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The passenger centre in Ljubljana International urban planning competition 2002

1. Introduction

In January 2002 the Municipality of Ljubljana and the Slovenian railways, in cooperation with the Chamber of engineers of Slovenia – Section of architects, urbanists and landscape architects and professional societies (Society of architects of Ljubljana, Town and spatial planning association of Slovenia and Society of landscape architects of Slovenia), organised a public anonymous single-level competition with two invited participants, for the area of the Passenger centre of Ljubljana (PCL). The intention of the competition was to obtain a concept of programmes and urban design proposals, which could be used as expert guidelines for further urban planning documents.

To what extent will the known story about the railway station in Ljubljana be repeated and continued, is too early to say. Our intention is to point out the main elements of this competition and to present the proposals, judged by the competition jury as adequate and which were exhibited to the citizens of Ljubljana and interested public soon after the new Municipal Council was sworn in.

2. Competition rationale

The competition guidelines, with their guidelines determining the preservation of the railway tracks on their present level, stopped a long-lasting professional self-reflective debate about the sensibility of moving the railway tracks running through the city to a lower level. Thus they also prevented proposals with new ideas, which would be feasible and executed by brave investors. The guidelines also stated their regret concerning the decision taken in the sixties about not lowering the level of the railway tracks, which has after decades of building underpasses and passages proved to be counter-effective in city building, but also financially inadequate. Maybe the present solution of the Gordian knot will also be non-comprehensible and regretted after several decades. If put in simple terms, because of the rigid norms regulating the railways, solutions were narrowed down to proposals with underpasses or bridges and consequential design.

Even the dilemma about the railway transiting the capital city doesn't start any debates. The present arrangement undoubtedly enables immediate proximity and access to the city centre, which is a definite advantage over a terminal station that should be placed further away. Nevertheless, who can be the judge, about the city doing itself a better favour in the first or the second case.

Aligned to changed social and economic circumstances and in comparison to the first competition (1983), the basic ideas about the role of the railway station in Ljubljana's wider region have changed. In the last competition it was

seen as the gateway or entrance to the Balkans, while the recent one emphasised the long-term potentials of the crossroads of the fifth and tenth European transport corridors. It was seen in the context of sustainable spatial and transport EU policies, which generate higher market values to areas alongside the future fast railways, thus also promising certain development advantages.

Special emphasis was placed on the role of the transport node in Ljubljana in the wider regional and national context. Not only in the sense of the central Slovenian point of transport transfer and exchange, which would in a consumer-friendly and integrated traffic arrangement stimulate the use of public transport systems in the wider (immigration) area, but also in the sense of providing a created distinct entry point to the capital city. Here we nevertheless have to point out that there are at least four railway corridors or entry routes running through the city, whose present image is far from representative. Changes can be brought about at any point. There is nothing wrong if the first one is in the city centre. The question is whether such zeal doesn't stop on the doorstep – the city's image begins its formation much earlier, than on the exit platform of the central railway station. On the urban level and the level of the city centre the new PCL with its multi-programme content should generate the city centre's revival. In view of the diminishment of its vitality, this appears as a very responsible task.

Because of the headaches brought about by past experiences, the demand for proposals being (financially) feasible was stressed, with sensibly defined phases. Special efforts were demanded for the first phase, which should include the new bus terminal and established quality links running in the North-south direction. Here the pragmatics of the rationale come forward ones again, whereby building from the present condition is seen as most realistic and can lead to satisfactory results. Nevertheless doubts appear about the reality of comparisons with the West European city Lille – which was mentioned in the competition project as comparable to Ljubljana, i.e. the revival of a post-industrial city with a superstructure on its transport terminal. There is a serious lack of courage in the guidelines and the introduction of investors in the early stages of planning. Here one could easily add an extension of the area under scrutiny northwards, thus including the fair grounds.

The area included all the land between Masarykova and Vilharjeva Street between the underpasses on Dunajska and Šmartinska Street, including all perimeter roads and the park in front of the building of existing railway station. The criteria presented to the competitors as decisive and which were the rationale for choosing the three final solutions were:

- functionality of the layout (above all connections between the transport sub-systems),
- functionality of the programme and urban design layout of PCL as an urban entity within the city centre
- quality of urban design,
- integration in the urban space (including the quality of ties in the North-south direction) and relations to existing spatial values,
- economic feasibility of construction and operation,
- possibility of building in separate phases.

How did the most successful competition participants (according to the competition jury) tackle the issues and to what extent did they manage to supersede it with added qualities is presented in the next chapter.

3. The chosen proposals

Subterranean passage [1] – *podhod*

The central motif is the passage running along the axis of Miklošičeva Street, which joins the functions of the railway station and bus terminal halls with entrances to a circular path of the shopping centre towards the West, congress-exhibition centre to the North and connecting passages to the North part of the city. The axis extends northwards across the demolished post office building and ends in the Students halls (Akademski kolegij).

The linear area along the railway tracks is seen as a new urban development axis running East-West and positioned perpendicular to the historically formed North-South axis. Its rationale lies in its connection towards the BTC shopping, business and leisure area and simultaneously represents the third entity connected with the city centre.

The morphology of the layout is respectful for the existing road network and leaves possibilities for connections between the »North« and »South« road network into a comprehensive unit. Design of the building blocks is less retiring with proposals for high-rise vertical landmarks in the West, which are a logical continuation of the pattern of Dunajska Street and are symbolic identifiers of the new urban quarter. With ingenious design these verticals could become a recognisable sign of the area and city, if not, they will become two more boring towers on the city's main avenue. Competition with the castle hill is in no way acceptable.

Certain doubts are also raised by the entrance square-ramp, which runs into the central pedestrian hall. On the conceptual level it does ensure quick access to the railway platforms from the pedestrian axis and city centre, but the proposal will become convincing only when the project is further elaborated and the technical documentation prepared, i.e. the roof construction supporting the railway tracks will have to gain in volume and the planned well-aired and lighted hall could change into a murky, uncomfortable place, while the entry ramp could become too steep and unfunctional. Under the assumption that Miklošičeva Street will be eventually relieved of motorised traffic, another dilemma springs to mind, why doesn't the central axis connected to the station hall run under the level of the traffic ridden Masaryk Boulevard?

Diagonals [2] – *diagonale*

Following the finding that the Miklošič axis doesn't lead anywhere (i.e. it doesn't lead to the main densities of urban programmes) the motif of this competition entry are long diagonal streets crossing the railway tracks. With design and programme differentiation two axes are formed, one running from Dunajska to Resljeva Street, the other from Bavarski Dvor to Župančičeva Jama, thus creating new enclosed urban places, which are accessible all day round. Concentric programmes along the edges and connections psychologically shorten the distances. Here one wonders, whether people would be willing to compensate so much open public spaces with enclosed ones, surely full of offer and comfort, but devoid of contacts with the external reality.

In correspondence to the main motif that transit to municipal public transport is feasible in the long-run, the central diagonal connection is oriented towards the Bavarski Dvor crossroads, i.e. the closest well-served present public transport station. The emphasised (micro)phases of construction, preservation of all presently functioning buildings

and lack of excessively burdening massive solutions increase possibilities for implementation.

In the first phase of the competition the proposal suggested a tram route along Vilharjeva Street, which would also establish a uniform transit point of all transport sub-systems (in view of the previous studies proving the position of the bus terminal on Masaryk Boulevard as extremely difficult, but simultaneously stated that a tram line running there would be suitable). The jury wasn't ecstatic about this proposal, but the author team maintained the proposal even in the second round.

As opposed to the other two award-winning entries, this proposal doesn't have any vertical landmarks, but its uniqueness is in the design of the central station hall, a meeting place of Mediterranean and Alpine worlds. It is positioned above the railway tracks in the axis of the present station hall with open views to the surrounding area. Its position maintains views towards the castle hill and the Navje Park (which after two decades still exists only on paper). The buildings in the Eastern part of the area are purposely left less defined leaving possibilities of invention for future generations.

Sculpture [3] – *skulptura*

Not only the graphic part, but also the general approach to the competition project point out a different architectural background. The central station area (behind and East of the present station building) are covered with an expansive glass roof equipped with solar collectors, which should provide the passenger centre with electricity and collect rain water for various ambiental features of the surroundings. The construction doesn't provide only protection from the atmosphere, but also creates a dignified entrance to the city. It covers the joint square connecting the railway station and bus terminal, while simultaneously functioning as the central motif of the design.

It builds from the creation of a so called urban sculpture, seen in the wider area by its vertically emphasised Western and Eastern concluding elements (a simulation of a view from the castle hill was presented, a practise which could become positive for all proposals dealing with the city centre, I won't repeat the comment about ambiguous vertical landmarks at any cost again). The principle of mega-structures is coupled by no desire for ties with the surrounding structures in layout placements. If the structures alongside Masaryk Boulevard and Vilharjeva Street with their modest heights strive for dialogues and harmony with the existing structures, their layouts convey a completely contradictory statement. The existing roads running North-South end in an apparently un-surmountable new building front, which do however hide pedestrian bridges.

The remaining open space in front of the old railway station is used for building commercial programmes, while the new station square is positioned alongside the station building and directed towards Miklošičeva Street. The experiential value of the public space should be as varied as that of the city centre, which is an excellent idea, but not an easy task and corresponds largely to later phases of the project. There is an interesting idea in the formalisation of the public space concept, which calls for the design of micro-identities for particular spaces with water installations. Even the inner courtyards of the perimeter buildings should be used as public gardens, which would, together with the green roofs, increase the percentage of green areas in the present »desert«.

The proposal magnifies ideas about placing housing programmes in the area. Living in the immediate neighbourhood of singing railway tracks themselves is not an advantage, living in the city centre, however, definitely is. With skilful architectural design and the creation of pleasant living micro-places (orientation, noise alleviation etc.) the idea of »living on railway tracks« is surely interesting.

4. Between the lines

Whether the recently completed competition met all the Slovenian capital city's expectations and granted the awaited push needed to redefine the transport node and other connected projects doesn't depend (only) on the final choice of an urban design and architectural solution. The decisive step will predominantly have an urban management nature. With global transfers of knowledge one could state that today there is more hope for its success, although the domestic practise cannot boast about available trained individuals, who could push the project forward.

The chosen competition proposals will be exhibited indefinitely in the hallway of Slovenske železnice, the national train operator. The recently closed exhibition in the unheated courtyard of the City hall was more than sorry, it would have been better to exhibit the proposals on one of the central city squares – visitors would still be out in the cold, but there would surely have been more of them and the squares would be filled, not only with the temporary seasonal December shopping stalls, but also with some content with long-term significance. In short, go there, take a look and report your judgement. The lack of public debate on such matters is becoming stifling.

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I am extremely grateful to all the participants of the competition, who had the time to speak to me about their ideas.

Notes:

- [1] Proposal by the author group coded 06931- »Podhod«, authors: Klanjšček, R., Pavlin, K., Vrhovec, A., with partners and consultants.
- [2] Proposal by the author group coded 56142 – »Diagonale«, authors: Prelovšek, A. M., Gašparič, D., Stegnar, L. M., with partners.
- [3] Proposal by the author group coded 77474 – »Skulptura«, authors: Volk, A., Huber, A., Castella, K., Günther, M., Schneider, M., with partners.

Illustrations:

Picture 1: »Podhod« (subterranean passage) – layout, winning entry

Picture 2: »Podhod« – rendering of proposed future developments

Picture 3: »Diagonale« (diagonals) – layout

Picture 4: »Diagonale« – perspective drawing of proposed future developments

Picture 5: »Skulptura« (sculpture) – layout

Picture 6: »Skulptura« – axonometric showing programmes and volumes of proposed development

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A City on a Landscape park's edge

Reassessing relations to the marshlands in the municipality as the starting point for rehabilitation of Ljubljana's Southern part

1. The Southern entrance to Ljubljana

The marshlands of Ljubljana (in continuation: *Barje*) are one of the natural and cultural entities strongly defining the city's identity. With its image and character, *Barje* is tied to the city's development, above all as a place of exceptional natural resources, unattractive for building and other urban functions. In fact, the city's development stops on the marshlands edge.

Barje is an area seen by the citizens of Ljubljana as a place of less valuable land uses, such as garbage disposal or illegal housing. The place South of the ring road is more or less formally tied to the city, while it functionally remains outside the daily rhythm of urban life. The preparation of the new spatial strategy of urban development (*orig.* Prostorska zasnova mestne občine Ljubljana, 2002) justly called for a debate about the connecting edge between the city and *Barje*. The conditions in Ljubljana's Southern gateway demand planned interventions and a decisive development policy. Questions about content and »incomplete« design are given additional ponder by the need for defining the municipality's cooperation in the management of the landscape park *Barje* (Krajinski park Barje, 1999).

We suggested to the municipality to comprehensively re-evaluate relations to the marshy part of the municipality's territories, which would be based on findings from various expertise and research. All acts concerning management, control, new programmes, cooperation with neighbouring municipalities and individual investors, should be driven by the idea that the area along the ring road should re-establish its dignity. The city has to assume an active role in relation to planning the rehabilitation and development of the area. The latter should limit itself only to an extent, which would enable functional completion of existing and new programmes. All ideas concerning development should be subordinate to the preservation of *Barje's* natural and cultural values. Ljubljana should participate in the landscape park's management with the notion that development in the park is limited with a protective rationale, which is also necessary for the park's functioning.

The proposal by the Ljubljana municipality for the accommodation of a new programme node, i.e. sports and recreation-park in the extension of Barjanska Street, is tied to the functional rehabilitation of the city's entire Southern edge. The concept of a new urban park on the meeting edge is a major development challenge. The present condition and