic input from the planning documents was missing with all of the competitions for the reconstruction of former military and industrial zones.

III. STARTING POINTS FOR URBAN RENEWAL (ABSTRACTS FROM COMPETITION PROPOSALS)

A. Ajdovscina Barracks

The renewal of Ajdovscina Barracks is not a classical example of renewal, wherein the reconstructed building shells a program similar to the one it replaced. This case requires a totally new program because the old, military program conjures unpleasant memories connected with periods of colonization: the Italians until 1943 and the Yugoslavs since 1945.

B. Artillary Barracks

Ljubljana enjoyed only a few very flourishing periods of urbanization. The first period began after the earthquake and the beginning of World War I, the so-called Secession Period. This period was famous for the erection of some of the most important public buildings within the still unbuilt central urban areas. The second period occurred in the thirties, when famous Slovene architects, such as Plecnik, Fabiani, Subic, and Vurnik, created a series of public and apartment buildings.

In comparison, the fifty years after World War II were marked by a series of uncompleted torso ensembles in the Ljubljana central area. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that the former Artillery Barracks zone be redefined with a program that will enable successful creation and completion of an unforgettable urban entity.

C. Metlkova Barracks

Unfortunately, this former military zone was situated in an area with a concentration of several superimposed anti-urban activities, such as a railway station, gas and electrical power plants, and a paper mill. So situated, the military zone caused the city to grow beginning around twelve kilometers from the center, while at the same time the city remained completely stagnate, only one-half a kilometer from the center.

D. Roska Barracks and Lower Poljane

Along with Roska Barracks a few raw-industrial plants occupy the Lower Poljane district, including the fruit and vegetables gross storage area, the city slaughterhouse, and meat reproduction plant. The future reconstruction and renewal process will transform the barracks into a new part of already existing, adjacent educational zone and raw-industrial plants and will leave space for new housing developments, which will bring a permanent lasting life.

E. Agrostroj Plant and Koseze Pond

This competition resembles the basic principles of the renewal competitions connected with the derelict Army Barracks. Yet it is unique because of its uncommon location between the banks of Koseze Pond and the city of Parkforest. IN the long run, the city of Ljubljana will definitely suffer a permanent loss due to the lack of funds available to create a perfect zone for sport and recreation. However, there also remains a question of whether one competition can solve three planning horizons: a large scale landscape solution, urban design of a new neighborhood, and architectural design of single housing.

IV. AN ANALYSIS OF THE WINNING COMPETITION PROPOSALS

The competitors' approaches for urban renewal differed significantly. In some cases (i.e., Artillery Barracks and Poljane Barracks), the existing buildings only represent an unpleasant obstacle requiring removal in order to create an entirely new housing or office development. Urban renewal more accurately takes place, however, when it involves finding new expositional areas for historical or artistic content. Through renewal, existing buildings become the new Ethnographic or National Museums or part of the Modern Gallery, like the southern part of Metelkova Barracks.

In the northern part the removal of existing buildings will take place gradually. During the first phase, while the alternative city culture scene moves in, the existing buildings will get new content without any significant renewal actions.

Similarly, students of the Middle School of Economy take their lessons in the former Austrian Army dormitories of Roska Barracks. At the same time, the adjacent fruit and vegetable storage halls and meat reproduction plants leave space entirely for new housing and commercial development.

A. Poljane Barracks

The Poljane Barracks area was destined for a new housing neighborhood as a result of a competition that took place eleven years

ago. Here, only a minimal amount of commercial programs will be built in some of the buildings along Grabloviceva street.

B. Ajdovscina Barracks

Only the location of a new church in Ajdovscina remains from the entire range of ideas for Ajdovscina Barracks. Recently, an architectural competition for the church was organized, but nothing more has happened.

C. Topniska Barracks

The Topniska Barracks area is split into two halves. The eastern half has already been renewed with new housing buildings. However, the western half, along the main Vienna street, has only partially been renewed with an office building, while the rest has remained an unfinished building site for several years.

D. Metlkova Barracks

In the southern part of the Metlkova Barracks area, all the existing buildings were supposed to be renewed. However, after several years only one building has been actually renewed; it was converted into an Ethnographic museum. The rest have been left to slowly decay. The northern part, in contrast, is totally inhabited with an alternative city cultural scene. Some of the buildings are well kept, while others are partially demolished due to the first official response to the alternative cultural scene.

E. Roska Barracks

Some buildings in the Roska Barracks area have been converted into the Middle School of Economy, while the rest still wait for a renewal because of lack of budget money.

F. Lower Poljane

Due to the change of the management of Mercator, the commercial company that owns the industrial and storage buildings

in Lower Poljane, nothing has happened since the conclusion of the competition in 1996. A plan to replace production and storage areas with new housing and commercial office space was partially prepared, but since then nothing has happened.

G. AGROSTOROJ PLANT AND KOSEZE POND

After the bankruptcy of the Agrostroj Plant, the former creditors and now owners of the lovely site, located adjacent to the Koseze Pond and the Park Forest Mostec, persuaded the Ljubljana city authorities to change the urban zoning plan for this area from industrial to residential. This change was a mistake, however, because this area was always considered a perfect sport and recreation zone. Now a housing scheme, chosen as the best in the urban design competition, is under construction. It is amazing how little the unique local specifics are represented in the plan. The urban planners dream of a recreational center is buried for the next fifty years.

V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE COMING MILLENIUM

With the changing urban image of the city, it is necessary to look at the results of the competitions and their consequences for the future of the city of Ljubljana and others. The changing situations and the transition of relatively stable urban images is a worldwide phenomenon with large publicity, even in the United States. Looking from the European perspective, there are relatively few preserved historical sites in the United States. Nevertheless, in 1997 there were two Harvard design magazines dedicated to Changing Cities and Durability and Ephemerality.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the problems of the renewal of army barracks and derelict industrial zones has become very acute and publicized in Europe as well. The fact that in the United States today the most decayed areas are the shopping malls from seventies is showing the trend of ever faster regenerative cycles of urban matrices. This trend was furthered by the architectonic expressions themselves. The so-called high tech buildings are aging faster and are harder to maintain in light of rising dwelling and ecological standards.

The Slovene renewal scene is unique in the European and worldwide trends. In 1991, the first year of the independent Slovenia, Ljubljana city authorities stopped the preparation of almost all plans for new housing areas due to either the denationalization process or some other problem. In a couple of years this fact alone created such a housing deficit in the real estate market that, even in a normal situation, it could take ten or more years to balance.

The departure of the Yugoslav Army and the changing economic situation unexpectedly offered the zones once occupied by barracks and industrial plants near the central cores of different cities a unique opportunity to start solving the blocked continuity of regular housing construction. The lack of time caused problems for the process of defining a detailed program for each derelict zone. This part was replaced with a single level, combined public urban and architectural competitions.

In the end, it would be possible to organize two level public competitions, where juries composed of only futurologists and urban planners and designers would chose the detailed program. City planners would work over the results, or program proposals, of the first-step competitions. Thus, prepared, detailed programs for each derelict zone would be offered to the urban and architectural designers-competitors of the second-step competitions. On the basis of the known program these competitors would look for urban form. Architects and urban designers would, as usual, compose the juries on these second-step competitions. The practice of one-step, combined programmatic and urban—architectural design competitions did not account for the importance and complexity of the programmatic problem. Instead, it mainly dealt with the momentaneous suitability of urban- architectural form.

In conclusion, series of eminent city core locations were too easily sold to trendy developers. These developers used the unaware competitions' juries to achieve the goal of building, almost everywhere, housing, which at that time was the most desired and missing good. With the introduction of urban design competitions replacing regular planing procedures, the urban and planning profession was not able to replace the newly disposed zones with the most suitable urban program. The almost unplanned rebuilding of derelict army barracks and industrial production plants allowed some

“transitional experts” to fill an actual commercial niche, housing; thus, postponing the more strategical urban programs for the next several decades.