# Edvard Ravnikar's Liquid Modernism: Architectural Identity in a Network of Shifting References

If ours is a "liquid" modernity, as Zygmunt Bauman argues, characteristic for a radical pluralism of cultural forms and tastes and their pervasive hybridization, then the question is whether architecture can negotiate, make sense of, and produce new meanings out of such pluralism, like other fields of culture have been able to do.¹ Citation and pastiche—the staple techniques of postmodernism—are essentially mechanical methods. They

**Vladmir Kulić** Florida Atlantic University cut up their source material and reassemble it into a collage of fragments that remain under clear quotation marks, thus maintaining their own referentiality at a distance from the new context. Such procedures may constitute a step in the direction of cultural "liquefaction," but they are still not "liquid" and constitute the remnants of an era of "solid modernity" and its stable, territorially bound power relations, cultural hierarchies, and geopolitical divisions. In order to transcend the limitations of the ideology of multiculturalism, which reifies differences but often stops short of bringing them into dialogue, architecture needs to learn to actively mediate the complex networks of references that define the contemporary world.

More often than not, architecture's current obsessions with sustainability and digital technologies serve as excuses for not dealing with the cultural pluriverse and tend to reduce its own disciplinarity to that of technology. Yet, this reluctance to deal with unprecedented cultural pluralism may not be universal; instead, I argue, it may be one of the decidedly "first world problems," a consequence of the complacency of cultural "centers" unaccustomed to negotiating and compromising with the incursions from the peripheries. Unlike music, for example, in which the popular and technological revolutions of the past decades have allowed broad access to the means of production (although not equally to those of dissemination)— architecture in the developed world is so bound by legal and material constraints that largely preclude the improvisational repertoire conducive to "liquefaction" available to other fields of culture. The enclaves of our "age of

diaspora" may produce their own food, music, and clothing, but they inhabit cities and buildings that are, culturally speaking, hardly their own. In order to find precedents for an architecture of a liquid modernity—an architecture that thrives on actively negotiating multiple cultural sources and reference points—we need to direct our gaze away from the established cultural centers and towards the varied peripheries around them, in which reference to exogenous contexts is a necessity and a common mode of being. It may be particularly worth looking at the places that are not only peripheral to a single center, but suspended between multiple reference points, places where overlapping gravitational pulls produce—synchronically or diachronically—the complex patterns of interference whose richness may exceed the simple sum of original source material.

One such place was the region of former Yugoslavia. For the past two millennia, it has straddled the dividing lines between various zones of cultural, religious, and political influence: in Antiquity, between Rome and Constantinople; then between Venice, Vienna, and Istanbul; in the interwar period, between Paris, Berlin, Prague, and Rome; during the Cold War, between Washington, Moscow and the non-aligned Third World; and today, between the European Union and the "rest."<sup>2</sup> Even before the onset of modernity, the accumulated layers of ever-shifting references resulted in an extreme diversity of urban and architectural cultures, compressed within a geographical space the size of Oregon or Michigan. The founders of the region's modern architectural profession in the late 19th century were educated at Central European schools in Vienna, Munich, Prague, and Zurich. The first local schools founded in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana, mobilized competing visions of cultural modernity to construct their own varied architectural cultures and the related national identities.3 Their students and disciples, however, increasingly looked beyond the borders of Central Europe, towards the sources that were explicitly inter- or a-national, such as German sachlich modernism and Le Corbusier. Yet the very geographical and cultural distance transformed these sources into something to emulate, i.e., appropriate as a ready-made material, something that involved identity making, since it constituted a declaration of intent to modernize, rather than the articulation of an existing modernity—a "modernism of underdevelopment," as Marshall Berman memorably put it.4

# **RAVNIKAR: CONTEXT AND ORIGINS**

The Slovenian architect Edvard Ravnikar (1907-1993) belonged to this generation and his oeuvre explicitly embodied a dual allegiance to the cosmopolitan spirit of modernism and to his own locality. It also embodied a transitional period in Slovenian and Yugoslav history, a period of rapid modernization in which the "modernism of underdevelopment" gradually became a real one. Ravnikar's career thus negotiated the varied and competing signals coming from the heartlands of modernity in order to construct not only a local modernism, but also a local version of modernity that would be cosmopolitan, yet also all its own. His formative experiences were clearly conducive to such a project: he was one of the prodigious students and collaborators of Jože Plečnik, the preeminent "national" architect of

Slovenia, whom Otto Wagner—unsuccessfully—once designated his heir at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. In the late 1930s, however, Ravnikar also worked for Le Corbusier in his rue de Sèvre atelier in Paris, contributing to the seminal projects for Algiers, which themselves mediated between modern universalism and the locality of the Maghreb. Exposed to such diverse—even discordant—experiences, Ravnikar early on devised a strategy of reconciliation and synthesis, rather than choosing one or the other of his sources. Over the years, he would continue applying that strategy to a broader and broader circle of references, which would come to include the lessons of the Ulm School of Design, Alvar Aalto's work, Scandinavian modernism, the various inflections of brutalism, direct references to Otto Wagner and the Semperian tectonic tradition, and even Mesopotamian ziggurats. Responsible for some of the key sites of Slovenian nationhood, Ravnikar thus connected these diverse references into a chain that, on the one hand, tied Slovenia's architectural identity through Plečnik to a specifically Central European tradition of modernism, and on the other, extrapolated it towards the ever-evolving international modernism (and postmodernism).

The result of Ravnikar's perpetual mediations was a "locally adjusted modernism," as his former student Aleš Vodopivec put it, which developed a very particular notion of regionalism, not so much built upon any particular local pre-modern tradition, but by establishing and extending a specific architectural lineage with a clearly identifiable—and ultimately modern—origin.<sup>5</sup> Plečnik was the founder and the harbinger of that lineage; as another student of his, Dušan Grabrijan, stated as early as 1948, "I know that I cannot speak about architecture in Slovenia without starting with Plečnik, because we have almost no question today that is not somehow related to him-Plečnik laid the foundation of recent Slovenian architecture."6 Plečnik's "national" status in Slovenia is perhaps paralleled only by the identification of Antoni Gaudí with Catalonia. The Slovenian capital is often described as "Plečnik's Ljubljana," reflecting the role the architect had during the interwar period in reshaping the city's most important spaces. Plečnik was also responsible for some of the key sites—real or imagined—of the Slovenian statehood, such as the National and University Library and his project for the Parliament of Slovenia, which remains a national icon even though it was never constructed. In terms of its content, Plečnik's architecture primarily mediated the universalism of classicist heritage for the use of national identification; but while he did refer to the local vernacular, he ultimately did not believe in the possibility of a "national art." 7 Slovenia's architectural identity thus hinged not upon a particular "national" content inherited from the past, but upon the personality of its most famous architect of the modern period and the extension of his influence through several generations of his students-known as "Plečnik's School"—who revered their mentor and continued his legacy well after his death.

Ravnikar can rightfully be called Plečnik's heir, not only for being his most successful student. His projects in the capital were as extensive and numerous as Plečnik's. He was also an influential teacher; similarly to Plečnik's,

it was "Ravnikar's school" that produced the next generation of Slovenia's architectural elite. Finally, Ravnikar had a perfect professional pedigree: he was closely associated with two great international figures and also built his own extensive international connections. The chief difference between the master and the disciple, however, was Plečnik's inherent conservatism, both aesthetic and political. Despite great freedom with which he transformed the canons of classicism, Plečnik was deeply suspicious of modernism, particularly of Le Corbusier. In contrast, Ravnikar not only willingly engaged an evolving modernism, he also embraced the goals of the Yugoslav socialist revolution, which allowed him to assume a prominent position within the new state at the end of World War II.

In such context, it may be fair to say that Ravnikar's ultimate success was to rescue Plečnik's legacy from its own conservatism through continuous hybridization, not only with the technological and programmatic advancements, but also with modernism's perpetual evolution. Such program and the accompanying ambiguity between reverence and transgression are almost explicitly articulated in the following statement from Ravnikar's diary: "Tradition is a preserved progress; progress is a continuation of tradition. A model, even though not perfectly adequate, for observing the relationship between tradition and progress is Plečnik." One, therefore, wonders whether Ravnikar may have set out to improve on the "imperfect adequacy" of Plečnik's model by tipping the balance towards the neglected side of progress.

Another important characteristic was Ravnikar's ability to locate the commonalities and overlaps between greatly incongruous contexts and to deftly transform the meanings of certain architectural motifs. That skill would prove particularly useful amidst the turbulent political changes of the early postwar period, during which architectural aesthetics acquired highly politicized connotations. An early case in point are his unrealized 1947 projects for New Belgrade, the new capital of Yugoslavia, devised at the height of political pressures to impose socialist realism as the sole aesthetic doctrine in the country. Ravnikar's plans for the city were explicitly Corbusian, particularly his proposal for the master plan, which directly translated the logic of the Radiant City for the needs of a socialist administration. 10 It replaced Le Corbusier's business center with the buildings of state and party administration and at the same time greatly amplified the source material's inherent potential for monumentality. The projects for the buildings of the Presidency of the Government and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia hybridized Le Corusier's primary volumes and open plan with Plečnik's taste for richly textured surfaces, giving the walls, as the jury put it, "a picturesque and decorative treatment" reminiscent of a "woven rug."11 (Note the obvious Semperian connotation to such description.) That, however, was not enough to satisfy the socialist realist demand for ideological representation; Ravnikar was obviously aware of such demand, but his solution again derived from Le Corbusier instead of the politically desirable Soviet sources. The sculptural articulation on the Central Committee building and the medallions with state insignia for the Presidency drew



Mundaneum. 12 Even though Ravnikar's proposal for the Central Committee building won the highest placement at the competition, it was far from what the communist leadership was expecting and the work remained on paper.

# STRATEGIES OF LIQUEFACTION



on Le Corbusier's own vision of monumental representation by referencing the unrealized projects for the Palace of the League of Nations and the

The formula Plečnik + Le Corbusier saw its pinnacle in the Municipal Assembly Building in the city of Kranj (1960), a symbolic temple of civic life. Set in the middle of a semi-open urban block, with a stone-paved plaza in the front, the building is approached obliquely, generating tension with its monumental symmetrical façade. Such positioning highlights the experience of passage towards the entrance and, in combination with the building's temple-like appearance, almost inevitably brings to mind August Choisy's famous analysis of the Athenian Acropolis, which inspired Le Corbusier's concept of the promenade architecturale.15 This reference, however, was another instance of the unlikely overlap of two otherwise divergent sources, as Plečnik knew Choisy well and taught his methodology at the Ljubljana Faculty of Architecture.



Figure 1: Edvard Ravnikar: Memorial Complex Kampor, Island of Rab, Croatia, 1953.

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Figure 2: Edvard Ravnikar: Municipal Assembly, Kranj, Slovenia, 1954-60.

The Municipal Assembly is a curious—perhaps even awkward—hybrid, a "fusion of classical temple and alpine cabin," as Curtis put it, but also a Corbusian glazed box raised on pilotis cross-bred with a temple in antis, with a folded-plate roof for a pediment and a bronze "entablature" on top of the box. The pilotis have oversized conical capitals executed in béton brut with a visible pattern of wooden formwork, as if directly transplanted from the interior of the Assembly Building in Chandigarh. Yet the exaggerated disproportion between the shaft and the capital is also something that Plečnik often used. The columns are odd in number, with a smaller, thinner one sitting in the middle of the façade, thus displacing the entrance to the side. This is a violation of the classical rules of composition directly out of Plečnik's book, seen in a number of his iconic projects, including the Presidential Hall at the Hradčany Palace in Prague. Both inside and out, a wealth of materials and textures contrasts the stereotomic and the tectonic, the structure and the cladding, the smooth and the rustic, bringing two different modernist traditions—the Wagnerschule and Le Corbusier—into close dialogue.

What is remarkable about the Kranj Municipality and the Kampor Memorial is the way in which they both blended their references while still preserving the recognizability of their sources. They are no mere pastiche, there is nothing fragmentary or parodic about them, and there are no "quotation marks" around them. On the contrary: both structures have consistency and integrity on their own, but at the same time, their ingredients can still be easily identified and traced back to their origins. It is as if their sources were not simply cut up into pieces and reassembled, but "melted" in a way that allowed seamless amalgamation, yet just before their identity started dissolving. And because Ravnikar kept adding new ingredients into the process of liquefaction and amalgamation, the end product never solidified into a formal style.

In his subsequent projects, Ravnikar expanded his experiments into the various kinds of cladding, expressive structure, and the aesthetics of béton brut skeleton and brick infill. Starting in the 1960s, he increasingly sought ornamental effects in the elaborately patterned brickwork, thus further strengthening the Wagnerschule tradition through evocations of the Semperian notion of Bekleidung as developed from the art of weaving. Some of his brickwork indeed uncannily resembles woven wicker, a theme he would keep varying for the remainder of his career, yet with different meanings. All of these different themes came together in his magnum opus, Ljubljana's Revolution Square (1960-85, today Republic Square), whose protracted construction allowed him to develop an exceptionally rich vocabulary of forms, structures, and textures, while still creating a cohesive whole. Located in the very heart of the city and enclosed on one side by the somewhat older building of the National Assembly, the Revolution Square is the symbolic center of Slovenian statehood, defined largely by three structures designed by Ravnikar: triangular twin towers (originally intended for state administration), the long low Maximarket department store, and the cultural and congress center Cankarjev dom. At the urban level, the project





Figure 3: Edvard Ravnikar: Municipal
Assembly, Kranj, Slovenia, 1954-60, detail

Figure 4: Edvard Ravnikar: Office Towers and the Cankarjev dom Congress Center at the Revolution Square (today Republic Square), Ljubljana, Slovenia, 1960-1983. Photo by author.

of the entrance. Photo by author.



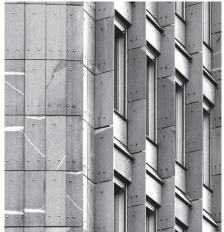


Figure 5: Edvard Ravnikar: Details of buildings at the Revolution Square in Ljubljana. Photos by author.

### **ENDNOTES**

- On liquid modernity, see: Zygmunt Bauman, Liquid Modernity (Cambridge: Polity, 2000) and Culture in a Liquid Modern World (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).
- On the persistent "in-betweenness" of the region of the former Yugoslavia, see: Vladimir Kulić, Maroje Mrduljaš, and Wolfgang Thaler, Modernism In-Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia (Berlin: Jovis, 2012).
- On the divergent programs of Central European modern architecture, see: Ákos Moravánszky, Competing Visions: Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867-1918 (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press. 1998).
- Marshall Berman, All That Is Solid Melts Into Air (London: Verso, 1982), 173.
- See: Aleš Vodopivec and Rok Žnidaršič, eds., Edvard Ravnikar, Architect and Teacher (Vienna: Springer: 2010),
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mediates between the local scale of the surrounding historical blocks and the scale of the whole city, as the two towers dominate Ljubljana's skyline. Their cantilevered pointed tips, however, face each other at a close distance, forming a colossal "gate" and engaging—much like the rest of the complex—in an interplay between the monumental and the intimate.

Instead of the direct links to Le Corbusier, parts of the complex reference more diffuse versions of "brutalism" filtered through the widely known international sources of the 1960s. At close analysis, however, the Revolution Square also reveals references to Alvar Aalto, whom Ravnikar greatly admired throughout his career. Motifs from Aalto's late work, such as the Finlandia Hall in Helsinki, are recognizable in the congress center: cladding in thin stone slabs arranged in long narrow strips, copper roofs with a green patina, and the complex, broken-up forms. Yet, Ravnikar's Central European roots are still abundantly visible, particularly in the duality of the expressive structural core and the variety of claddings. The latter included not only the "woven" brickwork, known from his earlier projects, but also the exaggerated rivets used to attach stone slabs to the façade, directly evocative of the façade of Otto Wagner's Postal Savings Bank in Vienna.

One of Ravnikar's last large-scale realizations, the Babylon-Oberoi Hotel in Baghdad (1974-84), demonstrated not only the range of transcultural references that his work could embody, but also the ease with which the particular motifs could transform their meaning depending on the context.<sup>16</sup> Originally designed for the Yugoslav coast of the Adriatic, the hotel's complex branching layout belonged to the large body of typological experiments conducted by Yugoslav architects in the late 1960s and early 1970s, developed in response to the country's booming tourist industry and the need to integrate the new facilities into the natural environment. 17 The project, however, fell through, but the client sold the plans to the Indian luxury chain Oberoi, which decided to use them for its latest facility on the banks of the Tigris. The political connotations of the endeavor, although not directly obvious, were nevertheless strong, since all three countries involved— Yugoslavia, India, and Iraq—belonged to the Non-Aligned Movement. The movement facilitated considerable economic exchange between its member states, thus circumventing their direct reliance on the "First World" in the common attempts at modernization. Ravnikar was one of the many Yugoslav architects who benefited from the country's non-alignment by acquiring large-scale commissions in the "Third World," thus also contributing to a liquefaction of the ideological divisions of the Cold War world.

With the change of the location to the Middle East, Ravnikar's motifs and techniques suddenly acquired completely new connotations. The branching, cascading form, originally developed to fit the natural landscape of the Adriatic, became incorporated into the construct of the local Iraqi identity by referencing ancient ziggurats. The same reference also affected Ravnikar's Bekleidung in ornamental brickwork: through links to Plečnik, Wagner, and Gottfried Semper, in Slovenia such cladding tied the local identity to its broader Central European context; in Baghdad—not to mention in a hotel named Babylon—it became a signifier of the ancient traditions

of Mesopotamian architecture. The hotel thus emerged as the product of a long chain of politically conditioned transfers that connected distant cultural and political projects: the tradition of the *Wagnerschule*, the various inflections of international modernism, the socialist modernization of Yugoslavia, Indian post-colonial entrepreneurship, and modern Iraqi identity.

### **CONCLUSION**

Bauman developed the notion of "liquid modernity" in reference to our current historical moment. However, the metaphor of "liquefaction"—of both social bonds and cultural forms—possesses an inherent analytical value applicable to other periods as well. <sup>18</sup> I argue that both the geopolitical position and the specific historical moment of socialist Yugoslavia represented a prolonged episode of radical liquefaction, so much so that Yugoslavia ended as "a state that withered away," as historian Dejan Jović memorably put it. <sup>19</sup> But if the Yugoslav socialist state was a failure, some of its cultural products had a more lasting contribution, anticipating the cultural strategies of our "liquid modernity" and the concomitant "global mélange" that emerges out of the accelerating globalization. <sup>20</sup> Edvard Ravnikar's hybridization of architectural forms is as good an example of such precedence as any.

Situated in a period of historical transition between tradition and modernity and in the borderlands of European civilization, Ravnikar's architecture was ultimately suspended amidst a complex constellation of reference points: past and future, the local and the international, and the various cultural and political centers. Due to the particularities of the historical moment, Ravnikar resisted succumbing to any of these gravitational pulls, developing instead a strategy of mediation that melted the solidity of received models and procedures and allowed for their recombination and blending. The result was an architecture that was at the same time highly referential and highly original. The historical moment that allowed the construction of a socialist Yugoslavia suspended between systems and cultures is long gone; its successors have either taken sides or remain in a limbo of indecisiveness that prevents them for taking any constructive action. Yet the lessons of the period and the architectures it produced, at the same strange and exhilarating, may contribute something useful for the current efforts at further liquefying the cultural and political divisions and power-relations of the contemporary world. •

- Dušan Grabrijan, Plečnik in njegova šola (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1968), 175-176.
- 7. Ibid., 97.
- On Plečnik's cultural and political conservatism, see: "Everything Provokes Fascism: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek," and Andrew Herscher, "Plečnik avec Laibach," in Assemblage 33 (1997): 58-75.
- Quoted in: William J.R. Curtis, Tomaž Krušec, and Aleš Vodopivec, Arhitekt Edvard Ravnikar, spominski kompleks na otoku Rabu, 1953 (Ljubljana: DESSA, 2004), 12.
- For a discussion of the projects for New Belgrade, see: Ljiljana Blagojević, Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, Arhitektonski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, and Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture grada Beograda, 2007), 82.
- Quoted in: Bratislav Stojanović, "Konkursi za Dom Centralnog komiteta KPJ i zgradu Pretsedništva Vlade FNRJ," in: Arhitektura (Zagreb) 2, no. 8-10 (March, April, and May, 1948): 148.
- 12. For a detailed comparison of Ravnikar's projects for New Belgrade of the late 1940s and Le Corbusier's work, see: Vladimir Kulić, Land of the In-Between: Modern Architecture and the State in Socialist Yugoslavia, 1945-68, Ph.D. dissertation (Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 2009), 163-66
- See: William J.R. Curtis, "Abstraction and Representation: The Memorial Complex at Kampor, on the Island of Rab (1952-53) by Edvard Ravnikar," in Vodopivec and Žnidaršič, Edvard Ravnikar, Architect and Teacher, 33-50.
- 14. Ibid., 43-45.
- See: Richard Etlin, "Le Corbusier, Choisy, and French Hellenism: The Search for a New Architecture," in: The Art Bulletin 69, no. 2 (June 1987): 264-78.
- 16. The project for the Babylon-Oberoi Hotel deserves further research, which is somewhat complicated by the unresolved access to his papers. For basic information on the project, see: Peter Krečič, ed., Edvard Ravnikar: arhitekt, urbanist, oblikovalec, teoretik, univerzitetni učitelj in publicist, exhibition catalogue (Ljubljana: Arhitekturni muzej, 1996).
- For the tourist facilities on the Adriatic coast, see: Luciano Basauri, Dafne Berc, Maroje Mrduljaš, Dinko Peračić, and Miranda Veljačić, "Constructing an Affordable Arcadia," in Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić, eds., Unfinished Modernisations—Between Utopia and Pragmatism (Zagreb: UHA, 2012), 352-73.
- 18. Bauman himself raised the analogy between "liquefaction" and the "melting of the solids," which Marx identified as an inherent quality of modernity; the difference, claims Bauman, is that previous periods strove to replace old solids with new, more permanent ones, while the current stage of modernity abandons any such ambition; see: Bauman, Liquid Modernity, 3-4
- 19. See: Dejan Jović, Yugoslavia: A State that Withered Away (West Lafayette, In: Purdue Univesity Press, 2009).
- On global mélange, see: Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009).