

GINO MALACARNE  
 ORCID 0000-0002-9102-9874  
 University of Bologna, Italy

## HISTORY AND INVENTION IN PLEČNIK'S LJUBLJANA PROJECT

### HISTORIA I INWENCJA W PROJEKCIE LUBLANY JOŽEGO PLEČNIKA

#### Abstract

For me, architecture is a kind of work that never stops developing. In some way, each new project is a response to those that preceded it as well as a reflection on the past to first become acquainted with the disciplinary tasks of architecture. In a continuity built from formal, historical, and symbolic affinities, works of architecture are born from previous such works, giving the possibility of defining a pattern of places that have developed through previous experiences, while responding to the needs of today: this is the real heart of architecture. To illustrate my stance, I have chosen to present some of Plečnik's projects, in which it is evident to what extent the relationship with history and a knowledge of the disciplinary corpus of architecture underlie the inventive process. The material recalled undergoes a process of transfiguration through an analogical and imaginative thought process which then produces a new design synthesis.

*Keywords: continuity, tradition, evocation, invention, urban design*

#### Streszczenie

Dla mnie architektura jest rodzajem dzieła, które nigdy nie przestaje się rozwijać. Każdy nowy projekt stanowi w pewnym sensie odpowiedź na te, które go poprzedziły, a zarazem refleksję nad przeszłością, pozwalającą na ponowne zapoznanie się z istotą dyscypliny architektonicznej. W ciągłości opartej na powinowactwach formalnych, historycznych i symbolicznych dzieła architektury rodzą się z poprzednich dzieł, umożliwiając kształtowanie układu miejsc powstałych z wcześniejszych doświadczeń, a jednocześnie odpowiadających na potrzeby współczesności – i to właśnie stanowi prawdziwe serce architektury. Aby zilustrować to podejście, przedstawiono wybrane projekty Jožego Plečnika, w których wyraźnie widać, jak relacja z historią oraz znajomość dyscyplinarnego korpusu architektury stanowią podstawę procesu twórczej inwencji. Przywołana materia ulega procesowi transfiguracji poprzez myślenie analogiczne i wyobrażeniowe, prowadząc do powstania nowej syntezy projektowej.

*Słowa kluczowe: ciągłość, tradycja, przywołanie, inwencja, projektowanie urbanistyczne*

#### 1

For me, architecture is a kind of work that never stops developing. In some way, each new project is a response to those that preceded it as well as a reflection on the past to first become acquainted with the disciplinary tasks of architecture. In a continuity built from formal, historical and symbolic affinities, works of architecture are born from previous such works,

giving the possibility of defining a pattern of places that have developed through previous experiences, while responding to the needs of today: this is the real heart of architecture.

On the idea of continuity, Milan Kundera, speaking of the art of the novel, expressed concepts that I see as being closely linked to architectural design and the work of the architect. Referring to the contemporary novel, Kundera wrote:

The spirit of the novel is the spirit of continuity: each work is a response to the works that preceded it, each work contains all the previous experience of the novel. But the spirit of our age is fixated on actualities, which are so expansive, so ample that they push the past beyond our horizons and reduce time to a single second, isolated in the present. Taken in this system, the novel is no longer a work (something intended to last, to connect the past to the future), but a current event like so many others, a gesture without a tomorrow.<sup>1</sup>

To be such, every novel must discover something new, just like an architectural project; each new work of architecture brings with it the experience of the past in response to the challenges of the present.

Pursuing these convictions means understanding the profession of the architect as an act of design, an imaginative act that contemplates a disciplinary corpus. Every work of architecture is an act that is part of a tradition that must be known, renewed, and “betrayed” every time, thus offering us a new and contemporary work.

In this time of overwhelming topicality, architecture risks becoming, as the novel did for Kundera, “a gesture without a tomorrow”, an event of purely topical events. For this reason, opposing this fatality is a necessary act for me, on both theoretical and practical levels.

What we define and feel as “architecture” participates in the constitutive symbolic circularity of time, of the “not yet” and the “already been”. As Ungers wrote, “Architecture is not an invention, but a discovery, a constantly new reinterpretation of known concepts – it is to see the world with different eyes, to experience it anew, to find it again and to fill it with new content.”

As in the best works of architecture, it is the “precedents” and historical references that can be glimpsed which nourish the imagery that they themselves generate. Evocative images are, in fact, essential to the principle of recognition and the construction of an identity of places.

## 2

To illustrate my stance, I have chosen to present some of Plečnik’s projects, in which it is evident to what extent the relationship with history and a knowledge of the disciplinary corpus of architecture underlie the inventive process. The material recalled undergoes a process of transfiguration through an analogical and imaginative thought process which then produces a new design synthesis.

Plečnik’s sensitivity to architecture was expressed in his attempt to bring a contemporary meaning to those values to which he attributed a suprahistorical interpretation, as many have pointed out; from this emerged his ability to impart a sense of objectivity and, ultimately, a sense of permanence.

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Kundera, *Part One. The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes* [in:] idem, *The art of the novel*, HarperCollins, New York 1988.

All his projects sought to show the richness of evocative forms borrowed from history in the transcription of an architecture which could not deny its modernity while still delivering new forms of usage.

As with the best works of architecture, it is the “precedents” and historical references that can be glimpsed which fuel the imagery they themselves produce. Evocative images are, in fact, essential to the principle of recognition and the construction of the identity of places. One example of which was Plečnik’s work on the city of Ljubljana with an idea of urban design that was realised through an incessant work of architectural design, proposing a lesson in architecture full of operational indications and, in many ways, supremely up to the minute. In fact, the complex questions that cities pose, even today, are still current, and for these, this Slovenian architect proposed solutions without falling foul of utopian attempts to advocate a “unitary system”.

The point of view of the wayfarer, the visual angle of the observer, were for Plečnik the basis, together with historical studies of “his beloved cities”, from which to develop, in the light of the multiple needs of the modern city, a series of considerations on the structure of urban space, and from which to build his very own idea of a design resistant to the innovations of the avant-garde and fleeting fads. The possibility of acting according to architectural principles that address the problem of urban design is one of the most significant teachings of Plečnik’s work.

Uninterruptedly, for around thirty years, Plečnik described, designed, conceived, and planned Ljubljana. What seems particularly important to us was his ability – which was at the same time an art – to build the city day after day, project after project, while maintaining a clear overall impression, composed of the many different parts that determined its form. His idea of urban design proposed architectural solutions that structured, arranged, and formed the public space which represents the quintessential part of the conception of a city.

The city that appears to our eyes today is composed of many parts, each with its own peculiarity, but undeniably harmoniously connected to one another and the result of a sort of “open project” that was constantly being debated, in line with the new demands of a place that was transforming itself from a provincial city into the “ideal” capital of Slovenia.

This was able to happen because Plečnik had always had a clear, unified idea of the project for Ljubljana, as evidenced by the fact that he frequently redesigned large swathes of the city in individual works; architecture, after all, always aims at an idea of unity and coherence, even if it knows the risk of becoming utopian, while fully acknowledging that it can only concretise fragments of a general idea. In reality, only a part of Plečnik’s projects and a few fragments of them were ever realised in Ljubljana, which nonetheless built the new face of the city.

Into this idea of a “plan” the architect poured all the knowledge he possessed of his city; by planning it, he constantly “measured” it and, on the basis of this “measuring” and the pursuit of new programmes, he evaluated the potential interventions. The exactitude of the architectural solutions, of the drawings that represent them and, at the same time, the fact that the indeterminacy of the plan permitted changes to be implemented without distorting the general conception, are all striking.

The site plans illustrating the designs for Ljubljana of 1928 and 1944 highlight their nature as collages, and within them we can read how the individual interventions contributed to defining unitary and harmonious solutions. Plečnik’s modernity, in addition to his recognised stylistic code, also lay in his desire to understand urban phenomena, to bring order to them, and to look at the history of architecture not as an available vocabulary but as an example of order and appropriacy.

Thinking about the development of the city through designs that presented clear indications of their spatial value, together with the ability to think of projects in terms of figures and not only through abstract functional, statistical, economic, sociological deductions

– uncritically following the aesthetics of aseptic building regulations – meant that Plečnik’s Ljubljana was born from a “conscious union between science and art”.

There was no project for Ljubljana that was not conceived as an urban project; the attention to the architecture of the city ushered Plečnik’s work back to an idea of decorum and a principle of order typical of classical architecture, which, while not proposing mimetic interventions for the historic city, did adhere to an idea of order. Countering the tendency to reduce the urban planning problem to a pure organisation of the street network, to an identification of areas suitable for building and their functional statutes, Plečnik brought back the point of view of architectural construction.

Underlying his way of building the city according to an open project was an approach that was simultaneously rational and empirical: he seemingly had no wish to recognise any art or urban science that proposed a universally valid treatise, especially if it was a question of intervening on the built city; rather, his appeared to be a design approach to architectural and urban themes that operated “case by case”. Indeed, each piece of the city had, even within a general idea, its own specificity, to which the individual projects provided answers.

Plečnik’s 1928 masterplan, which referred to issues already indicated by Camillo Sitte, adopted many of the indications given by Max Fabiani’s earlier plan from 1895 (presented after the earthquake of that same year); in fact, he positively evaluated the work of his predecessor, and perfected it from a formal point of view by introducing further hypotheses of urban control. Plečnik removed from Fabiani’s plan that sense of abstractness and rigidity imposed by the urban “model” adopted, which tended to cancel the specificities of the places within textbook-type choices and in repeating a pattern that was, in some respects, all-encompassing and endeavoured to contain the whole present and future city. A particular attention to the urban form seen as a complex of many peculiarities led him to propose a plan conceived in distinct parts respecting ancient routes and tending to make certain places unique. Ultimately, this was a plan composed of many projects aimed at achieving a balance between the singularity of the design responses for the individual places and their belonging to a more generic order.

For Plečnik, valuing individuality did not necessarily mean preserving the entire city. Certain “pieces” of the city and even some monuments were demolished (others had already been destroyed by the earthquake) to create room for new urban demands and new monumental buildings which were required to correspond to that ideal aspect of Ljubljana that Plečnik had set himself and which then contributed to building the city’s character; still more “parts” would have been demolished if all of Plečnik’s plans had been carried out. In these operations it is possible to read the teaching of Otto Wagner when he wrote: “Only a true artist-architect can distinguish and weigh between the beautiful and the old, and not only the ancient, and does not think of the criminal destruction of beauty, nor of a copy of the current state,” and again, “If architectural monuments still serve a practical purpose today, then this work is to be completed by artists and therefore in the style of our era”. “And Plečnik believed in his own artistic strength.”<sup>2</sup>

The relationship with history, which means a recognition of the tradition of one’s own craft, is not identified through an uncritical recouping of forms from the past, nor is it resolved in a simplistic adherence to a classicism of manner and textbooks; it rather becomes a mental habit according to which to operate with rules, clarity, order, and harmony.

---

<sup>2</sup> As Jurij Kobe and Janez Kozelj noted in the essay *Sulla Monumentalità nei progetti urbanistici di Plečnik per Lubiana [On Monumentality in Plečnik’s Urban Projects for Ljubljana]* [in:] E. Ravnikar, L. Semerani (eds), *Jože Plečnik: il ritorno del mito*, Cluva, Venezia 1983, p. 39.

Plečnik understood architecture as a problem of tradition and duration: he rediscovered in the past certain objective facts and immutable values, recognisable in important works from which the strength of tradition blazes through.

His projects were compositions of fragments, of autonomous works of architecture that followed a building programme in support of an idea of the city. The compositional procedure of addition “by parts” brought new meanings to “rediscovered works of architecture”. It is in this way – we believe – that it is possible to read almost all of Plečnik’s projects: but exemplary, in this sense, are the projects for such public buildings as the Library, the Odeon, the Theatre, and the Philharmonic (Križanke Convent), as well as the large unfinished project for the city centre. The latter was built on an idea of an architectural promenade that left from the current Prešern Square, crossed the three bridges to reach the covered market and then the new Town Hall, to finally reach the monumental municipal that would have led up the hill to the castle seat of the Parliament, creating a route that would connect the city centre conceived as an Agora with a Slovenian “Acropolis”.

The project for the new Town Hall referred to the idea of an “Agora”, or a “Forum” and was designed for the area located between the river and the castle mount; this space was defined by several buildings that clarified its figure and also included the existing cathedral; the space of the Agora was outlined as a complex multifaceted part of the city that was to take on the role of the main public space together with the adjacent covered market. The hill with its castle, the city’s main landmark, had always represented a sort of “Acropolis” for Plečnik: the design of the monumental staircase that would connect it with the Town Hall (an area designed as an Agora) and the replacement of the castle with an octagonal building that was to house the new Slovenian parliament, would hammer home this analogy.

This interest in the architecture of the city can also be seen in an emblematic project for social housing, dubbed “Houses under a Common Roof”. A project for the area lying between the Krakovo embankment and the mouth of the River Gradaščica, in which Plečnik sought a type of housing capable of integrating with the urban morphology, while also recalling the atmosphere of the “local streets”. This architectural solution, an aggregate consisting of different types of terraced houses, was essentially defined by a “common” roof supported by an entablature and columns that had its own autonomy; within the free space, under the roof, the project seems to present the possibility for everyone to build their own home, while respecting elementary geometries and using only certain materials; the communal parts and the planimetric solution were tasked with representing the civil values of this piece of urban architecture.

In this intervention, the motives for the urban project – which had to be implemented within a given time and also display a unitary character – and motives that let us grasp the individual and private characters of its inhabitants, become intertwined. This project, within the rational construction of the modern city, represented an attempt to come to terms with traits and characteristics that cannot be common in our time, and to let them coexist.

The Work on architectural types, the recovery of figures, the citation of antiquity, are nothing more than attempts to make the work intelligible to the highest degree. The use of quotation through the archaeological recovery of forms – such as solitary columns, pyramids, obelisks, (among others) – meant a ready-made operation (or operations) to expand the meanings of the work as a whole.

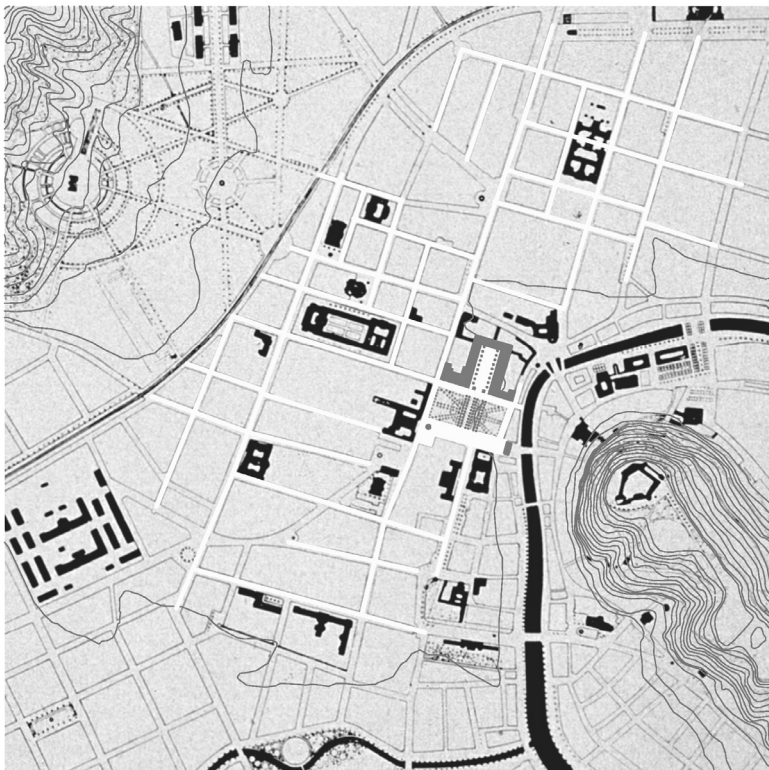
Through the “evocative value of elementary figures” and the use of “narrative fragments”, Plečnik also expressed all the difficulty of proposing intelligible symbolic figures in modern architecture.

For this reason, the “classical finds” used were “callously manipulated” and were skilfully necessary, together with the compositional devices employed, to “invent the words of the Slovenian architectural language,” as Luciano Semerani wrote.<sup>3</sup> In short, to bring a necessary character to what would later gradually become the capital of the Slovenian state.

Plečnik thought, unlike the “functionalist architects”, that “rational” solutions were not sufficient to offer answers to urban problems: the cities we know and see are also pervaded by an atmosphere, they boast their own character, which transcends any purely rational datum of the design. The ability to imagine figures and spaces – the specificities of places are the generating elements of the context and a definition of the urban space – came out of his knowledge of historic cities and architecture more generally.

He firmly believed that the relationship with tradition was not exhausted and, to paraphrase a statement by Adolf Loos, we could say that for Plečnik also, forms that had not completed their task were still necessary, and that only new tasks lead to a change in form.

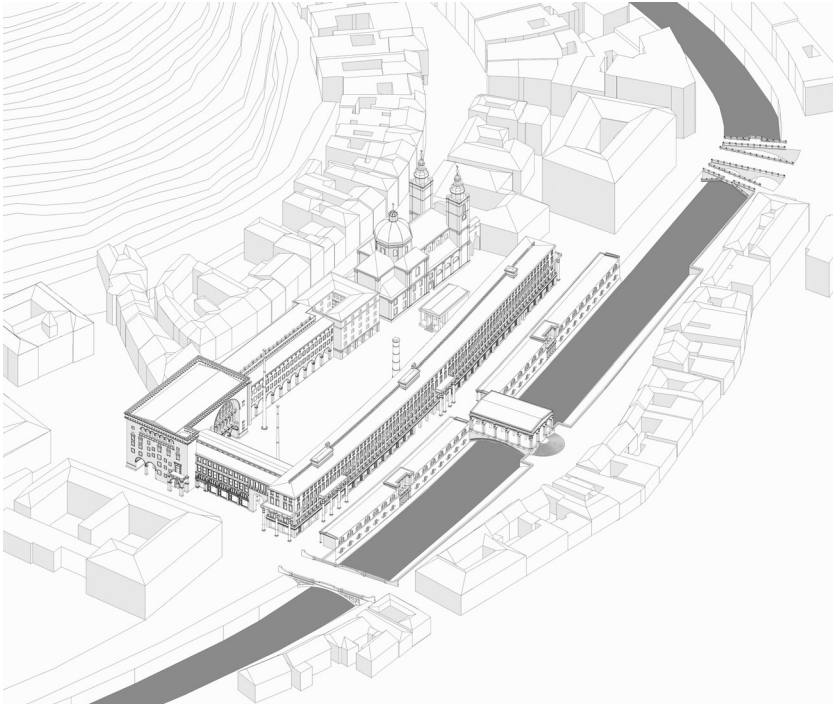
In Ljubljana, through the design of many public spaces and important buildings, the new and the old confront each other without falsification and certainly within a tradition with which Plečnik had somehow reconnected the threads of continuity, operating within a principle of commensuration between the work, the city, and the locations.



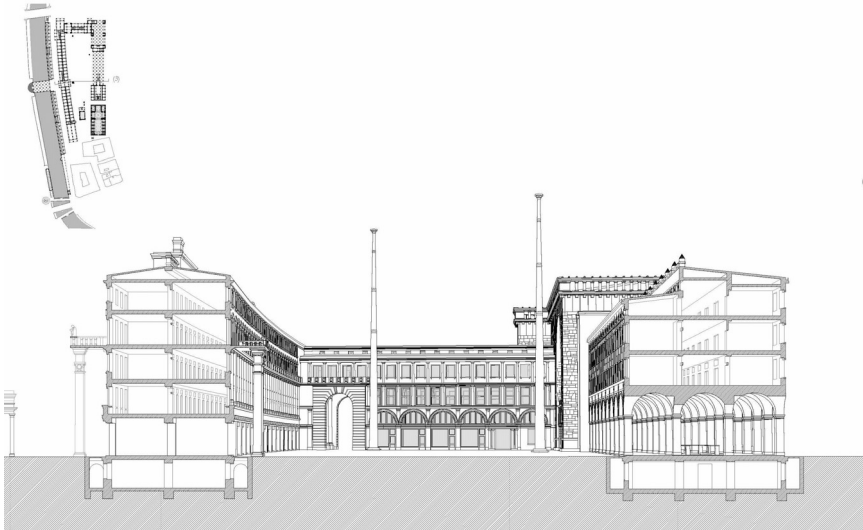
Ill. 1. Urban framework illustrating the overlay of Ljubljana's topographic survey with Plečnik's 1928 city plan. Drawing by Elisa Bandini

<sup>3</sup> L. Semerani, *Il ritorno del mito* [in:] idem, *L'altro moderno*, Allemandi, Torino 2000, pp. 77, 80.

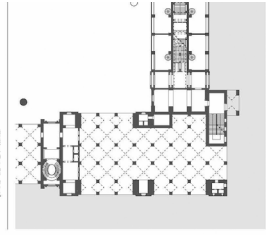
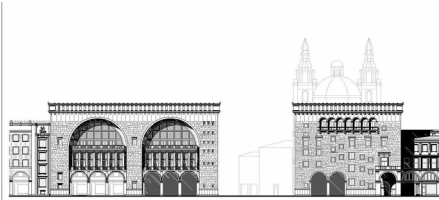
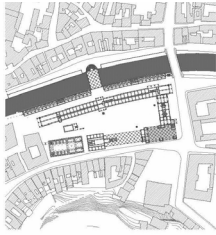




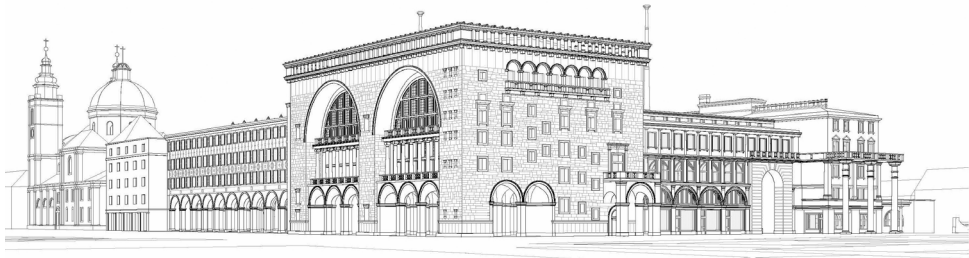
Ill. 4. The palace as a city. The 1940–1941 design for the New Town Hall conceived as a Roman palatium-villa. Axonometric view from the northeast. Drawing by Elisa Bandini



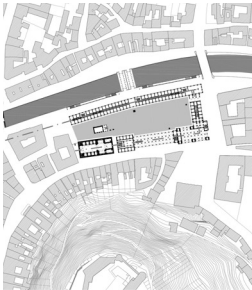
Ill. 5. The new Vodnik Square. Perspective section. Drawing by Elisa Bandini



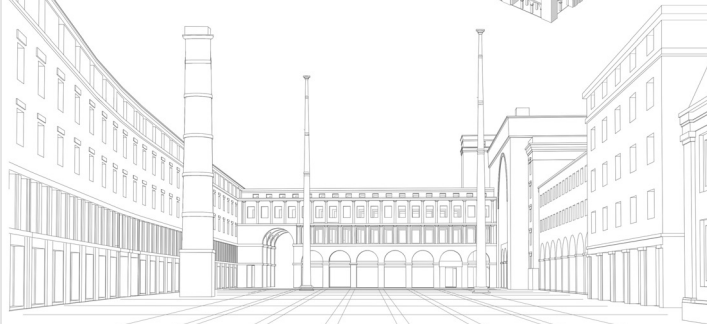
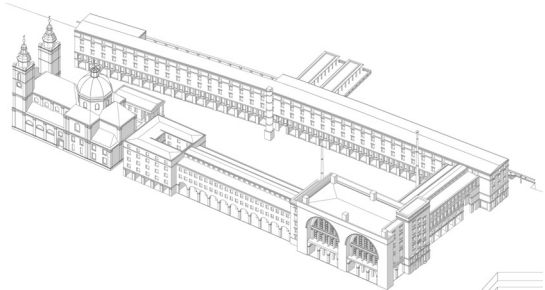
Soluzione di progetto del 1940-1941



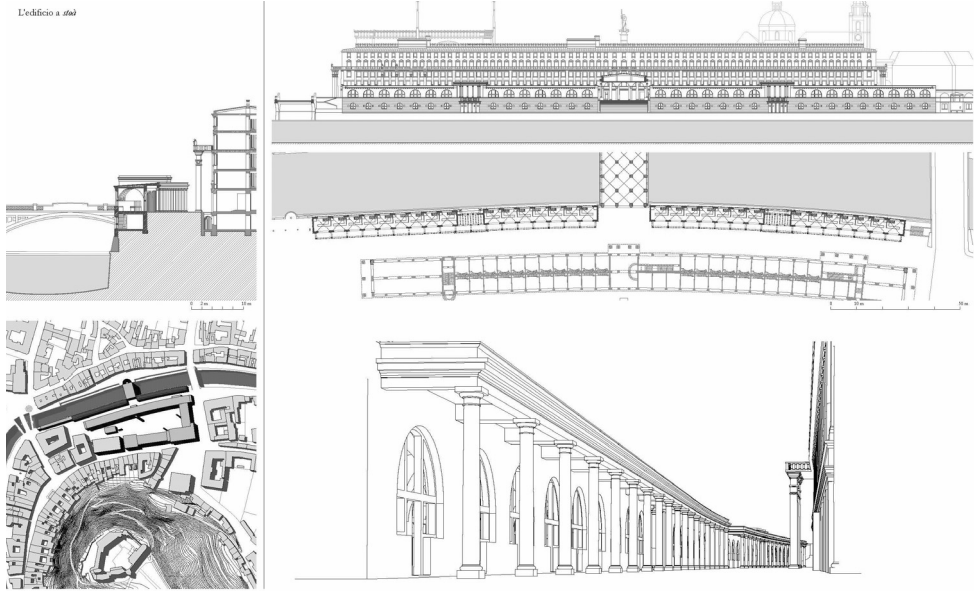
Ill. 6. Project of 1940–1941: the gate and the double portal. Perspective view of the intersection between Borgo Street and Kopitar Street. Drawing by Elisa Bandini



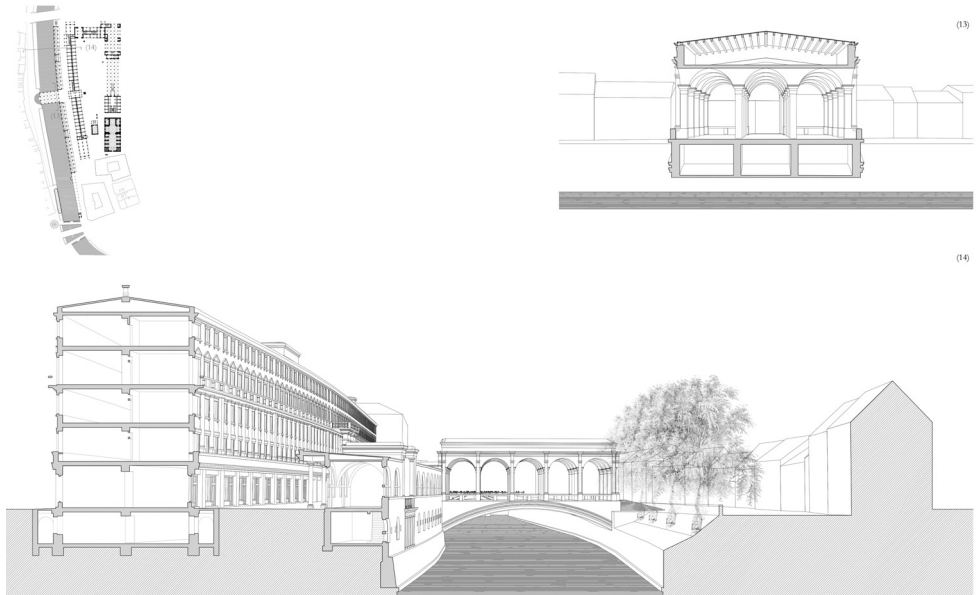
Soluzione di progetto del 1939



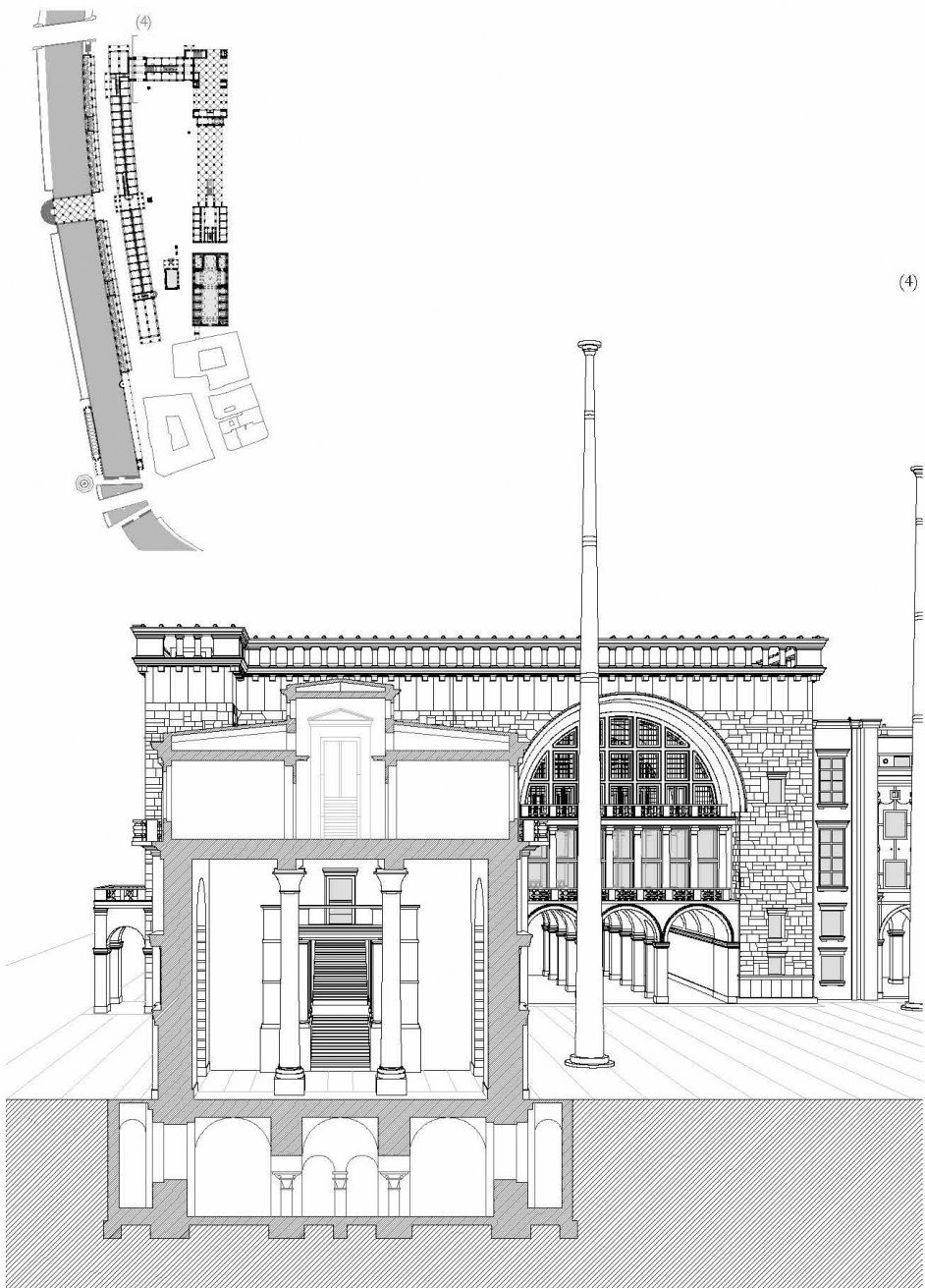
Ill. 7. Perspective view of the new Vodnik Square. Drawing by Elisa Bandini



Ill. 8. The stoa building (design solution from 1940–1941). Cross section; plan (scale 1:5000); plan and elevation; view of the building. Drawing by Elisa Bandini



Ill. 9. The bridge and the riverside architectures. Perspective sections. Drawing by Elisa Bandini



III. 10. The Town Hall's entrance hall/vestibule. Perspective section. Drawing by Elisa Bandini

## References

- [1] Ferlenga A., Polano S. (eds), *Jože Plečnik. Progetti e città*, Electa, Milano 1990.
- [2] Kobe J., Kozelj J., *Sulla Monumentalità nei progetti urbanistici di Plečnik per Lubiana [On Monumentality in Plečnik's Urban Projects for Ljubljana]* [in:] E. Ravnikar, L. Semerani (eds), *Jože Plečnik: il ritorno del mito*, Cluva, Venezia 1983.
- [3] Krečič P., *Plečnik. Lettura delle forme*, Jaka Books, Milano 1993.
- [4] Kundera M., *The art of the novel*, HarperCollins, New York 1988.
- [5] Malacarne G., Rosso P. (eds), *Jože Plečnik. Lo spazio urbano a Lubiana*, Pinacoteca Alberto Martini Oderzo 1996.
- [6] Semerani L., *L'altro moderno*, Allemandi, Torino 2000.

## Author's Note

### **Full Prof. Gino Malacarne, Architect**

(Portomaggiore 1955). Architect, Full Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the Department of Architecture, University of Bologna. He graduated in architecture in Venice in 1981, where he taught until 2004. From 2005 to 2012, he taught at the Faculty of Architecture "Aldo Rossi" of the University of Bologna, where, in the same years he held the position of Dean.

[gino.malacarne@unibo.it](mailto:gino.malacarne@unibo.it)