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**The different scales of relationality.
Edvard Ravnikar and the Revolution Square in Ljubljana**

Abstract

Revolution Square (today known as Republic Square) is a large-scale multifunctional complex of high symbolic and urban value, located by the historical center of Ljubljana. As a result of a long design process (1960-74), the complex designed by Edvard Ravnikar and his collaborators can be considered as one of the most extraordinary and at the same time peculiar examples of socialist “capitols”. Its uniqueness derives from its capacity to interlace through its various volumes a multiplicity of spatial and linguistic relationships with, on the one hand, the different scales of the city and, on the other, with its historical stratifications. The balance between the parts and between the elements of the project is managed over time, using precise tools of spatial composition that, far from rigid monumentalism, can project the work into a living, changing reality. The essay aims to bring to light the main strategies and techniques of relationality that characterize Ravnikar’s work.

Keywords

Relationality — Space — Edvard Ravnikar

Introduction

Edvard Ravnikar’s Ljubljana Revolution Square¹ has been read so far, predominantly, and consistently, through the lens of the relationship between politics and architecture in the years of Yugoslav socialism². However, the realized project, as we know it today, is the result of a long process characterized by several volumetric and functional reconfigurations. Although originally born from an idea to build, on this site, a temple of socialism, over time the project is enriched with a whole series of activities, architectures and spaces, transforming it from a memorial of the Revolution to a complex urban, economic, social, and obviously political-administrative centrality. In this sense, one might speculate how Revolution Square represents, rather than a particular example of a socialist capitol, a project that speaks to the uniqueness of the Yugoslav experience. An experience that, to be described and understood, requires a reformulation of the canonical definitions of the relationships between politics and architectural culture, between aspiration to modernity, architectural history, and the stratification of the city.

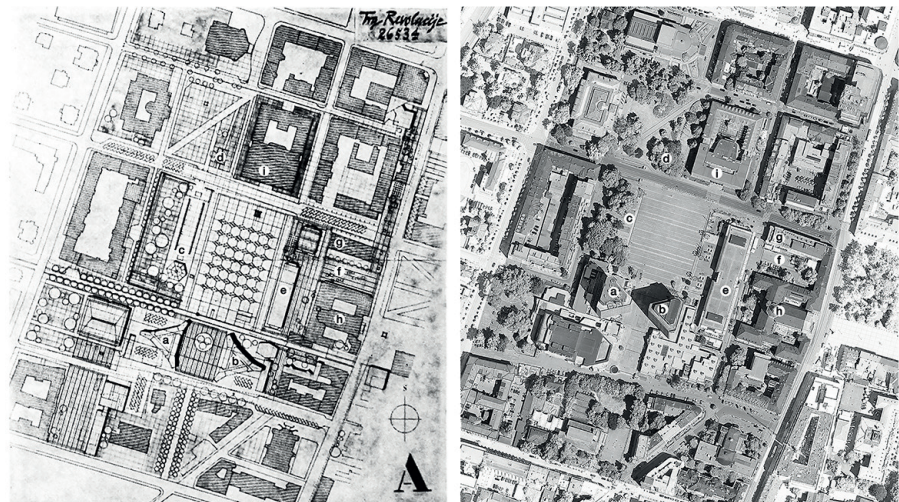
The project as a process

The 1959 competition asked invited professionals to redesign the garden area of the Ursuline Nunnery. The new square would have been overlooked by the People’s Assembly Building, and nearby were the most important public buildings dating back to the 19th century, such as the Opera House and the National Museum. The rich and grand monument to the Revolution was to be the symbolic focus of the entire composition.

Edvard Ravnikar’s winning proposal initially envisioned an empty space,

Fig. 1

Comparison between the plan of the intervention published after the competition (from *Arhitekt 4*, 1960) and the area as it appears today. a. Tr3 tower; b. Tr2 tower; c. Monument to the Revolution; d. Monument to the Heroes of Ljubljana; e. Emona building / then Maximarket; f. Plečnik square; g. Plečnik gymnasium; h. Church of the Ursuline nuns; i. People's Assembly / Parliament building.



as wide as the entire block and without elevation jumps, characterized by the presence of two twenty-story triangular prismatic towers – which would house the institutions – on the southern front, and the Revolution Monument on the western side. Here dense vegetation concluded the space and formed a green belt in continuity with Heroes Park, counterpointing the green foliage of Rožnik and Ljubljana Castle, visible on the opposite side. The building on the northwest side of Congress Square was to be demolished and, through selective demolition of a portion of the convent, a system of smaller squares toward the historic city was created to the east, an ideal continuation of Zvezda Park. In terms of size, this area corresponded to the Baroque block, which, however, is not directly included in the central space of the new Revolution Square: a low-rise building³ and a separate small head block interposed between the new intervention and the preserved portions of the preexisting building, rebating their lengths. The entire complex was excluded from vehicular traffic, and parking spaces were laid out flush along the closed access roads.

This first project, which already had all the elements of the final one (square, towers, monument, completion of the Baroque block), was in an important hinge position between the ancient and the modern city and was part of a programmatic operation aimed at giving Ljubljana the character of a national capital. To meet this goal, special emphasis was placed on the character of the space in the north-south direction, and the size of the surrounding blocks established the zoning of the new intervention. Along one and the same axis were the towers, the emptiness of the square, and the Palace of Assembly. The monument was placed near the towers, in such a position that it could not be spared from «formal and dimensional competition» (Ravnikar 1962a) with the architecture of the square.

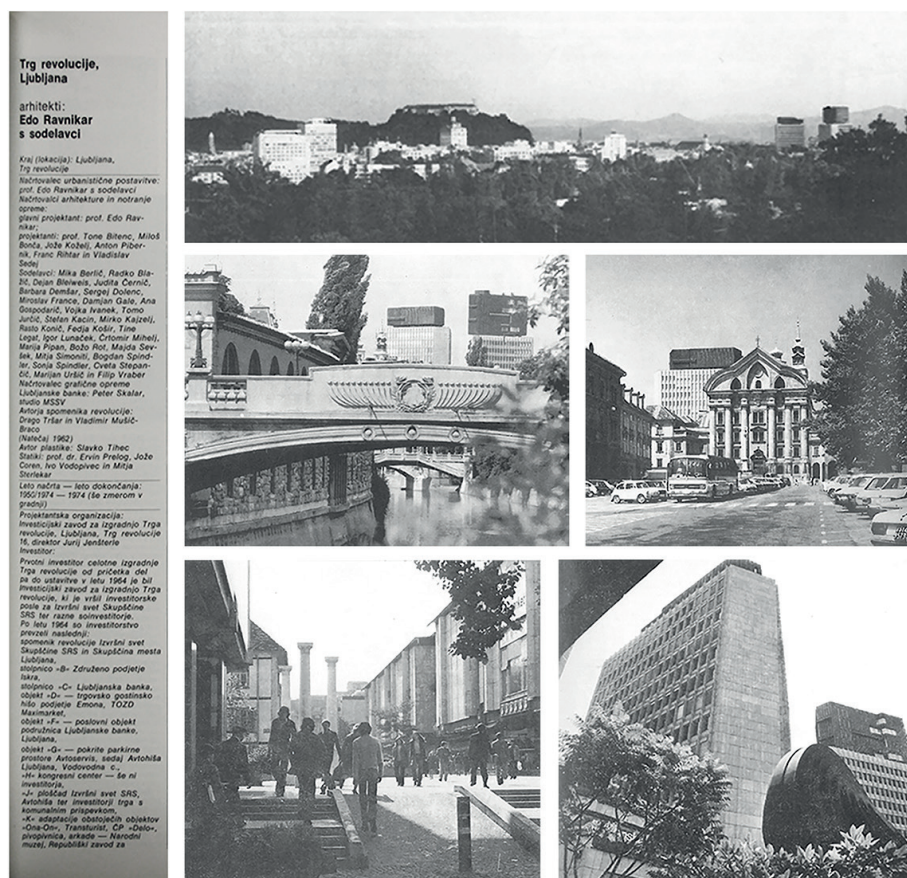
The connection of the complex with neighboring urban areas, to be achieved through the creation of a series of new spaces, did not appear to have been fully elaborated at this stage, and the commission itself had commented upon the winning design by suggesting that the solution presented should be considered «mainly as a basic urban program idea, rather than as a precise planning proposal»⁴ (M. Š. 1960).

Revolution Square in its final layout keeps the same basic elements, what changes (besides the functions dictated by contingencies) is their spatial configuration⁵.

The square is enlarged, axialities are lost, and the new intervention moves

Fig. 2

Some fragments of the 1974 article published in the “Sinteza” magazine. The article was accompanied by photographs describing the plastic relationship of the new figures in the natural environment, the relationship with the historic city, the spatial configurations. Digital collage by the authors.



out of the geometric division dictated by the surrounding blocks. It becomes a completely pedestrian place, and cars are placed in a basement level of parking. It shifts from an empty and strictly aseptic plaza to a space that can be walked through on multiple levels, whose primary value is given by perspective movement, distance, proximity, closeness, and separation between objects.

The prismatic volumes of the two towers are rotated and scaled in height, and although both towers have 12 stories, the silhouettes are unequal due to the irregular and various roof treatments. This variation on the theme avoids the potential cold monumentalism of symmetry, allowing the mass of the new intervention to be brought closer to the larger urban landscape. How central this theme was to Ravnikar is shown in his first presentation of the project in a trade magazine, where he includes the image of the two buildings in views of the Baroque city, from the bridge by Jurij Zaninović and Josef Melan⁶, and from Jože Plečnik's spaces.

The monument to the Revolution is still located along the western boundary of the square, but rests on a system of platforms featured by small gradients and is set apart from the towers, thus achieving a «shift away from the monument's axial, immobile vision» in favor of «proportions closer to modern man» (Ravnikar 1962a).

To the east, toward the historic city, the space is filled with many different elements, whereas in the previous version the old-new relationship was resolved with the emptiness of two small squares. A key role is played by the low, long parallelepiped of today's Maximarket, the length of which is increased to almost touch the extension of the Plečnik Gymnasium. The building, through its apparently elemental geometry, plays a crucial role, namely that of uniting a series of irregular volumes and spaces that are autonomous from each other (internal facades of the Baroque building block



Fig. 3
The Ursuline church with Tr2 in the background seen from Congress square (*Kongresni trg*). © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.



Fig. 4
Plečnik Square and the expansion of the gymnasium. © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.

and secondary spaces of the nuns' complex): the obtained spatial unity becomes, as will be seen below, the basis of the transformation of the functional content of Revolution Square.

The variation process, which lasted until 1982 and occurred even when the project seemed to have reached its own completeness, shows its gradual inner enrichment from a concept that, as Ravnikar puts it, «was nothing but an unknown», with the goal of «finding an architectural language that, on a psychological level, becomes very differentiated, rich and exciting» (Ravnikar 1974). A key to this place characterized by a strong multiscalearity and the composition of space aimed at overlapping visual planes is provided by Edvard Ravnikar himself in the article published by the magazine «Sinteza» in September 1974. The text comes with 32 photographs taken by the author, accompanied by their captions, which describe the intervention starting from its plastic relationship with the context – territorial and urban – and then and then goes on, with continuous jumps in scale, to the signification of details.

To gain a deeper understanding of the specific spatial and linguistic relations that the Revolution Square complex weaves with the city's scales and its historical layers, and the compositional reasons aimed at achieving balance among the project's parts, it is worth analyzing the individual basic elements that constitute it: the square, the towers, the completion of the Baroque block and the Maximarket Emona, the monument.

The square

Already in the design submitted for the competition, the layout of the complex centered around a large central void. It was a concrete floor characterized by a geometric paving pattern, which went to configure an accomplished space, almost a carpet of monumental size surrounded by the buildings that housed the highest authorities of the time. The garden of the Ursuline nuns was indeed the only urban space that could dimensionally accommodate this expansion of the city, but if at an early stage it was necessary to allude to an «afunctional functionality» (Ravnikar 1974) in order to meet the demands of the call, in the course of the design process, the task assumed by the architect is to transform an aseptic political space into a place of life, capable of relating the new dimensions of the city.

Placing institutions in the groove of ancient History and giving Ljubljana a scale and image that the city had never had – the scale of 19th century city: monumental and multifunctional (Vodopivec 2000) – was, at a time of full reconstruction, an important operation to give it the symbolic character of a national capital. Plečnik himself had tried, through his many projects, to



Fig. 5
The passage between Plečnik square and Revolution square (now Republic square). © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.



Fig. 6
The first view of the towers coming out of the passage that crosses the Emona building. © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.

base the city's image on a character of continuity – even freely interpreted – with the past. Notable in this regard are the series of urban projects for Ljubljana, some realized others remaining at the conceptual level, between the 1930s and the 1950s: the Market to the arrangement of Ljubljana, the axis of Vegova ulica and the National Library, the ecclesiastical architecture to the garden of All Saints in Žale, the design of the new parliament, the arrangement of the castle.

In the layout proposed for the competition, the memory of the Roman settlement was emphatically evoked by the empty space between the two towers, the monumental conclusion of the wide tree-lined boulevard that was to connect – again along the direction of the *cardo* – Gregorčičeva ulica with Erjavčeva cesta. The two prisms, symmetrical to the side, formed a portal in the north-south direction that framed the People's Assembly Building. The reciprocal position of the buildings and with respect to the emptiness of the square, implied a static visual perception and a one-way relationality of a monumental nature, associated more with the tradition of socialist realism than with Plečnik's complex spatial relations.

In the design process that marks Edvard Ravnikar's entire oeuvre, symmetry is often made imperfect and axuality is deflected. Revolution Square is no exception, and through progressive accent changes, the space acquires multi-directionality, and thus life. The emptiness of the square is resized, thus becoming wider and shorter, and thus the geometric divisions determined by the blocks are negated. The towers, consequently, are shifted westward, and this alteration of the weights along the longitudinal axis causes them to lose their axuality, in favor of a more complex triangulation between the towers, the government building, and the Tomb of Heroes.

Having lost the single directrix of the *cardo*, the entire lower, built-up margin is placed exactly on the site of the northern wall of the Emona *castrum*: the trace of history – as in many of Plečnik's projects for Ljubljana, above all the intervention on Vegova ulica – is placed at the foundation of the construction of the new, as a manifestation of the human and urban stratification of the city⁷.

But it is the construction of a large parking lot completely underground that leads to a fundamental change: the square loses its perimeter defined by level parking lots in favor of a unique, walkable, multi-level social environment. All its fronts are accessible by overcoming slight elevation changes. Stairs, ramps, and small passages guide movement through the space, and an urban gallery, a place of metropolitan life on a human scale, follows at the underground level the progression of the Emona building. What used to be a linear margin thus gradually becomes «a belt with opportunities to shop, to meet without disturbance, to relax and observe; a

Fig. 7

Emona building. Detail of the facade cladding. © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.



belt without cars, even if they are close by; a multipurpose belt with surprises, open to wind and rain, cold and heat» (Ravnikar 1974).

These principles followed the most innovative reflections in the context of international debate, especially those that arose from the 1951⁸ CIAM and flowed in various forms into the work of Team X members. Nodal was the issue of pedestrianization, and in a broader context of rethinking urban centralities, which had been strongly challenged by the constant enlargement of city boundaries and wartime destruction, which had led to the redefinition of the planning theories of previous years.

The towers

The towers, unlike the initial proposal, are rotated 90° in a position that is not perfectly symmetrical to the square. Such an operation evokes the tension given by the two reliefs (Grajski hrib and Šišenski hrib) that grip the city, integrating the new figures into the topography of the place, and completely changes the nature of the space between them, characterized now by forces no longer axial and parallel, but converging in two points, in favor of direct involvement of the human being within the celebratory space.

Tall buildings are built according to a “tree-like” structural scheme, with a central load-bearing core, cantilevered floors, and free-standing facades clad in thin slabs of Pohorje marble.

The basements, emptied, reveal the construction of the building, and fit into the two tower access podiums. To the east, the headquarters of Ljubljanska Banka (TR2) has the same marble slab cladding in its lower volume, while to the west, at the foot of the Iskra Company’s office tower, (TR3) face brick is used. This choice is driven by the fact that this is an architecture that houses a different function: the University’s technical library. The uses are thus separated, linguistically as well as functionally, while maintaining, albeit with different materials, the same dynamic character of the outer skin.

In his treatment of hanging facades, Ravnikar adheres to Semperian theories, filtered through the experience of Wagner and Plečnik: the curtain wall, consisting of a tight alternation of paired slabs and slats, when perceived in the distance becomes a stone pleating capable of vibrating in the atmosphere, yet without dematerializing the volumes. The modern theme

**Fig. 8**

The space between the Tr2 tower and the Emona building with the sculpture by Slavko Tihec, 1972. In the background, the Parliament building. © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.

**Fig. 9**

The Emona building and the bell tower of the Ursuline church, the only element of the ancient city to emerge from the new built horizon. © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.

of the brise soleil as a generator of light and shadow is declined here for the entire height, using a simple module consisting of two slabs of local marble screwed together: a wider one perpendicular to the facade shows its thin thickness, a narrower one is mounted at an angle. The result of this texture, perceived from the passages leading from the historic city toward Revolution Square, is that of a «tactile space as a space of complete intimacy, without width, and therefore violently vertical, without horizon» (Ravnikar 1974). Such a simple detail in terms of construction allows facades to be three-dimensional, despite their large surface area. It also makes the visual relationship with the towers a constant kinetic experience: as the observer walks, the two objects keep changing both in the textures of the elevations (sometimes open, sometimes half-open, sometimes completely closed) and in their changing relationship given by the triangular – and therefore never static – form of the prisms.

The two roofs maintain the same vertical warp in the folds of the cladding, but the different heights and irregular treatment allow the towers to be perceived as similar but not identical, denying their symmetry. When viewed from the space inside the square, these devices allude to the steeple spire of the Ursuline Church, but when facing the church, «the incongruity between the new tower facade and the classicist facade is masked by the same copper roof of the tower and the addition of Building 2» (Ravnikar 1974).

The completion of the Baroque block and the Emona building⁹

The relationship between the historic city and the new intervention is made clear in the solution adopted for the attachment to the Baroque block and in the Maximarket / Emona, a key building for the entire complex. The long parallelepiped, accentuated horizontally compared to the first competition version, simultaneously connects and delimits the area of the former monastery courtyard (now Plečnik Square) and the platform of Revolution Square. This is a “dialectical” delimitation: the building can relate to both voids, and both scales – both with the “baroque” square, according to practically pre-19th century measures, and with the modern, monumental one. The transition between the two is represented by an underpass, joining the two spaces, without affecting their respective integrity.

The Emona building, like the towers, has a central supporting structure. This allows for the creation of a set back and transparent ground floor (which lends itself well to the commercial function), with a passageway that invites those coming from the historic center to cross Plečnik Square proceeding in a slightly oblique direction, toward the extension of the gymnasium, and to subsequently discover Revolution Square offering a

**Fig. 10**

The Tr3 tower and the cantilevered ceiling of the Tr2 tower. © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.

Fig. 11

The monument to the Revolution, created in 1962 by the sculptor Drago Tršar together with the architect Vladimir Braco Mušic. © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.



non-frontal perspective rich in expressive details.

The suspended two-story volume is entirely clad in marble slabs, and the façade, interrupted only in the middle by a large window at the escalators, is articulated with a vertical rhythm given by a series of ripples that evoke, in form and function, the “pilasters” of Albin’s Rinascente, or the solution applied to cover the facilities’ pipes.

It is no coincidence that shopping center is called Emona, and bears on the stringcourses as the only decorative element the “e” logo. This letter is a reminder, even in the event of any functional changes, of the intimately archaeological nature of the place: quoting the ancient, the real vital heart of the building is its public gallery located below ground level. This is a covered space overlooked by stores, lit by numerous skylights and two patios full of greenery. From below, new glimpses of the towers open up to visitors.

The long shopping arcade ends in two open spaces: to the north an open space with stairs leads back to the level of the square, while to the south is the entrance to the foyer of the Cankarjev Dom, at the ancient Roman wall. The Emona building is conceptually similar to the solution adopted by Plečnik between 1931 and 1939 for the Central Market, along Ljubljana. Again, a long-built margin allows selected views of some notable portions of the city toward the Castle, while the basement is entirely traversable, opening with small breaks toward the river, welcoming visitors to its public spaces below ground level; above all, it reorganizes a series of spaces behind the medieval building curtain, giving it unity and scale.

In this sense, toward the old city, the small square dedicated to the Slovenian master is a striking space overlooked by the Baroque Ursuline building, made permeable on the ground floor, and Plečnik’s gymnasium with its headboard expanded by Ravnikar, toward Revolution Square. Here, three isolated columns are met according to the principle of «condensation of space at the conjunctions of large sides of the built environment, where individual parts of space flow into others, and things in this passage announce them by their attractiveness» (Ravnikar 1974).

The monument

The monument to the Revolution, in its first location, occupied the entire area to the west thus ideally extending the green belt, beyond Šubičeva cesta. The work itself, yet to be defined, was perfectly aligned – and the relationship is underscored by two parallel walls that isolate the space from the rest of the square – with the already present Ljubljana Heroes’ Monument, created in the square of the same name by architect Edo Mihevc with sculptor Boris Kalin in 1950.

**Fig. 12**

The configuration of space as a perspective movement, with its constituent elements: the towers, the square, the Emona building and the underground shopping gallery. «A game of distance and proximity or closeness and separation» (Ravnikar, 1974). © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.

Fig. 13

The underground shopping gallery and life inside this space during a working day. © Susanna Campeotto, 2023.



It will be necessary to wait until 1962 to see the plastic outcomes of the competition for the Revolution Monument: the first prize is awarded to the work proposed by the sculptor Drago Tršar together with the architect Vladimir Braco Mušic, who had designed the water basin and the system of plates on which the monument would rest, altering, again, the rigid axialities.

The figurative solution, as found by Ravnikar himself in reference to the submitted projects, follows the «dominant tone of thought characterized by a decided departure from the statuesque conception of the monumental task» and is expressed through a different plastic language that «appeals to other human capacities and perceptions» (Ravnikar 1962a).

Its new location, now distinctly independent of the building mass of buildings, surrounded by a green backdrop and visible over a much wider field – from the entrances in the proximity of the ancient city – «suggests the possibility of a broad and complete form, with greater symbolic power and more direct and essential expressiveness» (Ravnikar 1962a) in relation to the contemporary architectural context.

Conclusions

The design evolution of Revolution Square provides a deeper understanding of the transition to a post-statuary – and, in architectural terms, post-monumental – phase that characterizes a unique season of Yugoslav architecture. A methodology that can be applied to the plastic arts, as well as to spatial and tectonic composition, in search of a complex and layered relationality between parts, between scales, between elements. The particular design underlying the construction of each element of Revolution Square thus allows, for the entire complex, both the continuous perceptive leap between context, figure, and detail, and the permeability of the volumes in ground attachment, in order to transform a single-axial and political space into a multifunctional and sensory place of pedestrian movement. In between, more than two decades of modifications and changes of principalship have involved variations, decentralizations, new relationships according to an «inner growth that cannot be understood by the sequence of facts, for it is a process whose initial starting points may be the consequence of erroneous assumptions that, while being tested, still teach us much» (Ravnikar 1974).

* The paragraphs: *Introduction; The square; The completion of the Baroque block and the Emona building;* are written by Luka Skansi. The paragraphs: *The project as a process, The towers, The monument; Conclusions;* are written by Susanna Campeotto.

Notes

¹ Since 1991: Republic Square.

² In preparing this article, both the recent bibliography that has dealt with a more political treatment of the events related to Revolution Square (Stierli, Kulić 2018), (Kulić 2013;2014), (Cibic 2018), and the more historiographical, predominantly Slovenian (Zupan 2003), (Žnidaršič 2004), (Koselj 2005), (Hočevar, 2018). The latter publication, in which Rok Žnidaršič's thesis was incorporated, although it gives comprehensive information about the reasons for the project, it does not specify in detail the compositional and tectonic strategies fundamental to the Authors in Ravnikar's work. Also noteworthy is the performance *For our Economy and Culture* (Venice Biennale 2013) by Jasmina Cibic.

³ Reference is made to the building that would later become the Emona shopping center, but at this stage its function was not defined.

⁴ All quotations from Slovenian in the text are given in Italian with translation by the authors.

⁵ On the economic and administrative reasons leading to the functional redefinition of the project, see (Žnidaršič 2004), (Zupan 2003).

⁶ Jurij Zaninović and Josef Melan were the architect (a pupil of Otto Wagner) and engineer, respectively, who built the Dragon Bridge in Ljubljana between 1900 and 1901.

⁷ Fragments of the Roman walls emerge in the park facing Erjavčeva cesta in front of the Presidential Palace and close to the southern edge of the former Ursuline Convent, where it is necessary to approach them in order to observe them and then gaze out towards the ancient city.

⁸ In this context, the critical positions of what later became Team X in the years between 1954 and 1959 are particularly relevant. See: (Tyrwhitt 1952) and (Zuccari Marchi 2020).

⁹ The building will only later be called Maximarket.

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