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Vision and Reality: Evolution of the Winning Competition Entry for the New Town Hall Complex in Ljubljana

Abstract

The urban and architectural design competition for a new town hall was executed in 2009 by the Municipality of Ljubljana. The main question of the competition was if the new complex of public activities and public buildings could reinforce the urban development of the eastern edge of the existing city centre where extensive brownfield areas and abandoned industrial zones had been stopping the urban growth for years.

The intervention site comprises an area of 3 hectares (30.000 square metres) and currently no active public functions or buildings are situated there. However, all around there are many important fragments of architectural heritage from different historical eras (a protected old sugar factory from the first half of the 18th century, a small Baroque palace from the 18th century, a river barrier on the Ljubljanica from the 20th century by the famous Slovenian architect Plečnik and an excellent example of the 20th century modernist architecture in the form of a double round parking garage); however all of these structures are shrinking in terms of physical and functional conditions. A huge effort from the winning architectural team and the competition jury was made to preserve the heritage by the integration of all existing protected and unprotected historical building fragments into the building complex of a new municipal town hall in the sense of design and function. But further development of the project shows that they had underestimated the obstacles related to high investment costs and legal procedures that are not defined well enough. Currently, the development of the project has been halted and, in fact, a very small possibility of realisation exists.

The scope of this paper is to discuss the main reasons for the project failure, which lie in legal obstacles and unsuccessfully provided public investment strategies, and to propose the possible follow-up activities for a more proactive safeguarding of the cultural heritage in the fields of architecture and urban design.

I Introduction

Today, regeneration and densification of the existing built fabric and programme structure of urban areas represent the most viable strategy of sustainable development, which has been tested both theoretically and practically (Rogers, 2005); in urban planning theory it is referred to as inner city development. Renovation as the central strategy of sustainable development of European cities has been formally recognised as public interest in the Leipzig Charter from 2000 (Leipzig Charter, 2013).

The principles of inner urban development (Koželj, 2008, v Čerpes et al.), as such, address cultural heritage and other existing resources of an area. They are considered as equally important development potentials, and through a balanced interaction they can increase the added value of a certain city neighbourhood, street, square or building. Inner urban development, along with the rehabilitation of cultural heritage, reflects not only the recognition of the necessity for the economic use of natural resources, but also the awareness about the beneficial value of a dialogue with the history, thus enhancing the identity and social integration of the urban community. In contrast to the speed of information transfer and the transience of global images in our contemporary virtual world of electronic communication, the physical firmness and unambiguous local spatial and morphological presence of the historical built fabric is a fixed feature that captures time in a people-friendly way. The rigidity and material presence of the existing built

structures are values by themselves and, hence, they manage to evade the assessment of their benefit by using exclusively economic criteria of viability (Kpplinger, 2006). The efficiency of investments to regeneration is increasingly assessed from the viewpoint of legitimacy in the sense of the overall urban community. In this respect, viable investments to regeneration are those that manage to improve the living conditions of as many residents as possible. Over the past 15 years, planning strategies and techniques have been designed in architecture and urban design to enable an efficient regeneration and integration of cultural heritage into the modern urban structure. Notably, the systematic studying of the relevant programme contents in the form of scenarios has become a standard part of the architectural and urban design, i.e. contrary to the traditional practice, when a detailed programme scope had been set out a priori by the investor. The programme scenarios are both the starting points and the goals of design, which are expressed as an unspecified (but feasible) form of the designed built structure, i.e. in a way that it can accept unplanned, different, unpredictable programme structures, without considerably changing the morphology and typology of the design. The ability of the design to adapt to the programme changes is particularly important for a successful regeneration of traditional, historical city parts, where, typically, the new buildings clash with the different types of immovable cultural heritage under different protection levels; however, in their original condition some are more, and others less, suitable for the operation of a modern city. Hence, different modern activities are introduced to the historical structures, i.e. activities that the buildings were initially not intended for. Indeed, the positive evidence of the past cases suggests that this is an economically efficient strategy for regeneration of the extensive brownfield sites and infrastructure facilities. According to K pplinger (K pplinger, 2006), in these designs, the strategy of distinguishing between the old and the new, connecting the built fabric in a congruous whole, has been generally recognised by the profession. The strategy can be realised by using different techniques that differ in relation to the level of congruence between the old and the new. Among them, the most radical technique focusing on sustained (sustainable) regeneration and renovation of the built form is the ‘Swiss Box’ technique, originating from the tradition of minimalist Swiss architecture (K pplinger, 2006). In the approach, the essence of the existing structure (construction or a shell or a combination thereof) is preserved; through the addition of architectural elements and infrastructure it is transformed in a flexible area of a multitude of uses and interactions (e.g. Herzog and de Meuron, 2000, the refurbishment of the Tate Modern, London).

The public, open, anonymous, single-stage, design, urban and architectural competition entitled Integrated development of the Cukrarna and Ambro  Square area, along with the Ljubljana embankment, and architectural concept design of the administrative centre (ZAPS, 2013), analysed in detail in the continuation, has offered the entrants the opportunity to practically test the theoretical bases elaborated in the Introduction, i.e. in the framework of Slovenian professional and social practice.

I Study, Materials and Methods

In 2009, the call for competition was issued jointly by the Chamber of Architecture and Spatial Planning of Slovenia (ZAPS) and the City Municipality of Ljubljana (MOL). The challenge of the design competition was to address the programmatically void and physically degraded areas situated right by the existing eastern edge of the city centre. Due to the proximity of the city centre, its riverfront location and the planned location of the city ring, the area has a major infrastructural and territorial potential, i.e. as a location of central public urban functions and for the expansion of the central public riverfront areas. With the competition, the City Municipality of Ljubljana wanted to test the possibilities and limitations of building a new administrative centre in the area, along with the accompanying public programmes. In the competition area, the past city development left behind a more or less well preserved building heritage, protected under different protection regimes, ranging from strict protection of the building heritage (Cukrarna, the sugar factory from the first half of the 18th century¹) to loose provisions regarding the conservation of the image of some infrastructure

¹ Cukrarna was built in the first half of the 18th century as a sugar factory. In the early-20th century it offered refuge to the homeless, among them to many renowned Slovenian artists of the time. It is under the strictest protection regime. The Sever car park was built in 1969 and was named after its author – architect Savin Sever. It

facilities from the period of Modernism (Sever car park, 1969²), which are no longer in use and derelict. Similarly, the Ljubljanica River channel is also under a very strict protection regime, with the famous sluice gate (by architect Jože Plečnik, first half of the 20th century), which limits the competition area along its entire northern edge. On the other hand, the competition area is extremely well connected to the city road network; in fact, during the elaboration of the competition brief, a new road was built through the area, along with a new bridge over the Ljubljanica, which had been the long missing link of the inner urban ring road³. At last, the competition area was shifted from the peripheral to the central position.

In terms of architecture and urban design, the challenge of the competition was extremely complex and demanding, as on a relatively small surface area of 3ha the reconciliation of technical, functional and design demands was necessary, i.e. for a new administrative centre with a multitude of often contrasting effects. With the construction of the new road and bridge over the Ljubljanica, the accessibility to the area improved considerably; at the same time, the new infrastructure divided the area into two parts: a first one inside the new urban centre boundaries, and a second one outside the city boundaries, i.e. at the periphery. Due to the road width and road class (inner city ring), it is physically impossible to connect both parts by public spaces at the city ground level. Based on the situation described, it is evident that the administrative centre complex should be divided into several functional sets, which would allow for a stepwise approach to construction and different investment models supporting the strategy of inner development and renovation of the versatile range of the existing building heritage by sections.

I Results

In response to the study questions – whether the introduction of versatile contemporary activities into the historical structure, for which the buildings were initially not intended for, is, in fact, in line with an economically viable strategy of renovation, and, secondly, whether this can be achieved using the generally recognised design strategy of distinguishing between the old and the new, connecting the built structure into a congruous functional and design whole – the results need to be analysed on two levels.

First, at the level of theoretical answers, as offered by the winning entry, and then at the level of project development in the sense of construction.

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The group of authors from the architectural studio Scapelab from Ljubljana⁴ recognised the development potential and problems of the competition area; both were successfully connected to modern theoretical assumptions of regeneration and densification of the urban built form. In accordance with the competition design conditions, the bases of the architectural and urban concept design were the buildings of protected and unprotected cultural heritage, as integrated parts of a new administrative centre. The renovation strategy was based on the assumption that the programme, functional and design integration of

is composed of two round volumes, with a single core and a ramp in their intersection. In the nine floors of the car park, there are a little over 400 parking boxes for small personal vehicles. The façade of the garage is made of self-supporting prefabricated elements which make up a distinct uniformly structured, cone-like shell. The partition walls of the boxes partly allow the light to penetrate through, ensuring natural lighting and pleasant atmosphere inside the car park

2 The Sever car park was built in 1969 and was named after its author – architect Savin Sever. It is composed of two round volumes, with a single core and a ramp in their intersection. In the nine floors of the car park, there are a little over 400 parking boxes for small personal vehicles. The façade of the garage is made of self-supporting prefabricated elements which make up a distinct uniformly structured, cone-like shell. The partition walls of the boxes partly allow the light to penetrate through, ensuring natural lighting and pleasant atmosphere inside the car park.

3 In 1893, Maks Fabiani, the famous architect of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, published the Report on the master design of the capital city of Ljubljana, addressing the problems and opportunities of the modern development of Ljubljana. It included the design of the inner city ring. The bridge over the Ljubljanica, which completes Fabiani's inner city ring, passes through the building structure of Cukrarna (MOL, 2013). Author: Marko Studen, co-authors: Ilka Čerpes, Miha Dobrin, Boris Matič.

4 Author: Marko Studen, co-authors: Ilka Čerpes, Miha Dobrin, Boris Matič.

the existing built form with the new one will enable the preservation and restoration of all quality elements of the cultural heritage.



Fig 1: Competition area (<https://srv3dgis.ljubljana.si/Urbinfo/web/profile.aspx?id=Urbinfo@Ljubljana>, 11 November 2013).

Based on the location of the individual structures of the cultural heritage, their original function, engineering features and potentials for acceptance of new programmes, different restoration approaches and economic scenarios were proposed.

Both protected buildings, which are mostly owned by the municipality, were included to that part of the complex that was to be developed by the city, i.e. as the public investor. The extensive, but physically deteriorating, volume of the protected building was radically re-structured and turned into an art gallery, doubling as a monumental entrance hall into the new City Hall. Using minimum civil engineering measures, the small, well preserved Baroque palace with a park was reorganised into a representative and protocol reception area, and efficiently connected with the entire administrative complex. The car park by architect Savin Sever, a formally unprotected, but for the Slovenian post-war modernist architecture an extremely important building, which is privately owned, was integrated into the part of the complex that was foreseen for investments in the form of public-private partnership. The building is a characteristic product of modernist architecture, bold in its minimalist approach to dimensioning of the construction, breathtaking in its exceptional art composition of the round façade, in its completion leaning on the serial production of prefabricated engineering elements, and with the programme – faithful to the idea of a car as a symbol of the modern 20th century urbanity. At the same time, it appears indifferent to its environment; indeed, with its prominent height, volume, and circular shape, it breaks with the uniformity of the surrounding serially designed housing fabric. As it is, the parking programme, along with the accompanying programmes, such as a gas station, with noise, smell and other transport emissions, spoils the sensitive riverside area and destroys the public park area along the river.

For the Sever car park, we proposed the renovation of the construction and building shell, using the 'Swiss Box' method, as represented in the introduction section, and the move of the current parking programme to the underground floors of the proposed administrative centre. Instead, administrative and business/commercial programmes were proposed for



Fig 2: The Sever car park – a view from the west.

the refurbished Sever car park.

After the completion of the competition, the design development revealed that the assumptions regarding the Cukrarna area were correct, i.e. the design documentation for the refurbishment of the building was prepared in line with the design concept. However, the design of the Sever car park refurbishment was halted for the purpose of resolving the many ambiguities connected to the scope and ways of permitted interventions, as the protection criteria are, indeed, not defined well enough. In the preparation of the execution design, the rigid and unacceptably generalised academic standpoint of the responsible Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, i.e. that the role of the Cultural Heritage Service was the protection of the authentic physical substance of immovable cultural heritage, enabled the current owners of the Sever car park to rely on manipulations and extortions related to the purchase of their property shares, as well as extortions of potential private investors to avoid the costs of renovation, along with the chaotic Slovenian legal regulations in spatial planning and cultural heritage protection.

I Discussion

In the transition of the development paradigm of the economy of scale to sustainable growth, the renovation of cultural heritage has become the key strategy of urban development, as it enables the improvement of the quality of life by recycling the existing built form; in comparison with the traditional development model of expansion of built-up areas into the landscape, it has been substantially reducing the use of non-renewable natural resources and carbon emissions. Within the framework of the sustainable development paradigm, the persistent dilemma about the economic viability of restoration compared to new constructions has now been resolved; indeed, the viability of investments in the renovation of heritage cannot be measured by economic criteria only, but rather by using the criteria of general social benefit. New questions related to the implications of the declarative basis into practice emerge. They are both locally and culturally specific. They cannot be addressed in general terms. We need to find pragmatic design solutions to the individual problems based on the compromise achieved among the different interests of all the actors involved. The services responsible for the protection of monuments should take the responsibility for elaborating protection guidelines, which need to be broad enough to



Fig 3: Interior of the Sever car park.

find a compromise between the autocracy of private interests and wishes of the carriers of development in the public interest.

The analysis of the design competition entry for the new administrative centre in Ljubljana has shown that in Slovenia the conditions for the implementation of the renovation strategy as a tool of sustainable development are not ripe. The two important obstacles are the lack of recognition about the significance of cultural heritage renovation for the general development of the society, and, secondly, incomplete legal regulations, making an efficient transfer of professional knowledge to everyday practice difficult. The case of the unrealised plan for the refurbishment of the Sever car park clearly testifies to the validity of the aforementioned statement. Despite the exceptional efforts of the architects and the professional jury to take the refurbishment of the building and turn it into a development possibility, the preparations for execution came to a halt during the initial thorough investigations regarding the condition of the construction and the possibilities of a comprehensive renovation, necessarily addressing the rights of the current owners of the car park. A construction strength study (Granda, 2008) has shown that the structure does not achieve the standards required for any kind of public use, except for apartments; however, the prescribed height clearances for apartments are higher than the ones available. The renovation of the car park into the condition identical to the one before will not draw private investments. The private investors are interested in profit; hence, their goal is to tear down the car park and replace it with a new building with more profitable programmes. Moreover, this is facilitated by the Slovenian legislation in the field of protection of cultural heritage, which enables the investor to tear down a protected building if the renovation costs are unreasonably high, which is a criterion that can be easily met.

Non-formal interviews with the building manager and with more than 400 private owners of the parking boxes in the Sever car park has shown that their main interest is to enforce the right as the owners, i.e. to make profit on the property in the existing state, while avoiding the renovation responsibilities as landowners, as these responsibilities fall outside the scope of their own interest.

Both viewpoints of the key actors in the renovation process of the Sever car park are distinctly selfish and fail to promote development. Also, both are supported by



Fig 4: Winning entry at the Public, open, anonymous, single-stage, design, urban and architectural competition Integrated development of the Cukrarna and Ambrož Square area, along with the Ljubljana embankment, and architectural concept design of the administrative centre, author: Marko Studen, co-authors: Ilka Čerpes, Miha Dobrin, Boris Matič. Scapelab; Chamber of Architecture and Spatial Planning of Slovenia, the City Municipality of Ljubljana, 2009, Ljubljana.

unaccomplished legal arrangements which, in the case of the Sever car park, do not allow the city authorities to enforce public interest and thus preserve the building in the physical and cultural space. Last but not least, the competition winners have been left without the possibility of searching for expert and innovative compromise solutions with a high added value to the quality of living and modern urban infrastructure. The mission of monument protection services is void, as the building of cultural heritage value and the wider area of the city are subject to the processes of entropy and physical deterioration.

To conclude, we find that based on the design competition for the new administrative centre in Ljubljana, we are not able to judge on the success of the chosen design strategy, as the competition design has not been realised. To summarise, renovation of cultural heritage as a strategy of sustainable development of cities can only be successful in environments that recognise the economic viability of investments into renovation of cultural heritage in the sense of long-term improvements of the quality of life for everyone, by internalising the value in the form of proper organisation of social subsystems for a sustainable management of urban development.