





# Building culture in slovenian Alps through space and time

The European Alpine “stone arch” has its own natural and cultural identity. It represents “proto-architecture” that offers artistic inspiration, formal references, therapeutic effects. Slovenia and its Alps are small (like a fractal pattern of the big ones), but diverse in their landscapes, settlement culture and architectural traditions. Historically we were always part of Middle European cultural context (between the Alps, Mediterranean and Pannonian plains). Mostly part of bigger states, their culture reflected in built environment and architecture: from regulated order of the monarchy, the transition to modernity between WWI and WWII, “self-made” modernism of socialism, global capitalism free market trends after independence. The result is manifested in dispersed “urban sprawl” territories, a theme of “healing process” for younger urban planning and architectural generations to face with. Luckily less in the Alps with their strong traditions and topographies, where many compact historic settlements still witness their original urban matrix, (medieval) “spatial language” with its organic logic and very precise urban wisdom.

Some extraordinary designers in Slovenia helped to create high level of architecture culture in XXth century (also in the alpine space): besides two great personalities, Maks Fabiani and Jože Plečnik, the latter started – together with Juan Vurnik – with “Ljubljana school of architecture”, there was also his follower Edvard Ravnikar (who worked also at Le Corbusier’s), who continued with the architecture school and raised many good, modern architects. After the independence (1991) the younger generation reflects global trends, but also continues with architecture of high quality, found in some beautiful, diverse projects in the Alps. Today our alpine communities care more for their urban heritage and renew it, reurbanise their squares, streets and parks and support models of sustainable development, in which high level of building culture is an essential part of.

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## **Keywords**

*Slovenia, history, tradition, modern architecture, contemporary architecture, settlements.*

«The Alps... these great cathedrals of the earth, with their gates of rock, pavements of cloud, choirs of stream and stone, altars of snow and vaults of purple traversed by the continual stars...».

John Ruskin (mid 19th cent.).

### The microcosm of the Slovenian Alps

The Slovenian Alps rise like “proto-architecture” from the pannonian plains and Adriatic sea on the very eastern edge of the monumental, 1000 km long stone bow of the European Alps. They are part of the crossborder “Alpe-Adria” region (that includes small pieces of Italy and Austria) and are composed of three major parts. The highest, central area, is called the Julian Alps (which include the 2864 high Triglav with its group), the northern ridge, that divides Slovenia and austrian Carinthia, is called Karavanke, while the more eastern part are the Kamniško-Savinjske Alps (they define the northern borders of Ljubljana’s basin).

Slovenia is small, so are our Alps, but they have a very high degree of biodiversity, as well as cultural diversity. We can see them also as a fractal pattern or a small hologram of the bigger European Alps. They are very diverse in their manifestations: from landscapes to ethnography, from flora to fauna, from dialects to rituals, from agri-culture to archi-culture. The other key for division of our alpine territory could also be the bifurcation line, from which our rivers flow to the Adriatic (Soča etc.) or to the Black sea (Sava etc.), thereby getting the western and eastern part of the Julian Alps. This distinction partly defines also their cultural influences: the west was historically connected with latin culture and Italy and the north with Austria and the german one. In this sense Slovenia forms one of the bridges between these diverse alpine cultures, inscribing both influences in our spatial dimension, but also carrying them in our “collective memory”. But we possess also our own authentic identity or “soul”, that is combined of stratigraphic richness that spans from prehistoric influences over carantanian, illirian, liburnian, celtic, roman, venetian, langobard... to the final slavic ones. Its essence manifests itself also in high percentage of artists and poets (on one

side) and ingenieurs and inventors (on the other side) within our “character”. They reflect the intuitive/emotional as well as the analytical/rational aspects of our being, which is an important foundation for architects, who have to connect both parts of the self within one personality: the artistic and the scientific one, the poetic and the pragmatic, the “arche” and the “techné”.

### A short glimpse on dwelling culture in the Slovenian Alps

As in the other parts of the Alps, remains of late Palaeolithic communities appeared high in the caves (f.i. Potočka zijalka cave, 40000 years old “dwelling”). More than 5000 years ago near today’s (sub) alpine Ljubljana existed the prehistoric pallafite culture. They lived in wooden houses in villages at the waters of the lake and archeological remains of them, found in situ, form part of an UNESCO site, connected with related places in the Alps.

Later there were many cultures living around the area in their primordial houses/settlements, but more permanent urbanity came by Romans BC, when they established different towns in the valleys of today’s Slovenia (Emona, Celeia, Poetovio...). After the fall of the roman empire and intrusion of different tribes some christian communities escaped to higher, sheltered places in the Alps, where they established small, selfsustained villages (f.i. the escavated and presented refugium of Ajdna). After coming to our territory, the Slavs formed dominant “layer”, that was integrated with old settlers cultures. There are interesting surveys that have been made on the tripartite spatial structure of their sacred sites (“tročan”), where three hills and three corresponding deities are interconnected through a sacred angle that corresponds with inclination of the eclipse. A. Pleterski connects it with proto slavic mythology and calls it “cultural genome”.

In the middle ages, with help of monasteries the urban culture started to be developed again, settlements mostly searching for good sites with good orientation along rivers. They were placed organically into the topography, usually at the borders of the valleys while sparing the fertile land. There is a rich variety of morphologies and typologies

**Opening image**  
Renewal of old Škofja Loka, Ravnikar Potokar architects, 2013-2017 (photo Miran Kambič).  
Ancient alpine city centres: preserving the noble spirit of their urbanity, but at the same time respectfully reurbanising their open spaces to bring back vitality.

appearing between alpine towns and villages, still witnessing their original matrix in their historic centres. Between the excellent ones there are Škofja Loka with its still beautifully preserved historic centre, its silhouette with the crowning castle, two main streets/squares and some churches. Other interesting (sub)alpine towns are Kranj (with its

drammatic setting on a rocky promontory above the confluence of two rivers and a typical tripartite structure of its morphology). There are also the charming Radovljica, Kamnik and Tržič, all of them laying at the foot of the Alps, using them as a beautiful scenographic, but also semantic background setting.



**Fig. 1**

Mountain pasture on Velika planina (photo Bojan Kolman).

The wisdoms of traditional architecture: archaic landscape, formal resonance between mountains and buildings, morphological/typological unity of buildings/settlement, only local materials.



**Fig. 2**

The Hunting lodge by Jože Plečnik, Kamniška Bistrica, 1932 (photo Matej Leskovšek).

The beginnings of "alpine modernism" still manifest strong connection with tradition in volume, tripartite tectonics, duality of stone and wood, but also modernity in facade proportions, flat roof, details.

### Alpine settlements with spatial language, treasures of archaic wisdom

Within these alpine towns and villages, a seemingly random, but very exact “architectural-spatial language” is applied: it uses mountains as first points of reference when composing the directions of its streets and squares. Deep vistas towards peaks, manifesting clear relationship between “nature and culture”, influence the “invisible networks” of complex morphological patterns. These aspects of old spatial wisdom of our settlements, that we are “re-discovering” again, have the precision of a scientific discourse or formula on one hand and a deep beauty that has healing potentials and helps us live fuller, more creative lives.

In the heart of the Julian Alps there’s the Triglav national park, in which there are stricter measures for protection of the heritage. Specially in area of the lake of Bohinj, a beautiful closed valley, we can still witness some archaic built and living cultural forms, from authentic villages to very original, monumental “stog” structures/buildings (wooden “hay-racks” to store and dry hay), the most exceptional composition – with an iconic mountain behind them – found at the village of Studor.

In the west along the Soča river besides other settlements we meet three diverse towns: deeper in the mountains there is Bovec (with its specific “Bovec house” typology), in between there’s Kobarid (where influences from Friuli and venetian plain are already felt) and to the south there’s charming Tolmin (“the alpine city of Europe 2016”). Not far from it there is the beautiful small chapel Javorca, built by the soldiers between the first world war in 1916, now part of the European heritage.

In the east, on the other side of the Kamnik Alps, in the upper Savinjska valley we come to the closed valley of Logarska dolina, a splendid blend of nature and culture, incl. many high altitude rural homesteads, masterly composed of many different buildings.

Even further to the East there is a long (sub)alpine Pohorje ridge, at whose foot lies the second biggest city of Slovenia, Maribor (the city was EU’s alpine capital in 2000). In a similar way Ljubljana, the capital, is also a (sub)alpine city, since it is surrounded by a necklace of beautiful mountain and hill chains.

### Reflection of specific context of planning and building in recent Slovenia

Slovenia was historically always part of Middle European cultural context, that spans between the Alps, Mediterranean and the Pannonian plains. In recent centuries our regions belonged to the Austro-Hungarian empire (until 1918), between the

two world wars to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (except the coastal and alpine west, that was under Italy) and after the II. WW it was the new state of Yugoslavia. All the systems reflected their culture in built environment and architecture as well: the regulated traditional order of the monarchy, the transition from tradition to modernity in the 20.-es and 30.-es and the experimen-

**Fig. 3**  
Hotel Prisank by Janez Lajovic in Kranjska gora, 1960 (photo Janez Kališnik).  
Critical regionalism of the “socialistic sixties”: modern touristic architecture, interpolated between rural context and new sports centre. Concrete and wood in a new dialogue.

**Fig. 4**  
The jumping complex in Planica by Abiro/Stvar/Akka, 2011-2015 (photo Miran Kambič).  
National alpine projects: the sensitivity of integration of big infrastructural structures into a small alpine valley, including daring constructions and landscape design.



tal nature of “self-made” modernism during the 40 years of socialism (it’s peaks are exhibited now in 2018 in a big exhibition at MOMA). The independence brought back the capitalism and the “ideological” tensions between old ways of rather rigid “planning economy” and new ways of liberalised “market economy”. Between regulation and deregulation, controlled and *laissez faire* approaches.

Socialism developed some interesting examples of “localized modernisms”, but also allowed the general built culture and heritage to erode, “inventing” anonymous white cube proletarian type houses, that started to occupy the territories and manifested in growing chaos of the cultural landscapes of the country. The new layer of nineties “turbo-capitalism” functioned as pendulum ef-



fect: people now wanted to express their individuality and the before neglected “historic” resentments, translated through sympathy for different elements of eclectic “neo-styles”. The “cosmopolites” on the other side wanted to be “up to date” and possess their version of a trendy home (concrete, glass and steel boxes etc.), seen somewhere in a journal or on a web-site.

The fusion of incompatible elements and expressions was dispersely spread over the (sub)urban landscapes of our pocket country, a process, unfortunately tolerated by the “regulations” of the state and local communities, who did not understand the cultural and economic importance and value of good planning and building culture.

The task of the younger urban planning and architectural generations, that are starting their professional career in the XXIst cent., will undoubtedly be the “healing process” of these serious (sub)urban problems, that include communal, energetic, economic, ethical and – last but not at all least – esthetic aspects of our specific “urban sprawl” territories.

**Fig. 5**

Renewal of old Škofja Loka, Ravninar Potokar architects, 2013-2017 (photo Miran Kambič).

### **Slovenian XXth century architecture in the Alps (Plečnik, Fabiani, Vurnik...)**

Slovenia is small, but had some extraordinary architects that helped create high level of architectur-

al culture in the XXth century. The pioneers were the ones studying at the Accademy at Wagner in Vienna around the turn of the XIX cent.: Maks Fabiani, Jože Plečnik and Ivan Vurnik.

Fabiani during some years at the end of WWI, caught between three nations (Slovenian, Italian and Austrian), drew more than 90 regulation plans for the reconstruction of the demolished or damaged settlements, creating thereby the foundations of urbanistic modernisation and infrastructural regulations of north-western slovenian towns and villages, including this part of the Alps.

The genius of Plečnik was already a mature personality when he returned from Vienna and Prague: his fusion of etruscan – venetian – slav-ic cultural elements, of which he believed the Slovenes were the descendants, manifested itself in specific refinement and warmth of architectural character and materiality, that succesfully combined principles of regional anonymous architecture with that one of the universal classical origin. As example: his “hunting cottage” in Kamniška Bistrica (1932-34) beautifully reflects the traditional structure of the alpine homes and barns with their tectonic bipolarity of ground floor in elaborated stone and piano nobile in wood, using the modern flat roof and dynamic facade composi-



tion, sewing together two different rhythms with help of the beams in between.

Ivan Vurnik, classically educated as well (and born in the alpine region), first tried to develop a specific “national style”, best reflected in the bank building in Ljubljana, created together with his wife and painteress Helena. In his late years he directed himself towards international modernism, in which he composed some elegant works (f.i. swimming complex in Radovljica).

### After the Second World War: Edvard Ravnikar and his school

Edvard Ravnikar (1907-1993) was the most important architect, educated by Plečnik, but he was such a strong and autonomous personality that he could not just follow the master’s classical influence but had to “escape” from its shade to check the authority of the opposite, modernistic spirit, to Le Corbusier.

He worked with him in Paris, but could not accept the international style either, so he developed his own version of “regional modernism”, that included both influences, but also some others of the contemporary architects (Aalto, Scarpa...). After the Second World War he took over the chair of Plečnik at the Faculty of architecture

and with some other colleagues raised a whole generation of pupils, that developed specific architectural culture or even language (the s.c. “Ljubljana school of architecture”).

He built some bigger objects in the alpine Kranj (where already Plečnik left many of his marks), that define the transition from the historic, medieval city centre to the more open, modernistic urban morphology. His town hall (local community centre OLO) in a very modern, but discreet manner combines elements of antiquity (temple) with slovene vernacular architecture (hay-rack), but also includes the urban design of its wings and the square in front of it (1954-60). His other significant buildings were all manifested in different skin/materiality: the bank (1961/2; hexagonal plan, facade made with concrete elements), big commercial centre called “Globus” (1969-73; the facade made in cortene steel) and the hotel Creina (old roman name of the city), where facade was clad in bricks ((1968-70; “dressing” of the inventive, basic, sometimes “brutalist” construction seemed to follow the long tradition of Gottfried Semper’s “Stoffwechsel theory”, used already by Wagner and followed by Plečnik). The latest building is positioned dramatically – with its cantilevered volume – on the natural edge of the city’s plateau, thereby helping to create the big urban silhouette of Kranj with Kamniške Alps as a picturesque backstage.

### Attempts with critical regionalism: the case of two alpine hotels

This spirit of openness is reflected paradigmatically in two alpine works of Janez Lajovic, a young Ravnikar’s pupil. He developed two interesting hotel schemes in two slovenian alpine ski resorts, Kranjska Gora and Bovec. The first one, named Prisank (after the iconic mountain, seen from the site), was a relative big structure in the middle of a small scale traditional settlement context and at the edge of the skiing lifts. The architectural language he used was an interesting mixture between modernism and tradition: in scale, roof modulation, proportions and materiality. He used wood in the sixties when concrete was dominating the international and the yugoslav scene and today we could say that it was one of the first examples of “critical regionalism”, that culturally resisted the uniforming of either mimetic traditionalism on one side or abstract functionalism on the other.

Unfortunately the hotel (officially due to its old standards) was demolished in the nineties in the phase of privatisation by the new owner and was replaced by a generic “kitsch” structure. The architects were protesting, but could not help...

**Fig. 6**  
Community multipurpose center: Rinka in Solčava, AU arhitekti, 2011 (photo Damjan Švarc).  
Revitalizing the sleepy, small alpine communities: well placed new central buildings with vital programmes and good architecture can revive their centres.





A decade later, in the 70es, Lajovic built another hotel with a different expression: this time set in the valley of Soča river, sitting just at the line, where the first world war front line was running over the fields of Bovec (Plezzo/Flitsch). The volume, all wrapped

into the antracit eternit skin, defines the newly built southern edge of the charming small town, where it lies like an landscape abstraction reflecting the scenery of the big mountain chain of Kanin behind it.



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### New winds after the independence: between globalisation and resistance

After becoming an independent state slovenian architecture of the nineties expressed this new feeling of freedom mostly through a new young generation, that studied abroad (from AA London to Berlage institute) and in their work reflected the propulsive trends of the globalisation processes (*promoted by 6 pack exhibition/book etc.*). This “surfing on the wave of transition” towards neoliberalism and its new investors, that started to develop the real estate market (nearly not present in the socialist times), brought them success and caused a syndrome of slovenian micro version of “starchitects”.

But parallelly the more culturally resistant architecture, that did not directly follow the mainstreams, but integrated some of their aspects with critical distance and reason, was revived by smaller offices (the latter ones became representatives of new times after the big firms of the old system collapsed). This attitude was historically more immanent to slovenian architectural approach, which is usually the case with smaller nations that live at the edges of the big trendsetting cultures. For architecture this means that it is deeper connected to space, place and culture, that it is more stable and permanent in comparison with the quickly changing trends. Our Alps are the region with strong identity and belonging, where these in depth developments were continuously happening and perhaps we can read them most symptomatically through the development of the smallest of their typologies, the bivouacs.

The pioneer of these new creations is the architect and climber Miha Kajzelj, whose three mountain shelters reflect the development of this specific typology through a decade. While the first minimal, selfsufficient structure was wholly integrated into the topography of the mountain, summarizing its slopes with the angles of the building (Kobariški Stol, 2002), the second one responded to the very specific micro site context- it is jammed underneath a huge rock on a large stony slope (Kotovo sedlo, 2005). The last one employed a different principle, since it wanted to make itself visible, specially in the cloudy, foggy weather. Therefore it is a vertical statement, like a small boulder or a dark “high rise” tower located on the grey rocky “lunar landscape” of Veliki podi pod Grintovcem (2009). As comparison, in the last decade, the internationally renowned architectural office OFIS (together with ACT II and Harvard GSD students) built two bivouacs (2015, 2017). Observed as objects of design, they follow a slightly different approach (that resembles more the last of Kajzelj’s shelters), which presents their structures as less functional ones, but more as formally attractive, expressive markers in the alpine morphologies. But they are not any more

part of the “idealistic world” of mountaineers, who built their refugees as vehicles of survival mostly with their hands, since they were mostly sponsored by private investors.

### Major architectural themes and their chosen examples

Architecture and building culture play a very important role in this context. The alpine towns and villages should care for their urban heritage, renew and upgrade it within their urban boundaries, radically reduce the occupation of open land around them. Their (sometimes lost) centrality, their inner open spaces (squares, streets) have to be reurbanized (*example of redesign of open spaces of Škofja Loka by Ravnikar Potokar architects*). Their polyfunctional community centers have to be (re)built to generate new vitality in their communities (*example of Rinka center in Solčava by AU architects, awarded also by “Constructive alps”*). They have to take care for their parks, alleys and rivers, for the human scale of cities, that support integral, public green mobility and traffic solutions (*examples of system of cycling paths and micro architectures of Bohinj valley by Atelje Ostan Pavlin, incl. the bridge by Dans architects*). They have to preserve the identity of their villages and alpine farms, where old and new elements are combined in new, dynamic architectural balance, that includes improving of living standards (*example of Vrločnik homestead revitalization by Medprostor architects*). Big infrastructure projects in the Alps, mostly initiated by the state, should follow open competitions and offer good examples of systematic, but sensible approach to fragile environmental themes like sports complexes (*examples of ski jumping centre in Planica by Abiro, Stroj and Akka; rowing centre in Bled by Multiplan architects and Banfi/Kajzelj/Kaučič/Lemajič; football training and conference centre at Brdo by Krušec arhitektura*) or congress and tourism centres (*example of Brdo convention centre by Bevk Perovič architects*). They should all reflect high quality architecture, urban design and landscape architecture.

The alpine communities have also to refine their attitude towards local building materials, that connect old wisdoms with new technologies (f.i. by principles of building biology, “baubiologie”), specially when building homes, apartments or working spaces, in which we spend the majority of our lives. Therefore wood, of which nearly 60% of Slovenia’s territory is covered by, has to become the essential material for dwellings, which at the same time helps to tackle the serious global warming crisis (*example of Bohinj Barn reconstruction by Ofis architects*). But architecture shall reflect the principles of building tradition also when we build new, modern structures; at least in archetypes, alpine character, major proportions or “intangible” spirit (*example of Podkoren wooden apartment building by Vrhovc Gregorc arhitekti*).

Fig. 7

Appartment house in Podkoren, Gregorc/Vrhovec arhitekti, 2008-2010 (photo Damjan Švarc). Living in the Alps has quality: new dwellings with alpine character within town/village context (using healthy, natural materials: wood, stone) are inviting.

Fig. 8

Renovation of the Vrločnik homestead in Matkov kot, Medprostor architects, 2011-2017 (photo Miran Kambič). Preserving remote alpine farms alive is cultural necessity: done with subtle renewal, preserving the best of old and adding resonant new architecture.

Fig. 9

Cycling bridge in Bohinjjska Bistrica, Dans architects, 2013 (photo Miran Kambič). Sustainable traffic infrastructure for alpine communities: stimulating green mobility by modern constructions with alpine identity, serving inhabitants as well as visitors.



### **A sustainable future for the slovene alpine region?**

**Fig. 10**  
Bivouac on Stol,  
Miha Kajzelj, 2002  
(photo Miha Kajzelj).  
Small, but archetypal  
mountain themes:  
survival within high  
altitude shelters,  
where out of the  
rocky and snowy  
landscapes diverse  
architectural forms  
and constructions  
are being born.

The Alps witness a specific condition: the alpine people were always tighter connected with their way of life (and survival) and their traditions in general, so were their steep topographies, which were not so easily conquered by the disperse (sub)urbanisation of the XXth cent. In this way they preserved more of the authentic urban and rural living and building patterns and have better conditions for long term, balanced, sustainable development, which is their only alternative.

The young alpine generations are becoming more optimistic about their survival in the mountains

and don't just flea to the cities for working opportunities. The trends are changing: nowadays professionals and families from urban areas are moving to the alpine world, cause the quality of living there is higher than in the bigger cities in the valleys. Natural beauty and healthy conditions, the integral presence of nature, that has different therapeutic influences, diverse forms of culture, sports and public facilities, including interesting new job possibilities developed by "working at home" or in sustainable tourism; all these aspects help the Alps to be attractive not only for visitors, but also for living. High building culture, incl. good architecture, can only supports these trends.



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In future some architectural themes, that usually stay outside the main architectural discourse, should also be touched upon: deep spatial connections between architecture and archeology, nature and culture (manifested in situ in rich alpine sites); themes of deeper human perception, supported by synergies between phenomenology, psychology, neuroscience and embodiment in architecture (that revive some “old truths” about the role of balanced environment, supported by scientific evidence; these might help us also in dialogues with politics and investors); readings and markings of archaic, sacred (like modern chapel at Grezje pilgrimage complex by Arrea/Maruša Zorec or a small private chapel near Bovec by Atelje Ostan Pavlin), mythological and geomantic landscapes, usually better preserved in the alpine world (where interesting research case studies have been made in recent times) etc.

Two millions of Slovenians mostly love their Alps, the majority of nation visits them at least from time to time, many on a regular basis. We always had remarkable climbers, that have conquered the most demanding peaks of the Alps, but also Himalayas and mountains on other continents. Therefore the alpine community is present in the public discourse and is also well organized, we have a lot of different societies, of which some are supported by the state or local communities, while many others function on the basis of enthusiasm.

As a proof of all that a decade ago Slovenia got its first modern, newly built Alpine museum (Slovenski planinski muzej v Mojstrani, done by the team of arch. Leskovec). The solution was chosen through an open architectural competition (a tradition in Slovenia, that should be widely supported and developed further!), which is another proof, that love for mountains can well be connected with love for good architecture! That puts us on optimism when believing that with better education of professionals as well as public, politics and investors we can raise the level of architectural culture not only in the slovenian Alps, but in the whole country! ■

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