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**Between Archè and Techne.**  
**Subtle equilibriums in the work of Oton Jugovec**

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Abstract

Some works by the Slovenian architect Oton Jugovec are used to investigate his figurative and architectural research more generally, in which the definition of form can only be understood as the result of a synthesis of relationships between “construction” and “place”. The evolution of his thought manifests a gradual move away from the modes of international standardization, with the aim of developing an architecture capable of extracting and abstracting principles and forms derived from the study of previous epochs and tradition. Attention to places and memory of local identities, combined with formal and structural invention from traditional materials are the elements that distinguish his work and still constitute a topical element.

Keywords

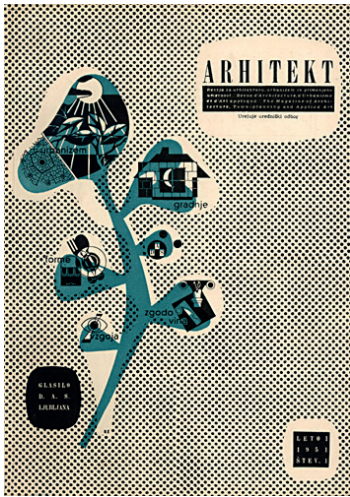
Oton Jugovec — Tradition — Construction

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**Modernity versus genius loci**

If we listen with attention to the writers and thinkers of the twentieth century when they express themselves on the concept of modernity and compare them their opposite numbers of the previous century, we are made aware of a radical lowering of perspective and a drop in imaginative potential (Berman, cited by Nicolín 1989, p.5).

At the end of the 1990s, Pierluigi Nicolín began the editorial of issue 64 of the magazine “Lotus” with some words by the American philosopher Marshall Berman who, in his texts of those years, proposed a series of reflections on the experience of modernity, starting from a reading of the work of certain masters and their special cultural relationship with certain cities. The issue of “Lotus”, titled *The Other Urbanism*, is introduced by an interesting essay by Manuel de Solà Morales in which the Catalan architect rereads, in the key of an “other” tradition, a series of contemporary urban projects by «planners of the ‘other modern’, at one and the same time enthusiasts for and enemies of modern life, [who] have been able to grasp its ambiguities and contradictions without renouncing the attempt to go beyond them» (Nicolín 1989, p.5). The re-examination of the origins of certain phenomena contemporary to him had the sense of focusing on the work of certain figures of planners interested in identifying a method capable of interpreting modernity in the sign of complexity and superimposition on the pre-existing city «and for that very reason determined to seek its most rigorous transformation» (De Solà Morales 1989, p.7), far from the abstractions and absolutisms of that current of modernity that arose, according to De Solà Morales, after the Ciam Congress of 1929. The abil-



**Figg. 1**

Cover of the first issue of the magazine "Arhitekt". Graphics by Edvard Ravnikar Univerzitetna knjižnica Maribor, September 1951.

ity of the selected projects to read the contexts and specific conditions «of each part of the city, its perspective being the great city as a complex and ever richer and more differentiated artefact» (ibid) brought to attention a «complex history of twentieth-century architecture - in which avant-garde and the tradition are often intertwined in the creations of the same protagonists and ideas pass through personal relationships that had little to do with architectural movement» (Ferlenga 2022, p.23).

In the panorama of Slovenian architecture of what has been defined as the third generation of architects, Oton Jugovec can be considered as that figure whose sensitivity, together with a profound knowledge of his own origins, has resulted in architecture in which respect for tradition and dialogue with the roots of the territory have «guaranteed an evolving continuity» (Zorec 2020). With his work, Jugovec has managed to achieve a balance between modernity and the local rural, artistic and architectural heritage, experimenting, over time, with techniques and forms of modernity in search of his own distinctive language. The evolution of his work reflects, on the one hand, the knowledge acquired during his early years of training at the Technical University in Prague, and on the other, the influences of the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana and his teacher Edvard Ravnikar. If from the Prague university he inherited «a solid technical education and working discipline» (Zorec 2000-2001, p. 139), in the Ljubljana faculty he was able to incorporate both Central European and modernist instances. The establishment of the university in Ljubljana by Ivan Vurnik and Jože Plečnik had in fact been characterized by a Mitteleuropean breath «that would strongly mark the whole evolution of the subsequent Slovene architecture» (Mercadante 2023, p.2) through the work of Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, Peter Behrens or the interest in Expressionism and Bauhaus, or the great structures of the Viennese Höfe (ibid). Between the 1920s and 1940s, however, a series of Slovenian architects, including Ravnikar, had frequented Le Corbusier's studio (Hrausky 1993, p. 37), importing the instances of Modernism, later hybridized by the proximity and relationship with Nordic Scandinavian architectural models, also through their work within the magazine "Arhitekt" (fig. 1). The figure of Ravnikar, and his cultural circle, can be considered the pivot of a work of internationalization and cultural exchange that, in some exponents of Slovene architecture, made possible over time that process of *invention of tradition* described and defined by Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm 1987). Particularly in Jugovec's work, it is possible to recognize a kind of evolution of thought that, moving from an initial explicitly modernist attitude, will arrive at a synthesis of modern architecture and Slovenian tradition, in which the forms of the old will build subtle balances with those of the new and, in which, the relationship with the place and the environment will progressively acquire a central role for the project.

In his search for a language capable of representing the *genius loci* and a Slovenian identity, the place will represent «that part of truth that belongs to architecture [...], the concrete manifestation of man's dwelling whose identity depends on belonging to places» (Norberg-Shultz 1979, p.6).

### Construction and Place

In Jugovec's work, certain themes can be identified as central to his research and can be used as keys to interpretation and interpretation for his works. In his projects, the definition of form can only be understood as the result of a synthesis of relationships between "construction" and "place",

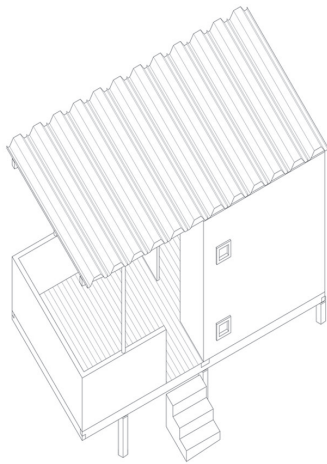
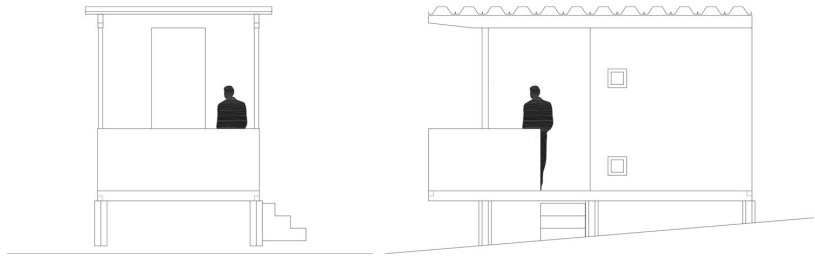
understood according to multiple meanings. This synthesis, which «starting from simple and partial elements, arrives at a complex and unitary representation or knowledge»<sup>1</sup>, constitutes an element of interest and innovation that can be identified as a method still fertile for new future design outcomes.

Experimentation with form seeks and finds profound reasons in the relationship with construction, understood in the structural sense, but also in the choice of materials and the precise control of architectural details that distinguish the parts of the building. In this sense, once again, the architect's training constituted an important starting point, both through the teachings of the Prague School, but above all as an outcome of the debate developed in Ljubljana from the 1950s onwards. If towards the end of the 1940s it was the legislation of the FLRJ government [Federativna ljudska republika Jugoslavija] that defined architects as belonging to the category of builders, it would be Ravnikar, in the following years, who would claim a “different” status and role for the figure of the architect (Mercadante 2023, p.6-8). At that particular moment in history for Slovenia, which required the rapid reconstruction of production fabric, roads and housing, Ravnikar, although he developed specific research into prefabrication and the construction of experimental architectural and structural models, at the same time emphasised the importance of the architect's role as an intellectual, as a creator of spaces. In his opinion, this capacity

requires [...] an observation of social facts and a specific preparation, combined, however, with creative skills and an aesthetic sense. The architect therefore, beyond his technical function, is also a creator of cultural values, just as writers, sculptors or musicians create culture (Ravnikar 1951).

Jugovec's works are strongly influenced by this cultural openness, incorporating his precise technical-scientific knowledge with his interests in poetry and music «in which he moved with equal confidence» (Ravnikar 2000-2001, p.5) and with an innovative spirit.

The technical-structural component will, however, accompany his architectural research, together with his interest in the «parallel and simultaneous development and [...] subjective evaluation of all components, creating the exterior and interior space [which] is the germ of individual expression» (Jugovec, in Zorec 2000-2001, p.139). All of Jugovec's production tends to balance structure, construction and geometry, in an attempt to «find its poetic potential as an expressive structure and as a system of construction» (Frampton 1987, p.21), designing every smallest detail<sup>2</sup>, as learnt from Ravnikar and during his first three years of study at the Prague University<sup>3</sup>. His constructive experimentation will begin with an initial phase dominated by the use of concrete and even prefabricated structures which, passing through a rarefaction of forms and research into lightness, will gradually arrive at the use of wood as a building material identified probably as being more inclined to represent Slovenian culture and tradition. The use of wood in fact, if on the one hand it can be read in the sign of that previously mentioned influence of Nordic architecture developed within the Ljubljana school, on the other hand it recovers not only the popular traditions of local architecture, but also the studies undertaken by Jugovec on design in general and the works exhibited by numerous Slovenian architects in some editions of the International Wood Fair in Ljubljana, the results of which were also published in some issues of the magazine “Arhitekt”.

**Fig. 2**

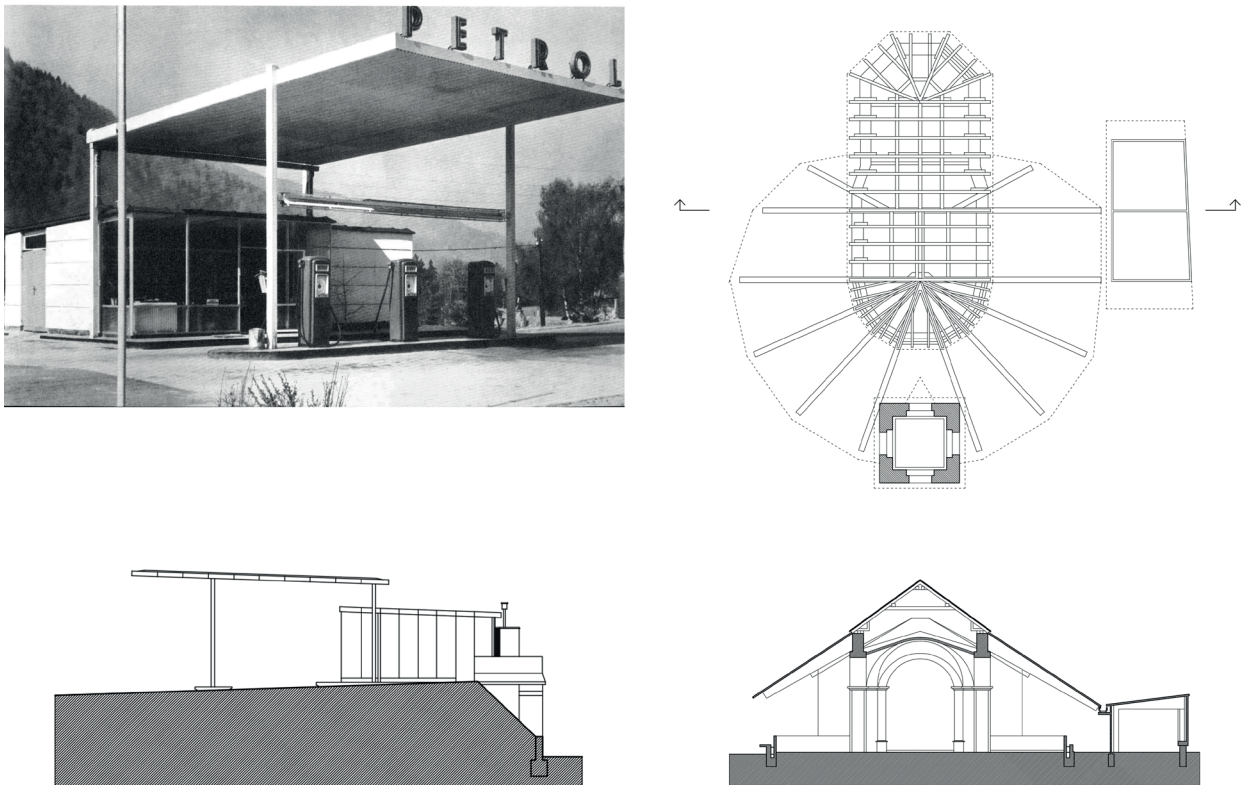
Jože Plečnik, Newspaper kiosk, Ljubljana and Oton Jugovec, Prefabricated holiday homes, Ankaran. (photos from Zorec 2000-2001, p.56 and drawings by C. Pirina and P. Ferrara).

This evolution of thought, and of the method of defining form, manifests a gradual departure from the ways of international standardization, with the aim of develop an architecture capable of extracting and abstracting principles and forms derived from the study of previous epochs, and the tradition of the place, in order to «taking full account of the changeless atmospheric and topographical conditions of a country, which are no longer obstacles but springboards for the creative imagination» (Giedion 1960). In settling in a place, memory and nature play thus play an equally fundamental role as the constructive one. The memory of the place, and of the traces present in it, is combined with the interest and the ability to define, in the project, symbiotic relationships between architecture and nature considered, «in a similar way to Aalto, [...] a symbol of freedom» (Zorec 2000-2001, p.147).

### The roof as a shelter

In Jørn Utzon's famous article entitled *Platforms and Plateaus: Ideas of A Danish Architect* (Utzon 1962), the Danish architect describes the inspiration for his architecture in the strange opposition between the Chinese roof-pagoda and the Mexican pyramid, which are translated into the definition of variously articulated ground-bases and suspended roofs in the form of shelters. His evocative sketches tell of worlds in which, on rigid, horizontal plinths, suspended pagodas float, capable of accommodating habitable spaces and, at the same time, of metaphorically “incorporating” the landscape. This suggestion, and these sketches, well represent Jugovec's series of architectures that articulate the theme of roofing in various ways and can be used as examples of an original thought and design trajectory. If on the one hand these architectures effectively express a logical reason for materials and a constructive coherence, on the other hand they progressively become bearers of the spirit of the places in which they are inserted,



**Fig. 3**

Oton Jugovec, Petrol filling stations and Oton Jugovec, Reteče. Church (photo from Zorec 2000-2001, p.59 and drawings by C. Pirina and P. Ferrara).

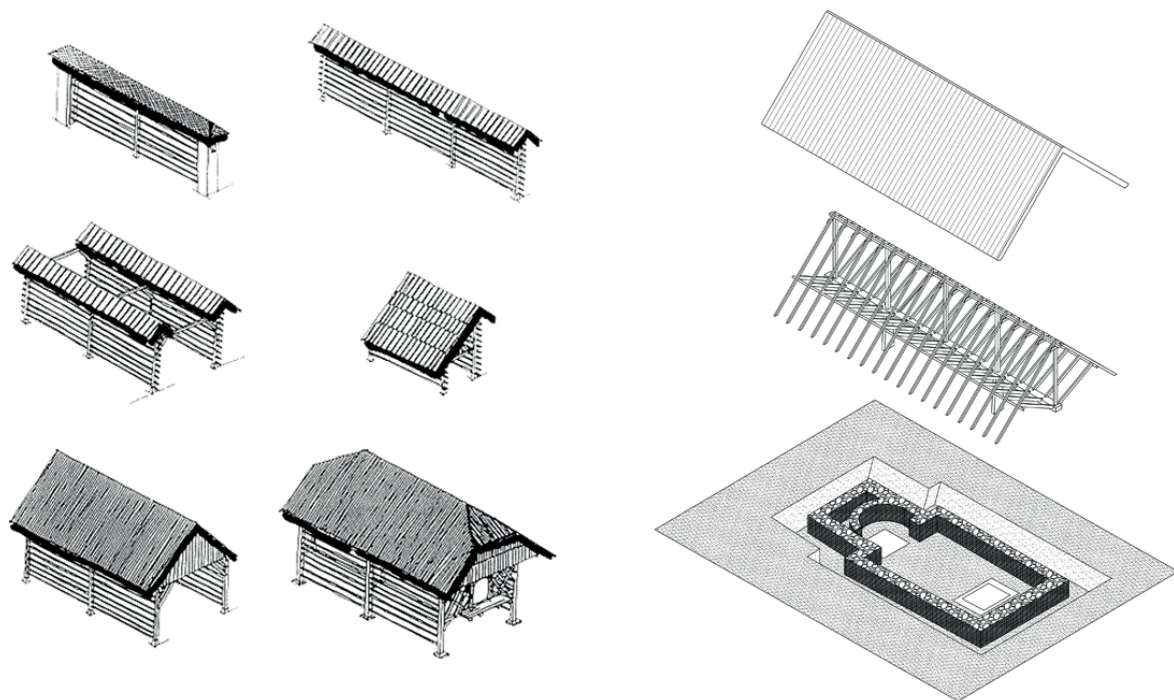
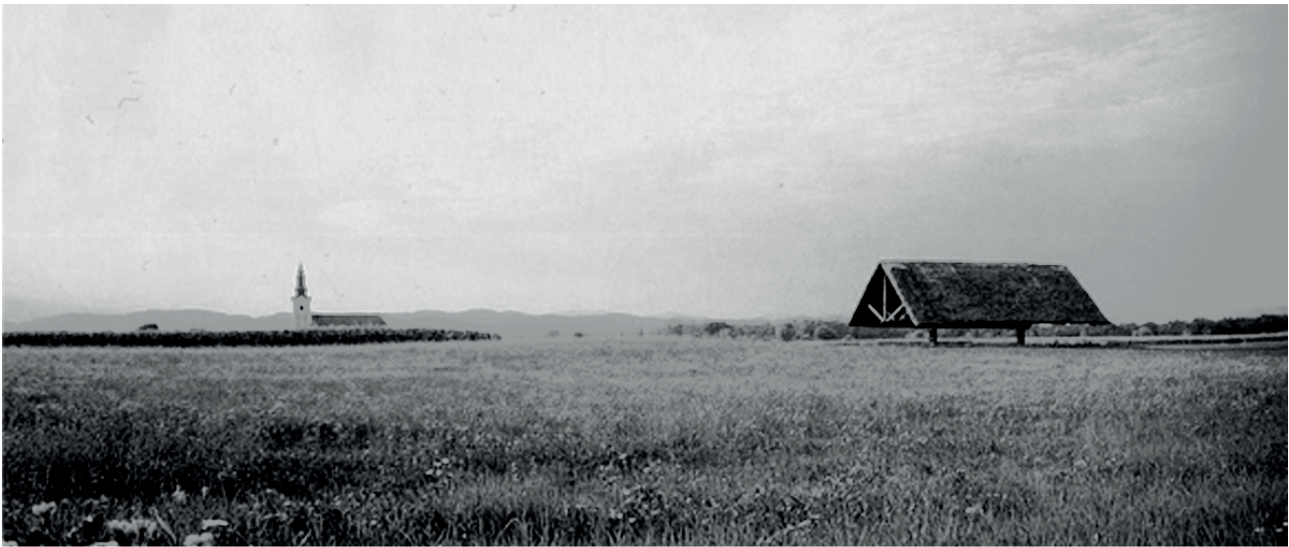
weaving a dialectical relationship with geography.

The slender structures of the prefabricated holiday homes in Ankaran are perhaps indebted to the image of the newspaper kiosk designed in Ljubljana by Jože Plečnik on *Petkovškovo nabrežje* at the entrance to the triad of bridges over the Ljubljanica. Realised in the second half of the 1950s through the assembly of dry structural elements, these structures experimented with innovative construction materials and technologies, and were part of an international debate that animated the new generations of architects in Europe and beyond. Suspended wooden platforms, in the form of stilts, mediate the relationship between the interior of the building and the sloping ground on which the settlement rests. Slender pillars support single-pitch corrugated sheet metal roofs, while walls made of ribbed fibre cement *Solonit* panels define the small 2.60x2.60 meter spaces that accommodate the residences overlooking nature thanks to the covered terrace space that doubles the essential accommodation (fig.2).

At the beginning of the 1960s, the dry experimentation on slender single-pitch roofing systems reaches even clearer definition in the *Petrol* station projects, in which the relationship between roofing and partially glazed volumes defines a greater constructive and formal otherness and autonomy between the parts (fig.3).

It is 10 years later that the work on the reconstruction of the church in Reteče in which the roof, in the form of a shelter, constitutes an element of formal innovation and contemporary grafting onto traditional architecture. The structure of the traditional roof of the church is reassembled above a sort of large suspended 'umbrella' that expands the interior surfaces and radically changes the system of physical and visual relationships between exterior and interior. A stained-glass window, whose design clearly denounces its structurally non-load-bearing function, protects the space of the hall characterised by a slot of light at the foot of the building (fig.3).

In 1973, Jugovec designed and realised his most iconic and best-known work of roofing the archaeological remains of the medieval settlement of

**Fig. 4**

Types of traditional wooden structures of the *kozolec* and Oton Jugovec, covering the archaeological remains of the medieval settlement of Gutenwertha in Otoku (drawings by C. Pirina and P. Ferrara).

Gutenwertha in Otoku, in which an apparently suspended double-pitched roof protects the imprint of ancient walls set into the horizontal plane of the countryside. By accommodating a simple sheltering function, it focuses even more attention on structural precision and on its being an expression of the cultural heritage and identity of those places. That spirit of construction which, according to Luis Kahn, is reflected in a building's ability to clearly narrate its nature by highlighting its structure, is embodied in Jugovec's project in a few precise wooden elements suspended on two pillars, in apparent precarious balance. But beyond the form, it is in the relationship of tension between the roof and the ground that the structure demonstrates its most interesting character. In cross-section, the height of the gap between the lower edge of the roof and the ground line produces a condition where the horizon is cut off and the surrounding landscape is specially framed (fig.4).

If the work refers to the image of Laugier's hut, the logic of the materials and the constructive invention are indebted to the traditional wooden structures of the Slovenian *kozolec* (fig.4), elements of vernacular archi-



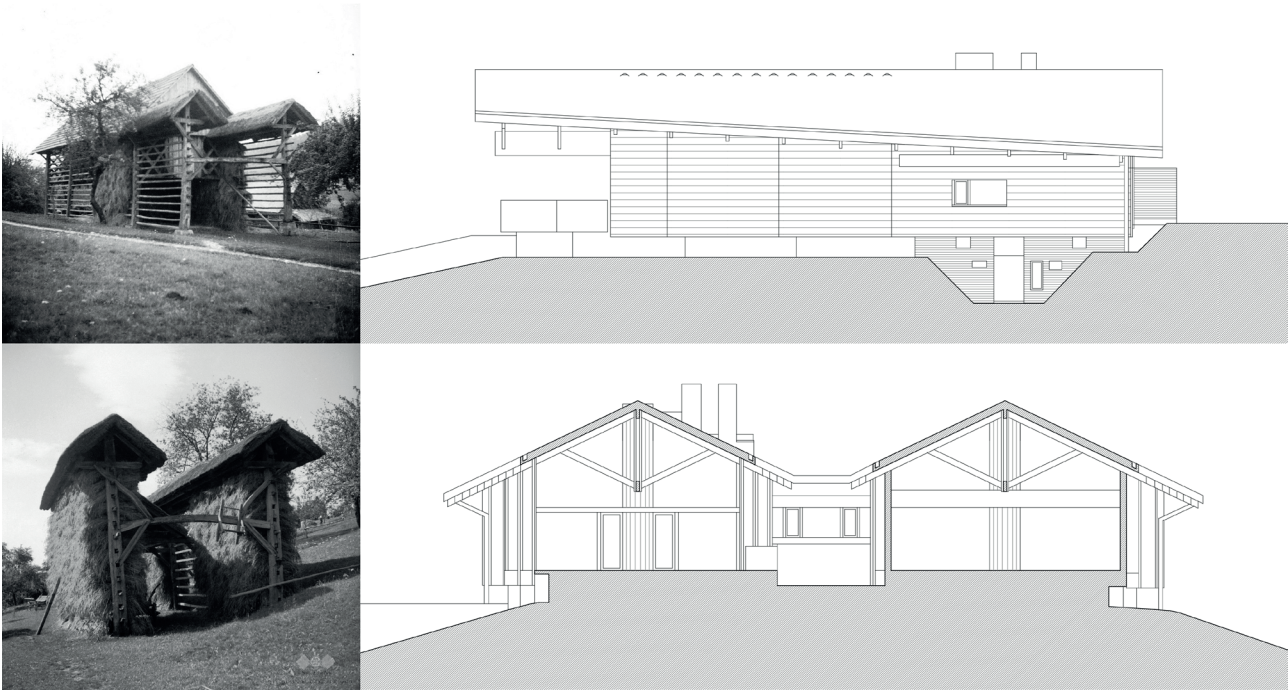
**Fig. 5**

Joseph Wagner, Litografija Ljubljane iz zbirke *Malerische Ansichten aus Krain*, 1842 - 1848 (Digital Library of Slovenia, id. no. QLYI3AXZ). [online].

ecture that punctuate the ancient agricultural territory and characterise the landscape (fig.5). Among the many and varied forms of these structures, the typology using two central supports suspending small double-pitched roofs to protect the hay that was stored on the central racks is particularly striking in relation to the Jugovec project. In some cases of the tradition, the doubling of such structures strongly recalls the image of the last of the projects realised by the Slovenian architect in the late 1980s, of the central building of the Partisan Rog Baza 20. The articulation and complexity of the allocated functions gives rise to a building that interprets, in a complex form, if previously described structural figures. The splitting of the structure composes a volume in which 4 large wooden pillars support a pair of pitches that touch at certain points in search of balance. The tapering in plan of the pitches in the form of a trapezoid translates in section into an equally trapezoidal figure that further articulates the volume and the relationship with the surrounding landscape, which becomes the work's protagonist. Once again, the form and construction of the building establish a dialectical relationship with the site and seek in the horizontality of the basement a dimension other than the sinuous lines of the ground (fig.6).

### Actuality of Jugovec's work

Attention to place and memory of local identities combined with formal and structural invention from traditional materials are the elements that characterize Jugovec's works analyzed in the text. In his work, the coexistence and ability to combine the instances of modernity with local peculiarities, if on the one hand they can be understood as part of that architectural history of the 20th century interested in investigating relations with tradition, on the other hand they constitute the true elements of interest and topicality of his work. If already during the last years of his career a number of prizes and awards had drawn attention to his figure<sup>4</sup>, in recent



**Fig. 6**

Types of traditional wooden structures of the *kozolec* (Wikimedia Common). Oton Jugovec, central building of the Partisan Rog Baza 20 (drawings by C. Pirina and P. Ferrara).

years there has been a return to investigating his architecture in his places of origin. If Maruša Zorec's careful monographic work is in the sign of discipline-specific research, it is interesting to note how some of her works transcend the specifically professional dimension to be used in a broader imaginary. In the spring of 2022, for example, the 27th Ljubljana BIO design biennial<sup>5</sup>, entitled *Super Vernaculars - Design for a Regenerative Future*, explored those

practices rooted in vernacular traditions, systems, and cultures and seeking alternative and innovative narratives for the 21st century. [...] Reviving traditional practices is in no way about nostalgia or looking backwards, it's about saying that often there are very valid and common sense responses and ways of doing things that were rooted in climate, weather and terrain and developed for generations that have been lost in our capital-centric, industrial-centric recent era (Withers 2022).

In the main space of the Biennale, a central position was entrusted to the photographic series *When International Style Went Local: Vernacular Modernism in Croatia and Slovenia*, commissioned specifically for the event by photographer Adam Štěch, which included the *Floating Roof* in Jugovec, perhaps demonstrating the recognition of the identity character of this small piece of architecture and its ability to make «still productive, to refer to an evolutionary chain of figurative traditions grounded in the places of our present» (Zermani 2022, p.4). In his work, «the complexity, the tangle of facts (true or presumed) that clusters around each individual work, the overlapping of different and contrasting temporalities, the intersection of experiences and thoughts» (Settis 2023) attests to his ability to “design” a “new” modernity that is useful to investigate for the challenges of our time.

The “new beginning” [in fact] can only take place [...] through a re-connection with the inherent nature of places, with what still resists in its own recognisability, with what is inscribable in a narrative (Zermani 2022, p.4).



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Synthesis" in Treccani online dictionary. Available in <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/sintesi/>

<sup>2</sup> «Jugovec was a master of detail. He had this knack of how to do something from before. He could have been a watchmaker, and if he'd been in Switzerland he'd certainly have been a millionaire, because he would have invented a new watch» (Potokar 2022).

<sup>3</sup> In an audio recording of his studies in Prague in 1985, Jugovec himself states that his desire to draw every detail probably stems from the lessons he learnt in Prague (Zorec 2000-2001, p.17).

<sup>4</sup> Republic of Slovenia, 1967 *Fund Prešeren Prize* for the construction of the nuclear reactor in Podgorica, 1984 *Prešeren Prize* for achievements in architecture; *Jože Plečnik Foundation* 1979 *Plečnik Prize*.

<sup>5</sup> The biennial was held in Ljubljana from 26 May to 29 September 2022 and was directed by Jane Withers.

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