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3|2020 **S u d**

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QuAD

Quaderni di Architettura e Design

Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Ingegneria Civile e dell'Architettura – Politecnico di Bari

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South going North

Designing for communities, from Santiago-de-Chile to Ljubljana

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Edizioni Quasar di Severino Tognon s.r.l., via Ajaccio 41-43, 00198 Roma (Italia)
<http://www.edizioniquasar.it/>

ISSN 2611-4437 · eISBN (online) 978-88-5491-096-6

Tutti i diritti riservati

Come citare l'articolo:

JOHAN NIELSEN, YVES SCHOONJANS, KRIS SCHEERLINCK, *South going North. Designing for communities, from Santiago-de-Chile to Ljubljana*, QuAD, 3, 2020, pp. 193-207.

Gli articoli pubblicati nella Rivista sono sottoposti a referee nel sistema a doppio cieco.

3|2020 Sommario

- 7 EDITORIALE
Gian Paolo Consoli

Architettura

- 13 PAESAGGI E CITTÀ DEL SUD. IDENTITÀ E CONTRADDIZIONI
Ludovico Micara
- 29 FESTÌNA LENTE. TRADIZIONE E INNOVAZIONE ARCHITETTONICA
IN TERRA DI BARI TRA XVI E XVIII SECOLO
Alberto La Notte
- 51 IL MODERNO E LA PROVINCIA. RIFLESSIONI GRAFICHE SU UNO
SPAZIO MAI NATO: LA CASA DEL BALILLA DI LUIGI MORETTI A
BITONTO
Salvatore Damiano
- 71 LA MARSICA NEL NOVECENTO. TRASFORMAZIONE, MARGINALITÀ
E SPERIMENTAZIONE
Simonetta Ciranna, Patrizia Montuori

- 89 UNA DAMA DELL'ARCHITETTURA A PALERMO
Francesco Maggio
- 109 IN FORMA DI SFINGE. L'OSSARIO DI BARLETTA E GLI *SPOMENIK*
JUGOSLAVI: TRA IDENTITÀ LOCALI E LINGUAGGI UNIVERSALI
Giuseppe Tupputi
- 125 LA LINGUA AUTENTICA E LA LINGUA STRANIERA. LE ORIGINI
DELL'ARCHITETTURA DI ARIS KONSTANTINIDIS
Vitangelo Ardito
- 143 ARCHITETTURA E RIFORMA SCOLASTICA NEL CANTONE TICINO.
L'ISTITUZIONE DELLA SCUOLA MEDIA UNICA NEI PROGETTI DI
LIVIO VACCHINI, AURELIO GAFETTI E MARIO BOTTA
Matteo Iannello
- 163 DISPOSITIVI SUL MARGINE. LA SOGLIA IN ALCUNE OPERE DI
UMBERTO RIVA NEL CONTESTO MERIDIONALE
Nicoletta Faccitondo
- 177 LA LENTEZZA COME VALORE DELLA TEMPORALITÀ
Valerio De Caro
- 193 SOUTH GOING NORTH. DESIGNING FOR COMMUNITIES, FROM
SANTIAGO-DE-CHILE TO LJUBLJANA
Johan Nielsen, Kris Scheerlinck, Yves Schoonjans
- 209 ABITARE LA PUGLIA. CRITICITÀ E SFIDE PER NUOVI MODELLI
ABITATIVI NEL MEZZOGIORNO
Giovanna Mangialardi, Nicola Martinelli, Giulia Spadafina
- 229 TERRA CRUDA E SCARTI AGRICOLI. MATERIALI EDILI EFFICIENTI
MADE IN PUGLIA
Stefania Liuzzi, Francesco Martellotta, Pietro Stefanizzi
- Recensioni
- 243 LA CULTURA DELLO SPAZIO URBANO. I SAPERI DELL'URBANISTICA
TRA ITALIA E FRANCIA
Leonardo Rignanese

Design

- 253 GIO PONTI E IL DESIGN SPAGNOLO. LA MODERNITÀ “A SUD” NEGLI ANNI '50 E '60 TRA ITALIA E SPAGNA

Vincenzo Bagnato

- 273 SUD COME NORD. IL MERIDIONE NEL CINEMA INDUSTRIALE DEGLI ANNI SESSANTA

Walter Mattana

- 287 AFRICAN DESIGN WAVE. PARADIGMI ESTETICI, MATERICI E IDENTITÀ DI UN SUD GLOCALE

Ivo Caruso, Carlo Martino, Vincenzo Maselli

South going North

Designing for communities, from Santiago-de-Chile to Ljubljana

Johan Nielsen, Yves Schoonjans, Kris Scheerlinck

KU Leuven, Faculty of Architecture | Campus Sint-Lucas Brussels/Ghent
johan.nielsen@kuleuven.be

The article considers the architectural project “Common Places: micro interventions in Nove Fužine” by Plan Común and Tiago Torres Campos in Ljubljana as symptomatic of the growing importance of remote architectural practices in a global culture. Initially designed for urban communities in Santiago de Chile, the project was initiated as a response to the Chilean neoliberal policies in the decade 2010-2015. Implemented in Slovenia in 2016, the design process faced an unexpected complexity, due to local realities and the obligation to work remotely. Through an examination of the genesis, the chronology and the different versions of the project, the article discusses opportunities that allowed the project to travel from South to North, the difficulties encountered in such migration and how the architects responded to these difficulties in designing generic objects that partly failed in achieving its objectives of local embedding.

L'articolo considera il progetto “Common Places: micro interventions a Nove Fužine” di Plan Común e Tiago Torres Campos a Lubiana come sintomatico della crescente importanza di pratiche architettoniche remote in una cultura globale. Inizialmente progettato per le comunità urbane a Santiago del Cile, il progetto è stato avviato come risposta alle politiche neoliberiste cilene nel decennio 2010-2015. Implementato in Slovenia nel 2016, il processo di progettazione ha affrontato una complessità inaspettata, dovuta alle realtà locali e all'obbligo di lavorare a distanza. Attraverso un esame della genesi, della cronologia e delle diverse versioni del progetto, l'articolo discute le opportunità che hanno permesso al progetto di viaggiare da Sud a Nord, le difficoltà incontrate in tale migrazione e come gli architetti hanno risposto a queste difficoltà nel progettare oggetti generici che in parte non sono riusciti a raggiungere gli obiettivi di integrazione locale.

Keywords: *Plan Común, Torres Campos, Nove Fužine, globalization, remote practices, urban spaces*

Parole chiave: *Plan Común, Torres Campos, Nove Fužine, globalizzazione, pratiche remote, spazi urbani*

▪ *Introduction*

Due to the opportunities offered by the current globalization, architecture offices have more and more assignments in foreign countries, far from their home office. Several sources of opportunities have induced this shift. Among these sources are the consequences of major geopolitical and economical changes, such as the fall of the Iron Curtain or the implementation of international trade agreements. The shift in local mentalities and the rise of a global architectural culture play also important roles, with multiple implications, such as personal acquaintances across the world, amplification of exchange programs and international education *curricula*. The rise of communication technologies should also be mentioned because of the growing importance of social networks and online architecture platforms. Together, these sources of opportunities contribute to an internationalization of the market of architectural production. As a result, architects are asked to design projects in remote locations, sometimes being only shortly or even not present on site, without any good experience of the local environment, cultures and backgrounds. Paradoxically, this state of affairs can be considered as a tremendous chance for contemporary architectural practice because, as Georg Simmel mentions, it can be considered that the stranger enjoys greater freedom than the ordinary man¹. Therefore, a profound examination of the whys and wherefores of such remote practices appears as of peculiar importance today. For historical and economic reasons, in most cases, one can detect architects of the North working punctually in the South. The way around is not that usual and deserves much more attention. In the summer of 2016 in Ljubljana, Chilean architecture office, Plan Común, together with Portuguese landscape architect, Tiago Torres Campos, built a project initially developed for the empowerment of communities in Santiago-de-Chile. They designed five plinths made of bricks positioned across Nove Fužine, a functionalist post-war communist neighbourhood undermined by obsolete spatial structures in the outskirts of the Slovene Capital. The plinths had similar sizes, between 5 and 9 meters long, 1 to 5 meters wide and 40 cm high. The project, commissioned by the Museum of Architecture and Design of Ljubljana, was defined by the authors as «a constellation of common places ready for appropriation by an engaged community of all ages»². From the beginning of the design process, the project was confronted to a level of unexpected complexity and resistance from local stakeholders. A critical and strategic dialogue started then between South and North. Through establishing design process chronology and examining intermediate versions of the project, this article shows how the Chilean office intended to embed the project in the local context, despite the distance and the cultural differences and the multiple causes that affected the design and the consequences on the success of the process.

▪ *Nove Fužine: an urban fabric inherited from the 20th century facing challenges*

Nove Fužine is a district situated east of Ljubljana, where the urban fabric meets with the agricultural fields and the Ljubljanica River. As several neighbourhoods built by the Yugoslavian government to frame the urban expansions in the second half of the 20th Century, it was carefully dimensioned and planned to fulfil the requirements of a new communist social well-being through urban densification. The site was selected in 1958 by the socialist government for its excellent ground condition and its low level of urbanization with the purpose to house economic immigrants from southern regions of Yugoslavia and other socialist republics. The district, designed by architect Vladimir Brezar, offered more than 4,000 dwellings and was designed as a self-sufficient neighbourhood with all the public services needed by the residents³. It is characterized by 17, 8 and 12 - storey housing blocks structured around three large open areas, Rusjanov, Brodarjev and Preglov markets. Through the years, the reputation of the neighbourhood became a multicultural place, influenced by soft communitarism and social segregation. In recent years, an accessible cost, spacious dwellings, proximity with the river and extensive green spaces made Nove Fužine attractive for new inhabitants. Nevertheless, today the neighbourhood faces major challenges, such as a high unemployment rate, poverty, difficulties in maintenance, omnipresence of cars, vandalism and a bad image in terms of security⁴. In particular, the underused open spaces represent a significant challenge. Time has passed, the urban policies have evolved and their status is today questioned⁵. Initially designed for recreation, they today consist of disorganised parking lots, uncomfortable pedestrian paths and purposeless lawns. By contrast, at the southern side of the Ljubljanica river, the landscape consists of small agricultural plots which are family owned. The Trail of Remembrance and “Comradeship Pot spominov in tovarištva”, a gravel-paved recreational and memorial walkway⁶, crosses the entire area through Nove Fužine and the agricultural plots and continues toward the Mazovnik hill.

Internationally reputed, the Museum of Architecture and Design (MAO) is located in a small castle situated between the neighbourhood and the river. On an annual basis, MAO organizes the international Call, “Future Architecture Platform”, aimed to detect young architecture offices emerging on the international scene. The Call is an invitation to submit ideas to «shape the most ground-breaking architectural happenings and events that form the core of the European Architecture Program»⁷. On the first edition of the Call in 2015, 291 applicants submitted and 25 offices were selected for the “Future Architecture Matchmaking Conference” held at the museum. The conference took place in February 2016 with all the participants being asked to briefly present their work to an international panel of experts. Among the participants, two offices were noticed: The Chilean Office Plan Común - the only non-European office

of the event - and Context, a landscape architecture office based in Glasgow and run by Portuguese landscape architect Tiago Torres Campos. At the conclusion of the conference, the museum commissioned the two offices for an ambitious project: a pavilion aimed to announce the international Biennial of Design BIO 25. Through this pavilion, the museum wished to initiate a stronger relationship with the local residents and to deconstruct the perception of the museum as an elitist place reserved to a culturally educated class.

▪ *Common Places: a strategy initially developed for Santiago de Chile*

Architecture office Plan Común was founded in 2012 by partners architects Felipe de Ferrari and Diego Grass. From the start, the office appeared as a transdisciplinary practice active in urban design, architecture and publishing activities. In particular, it engaged a profound reflection on the production of urban spaces in Santiago de Chile at that time. As a matter of fact, the period was characterised by a drastic reduction of the state's remaining role in producing urban fabric⁸, under the impulsion of the right-wing president Sebastian Piñera. It was the mere continuation, with a greater intensity, of four decades of neoliberal policies in the country. In the name of market efficiency, deregulations, privatisations of public land and promotion of private development corporations were deeply transforming the city. The political standpoint developed by Plan Común was symptomatic of a renewal of the architectural discipline in Chile in the years 2010-2015⁹. In continuation of the "Penguin Revolution" of 2006 - that saw thousands of high-school students reclaiming education reforms - and the so-called "Chilean Winter" in 2011 - the continuation of the movement among the college students - the country initiated a profound revision of its socio-cultural structures at the beginning of the decade. Architecture discipline was not escaping this self-critique and somehow changed its perspectives. Rather than a celebration of internationally acclaimed pieces, as was the case in the previous decade, the interest for self-reflection and criticism became dominant. This period was notably marked by changes at the head of the PUC School of Architecture in Santiago-de-Chile and a reorganization of ARQ magazine, a major printed publication in Chile. Architecture offices conceived as collaborative structures with an activist discourse such as TOMA, Umwelt, Plan Común or Republica Portatil, emerged on the national scene.

Among the projects of Plan Común, "Common Places" is probably the most significant. It was initially aimed toward the empowerment of urban communities in the districts of Recoletta and Independencia, north-east of Santiago. The method used was a careful examination of the urban fabric, the detection of opportunities and the creation of collective spaces intended for local communities. The objective was to «reinforce the character of public space, using new typologies or transforming typologies with a contemporary program»¹⁰.

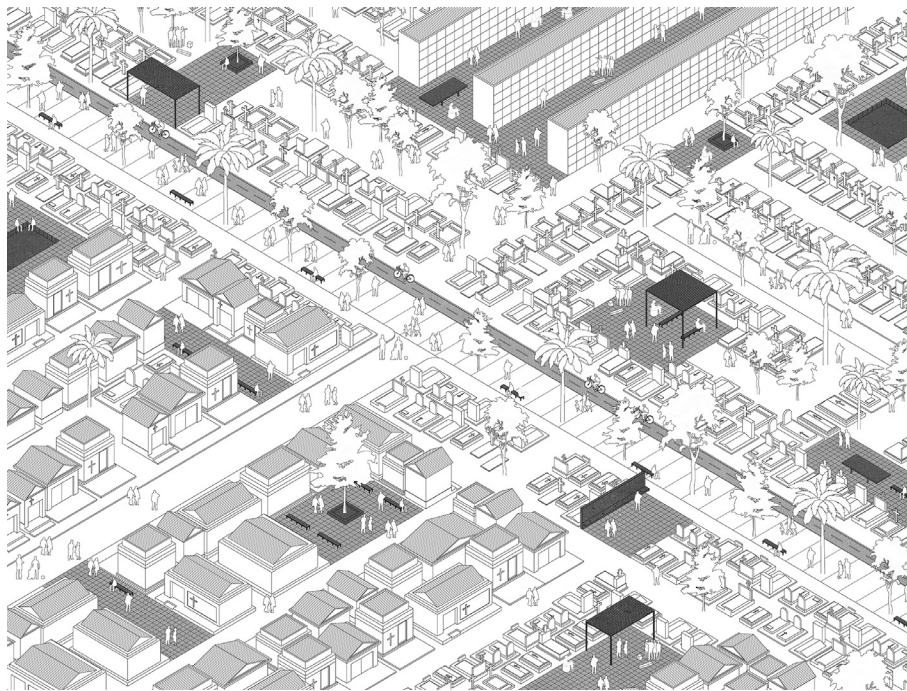


Fig 1. "Living Cemeteries". Case n.45 of "Common Places" research by Plan Común (image: courtesy of Plan Común).

The creation of such spaces, aimed to «reproducing the new and fertile public spaces demanded by the citizenship»¹¹, had to be set against the lack of qualitative public spaces, then disregarded by Chilean public authorities. The project, initiated as a local practice, turned thus into a broader research on the relations between urban spaces and ideologies. Lifted buildings freeing ground level for public space, circular oases in central plazas or extended beaches: the research explored the opportunities for collective activities on public or private land. Interactions between intimacy and publicness were the mainsprings of the proposals. Their formal expression is of a radical construction, highlighting challenges and opportunities in an abstract demonstration (*fig. 1*). Later, the research was even opened to external contributors from all over the world and internationally broadcasted. This wide visibility was made possible through the international connections acquired by de Ferrari and Grass, through their publishing activities¹² and, more generally, thanks to the growing audience of Chilean architectural online media such as "Plataforma Arquitectura"¹³. For Plan Común, the project for Nove Fuzine was the opportunity for a first real-life test of their visions in a country of the European Union. Not having encountered opportunities in the South, the project was about to be implemented in the urban conditions of the North. Therefore, the idea of the pavilion, as imagined by the MAO, was quickly discarded and replaced by an ambitious set of interventions across the area aimed to federate local residents, as an implementation of the strategy developed in "Common Places". Thereupon, the challenge for Plan Común and Torres

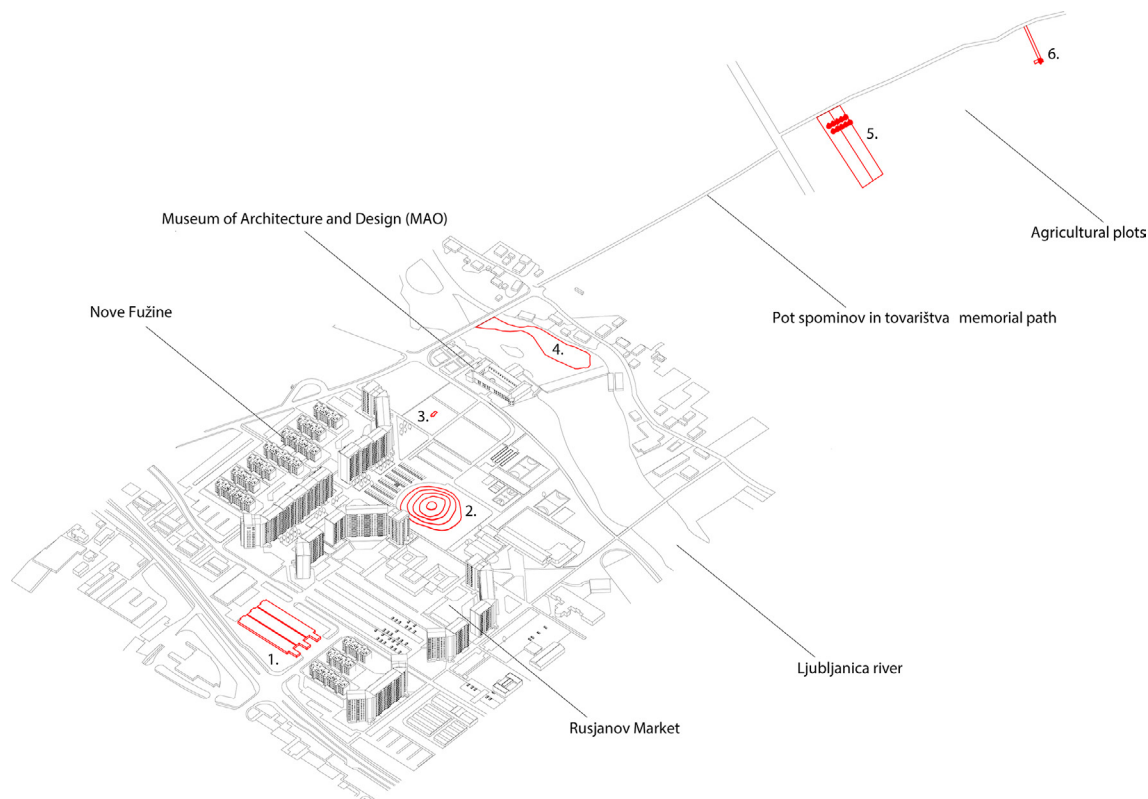


Fig. 2. View of the area of Nove Fužine and indication of the first site selection (diagram: Johan Nielsen).

Campos was to create conditions for a dialogue with local communities through a series of interventions dispersed in a foreign landscape. This could be achieved only through a firm embedding of these interventions in the local context.

▪ *An unexpected complexity*

The first step of the design process was the selection of sites that would be significant for such an ambition, sites that would have social meaning and able to house collective use.

The initial selection was a collection of samples of the context considered as significant by the architects, a catalogue of supposed decisive aspects of locality. It corresponds to a north-south path passing by the MAO castle. In the northern direction, the path crosses the open area of “Rusjanov market” and ends at the limit of the Nove Fužine neighbourhood. In the southern direction, the path follows the Trail of Remembrance across the river and the agricultural plots. Instead of proposing actual buildings, the idea of the architects was to imagine in each site an intervention that was «not creating public space but rather upgrading common places that already exist»¹⁴.



Fig. 3. View of the garage building designed by Savin Sever, part of the first site selection (picture: Johan Nielsen).



Fig. 4. View of the small hill in the open space of Nove Fužine, part of the first site selection (picture: Johan Nielsen).

After a working week on site, de Ferrari and Torres Campos edited a first booklet, entitled “Framing Pre-existences, A constellation of micro-interventions around MAO”.

The selected interventions and sites were as follow (*fig. 2*):

1. A billboard aimed to promote the Biennial BIO25 was hung on a garage building designed by renowned Slovene architect Savin Sever (*fig. 3*).
2. An intervention on a small hill situated in the centre of the neighbourhood. The type of intervention was not specified (*fig. 4*)
3. In the park of the MAO castle, the transformation of a former outdoor pool into a playground.
4. A “pocket garden” at the riverbank.
5. An intervention aimed to frame an area of trees *Fallopia Japonica* as a «recognition of their potential by-product»¹⁵. The type of intervention was not specified.
6. A long bench along the Path of Remembrance, under a remarkable tree.

The selection was aimed to be a basis for reflection; a first draft that would serve to engage with local inhabitants through a participatory process. At that moment, the stay in Slovenia ended for de Ferrari and Torres Campos. Back in their home countries, they continued the collaboration from a distance, between Ljubljana, Santiago de Chile and Glasgow. In the meantime, the idea of the constellation of interventions experienced a complexity that had not been anticipated by the architects, and the project was confronted by significant tensions. A first tension was due to the impossibility for the architects to be present on site, and the obligation to work remotely. This impossibility compelled the foreign architects to count on local partners, such as the team of the MAO and an architect from Ljubljana to contact local residents, community leaders, administration officials and farmers to launch the participatory process. A second tension was due to the short time available to develop the project. After preliminary contacts, it appeared that the inhabitants were actually open to dialogue. As the project had to be designed and built within 6 months, a conventional process of consultation was to be excluded. Therefore, another way to engage with the locals had to be invented. A third significant tension was due to a misunderstanding with the inhabitants. The reactions of the locals to the selection were contrasted; on the one hand, several opportunities to intervene in the open spaces of the neighbourhood of Nove Fužine rapidly popped out. The situation on the other side of the river was proving to be far more delicate. The farmers, owners of the agricultural plots, were frankly opposed to any intervention in their fields. A major source of family income, the land must remain untouched. A fourth tension was due to a misevaluation of the prerogatives of the local administration. Actually, the authorities were not positive about some of the interventions because they were planned in places of local heritage.

As a consequence of these difficulties, the participatory process was reduced to the minimum possible and held through local partners. Besides, the intervention in the fields, at the south of the castle, was abandoned and the intervention situated along the Trail of Remembrance was prohibited by the National Administration

Fig. 5. View of the Path of Remembrance and the remarkable tree, part of the first site selection (picture: Johan Nielsen).



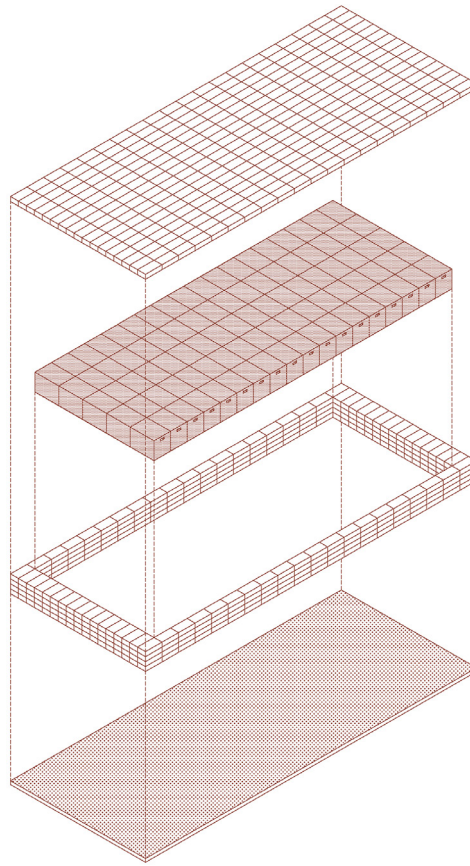


Fig 6. Construction scheme of the plinths (diagram: courtesy of Plan Común).

of Heritage and Preservation (*fig. 5*). In short, it appeared that the interventions should be limited to the open spaces of Nove Fužine, executed in a short time and without extensive contacts with local communities.

▪ *A generic solution addressed to an ideal community*

This series of setbacks led to a major re-identification of the project and the decision was made to standardize the different interventions in an homogeneous set of low plinths made of bricks, sort of podia in the urban landscape (*fig. 6*). The idea came from Plan Común, as a direct reference to the work “Komuna Fundamento” of the Berliner architecture office Kuehn Malvezzi, realized at the 13th Venice Biennial 2012. The project, re-entitled “Common places, A constellation of micro-interventions within Nove Fužine”, was then made of two billboards (one at the garage and one at the facade of the castle) and six plinths disseminated in the open spaces of the neighbourhood. The decision to build a set of similar plinths, described by the architects as «objects of abstract ground»¹⁶, was substantially modifying the

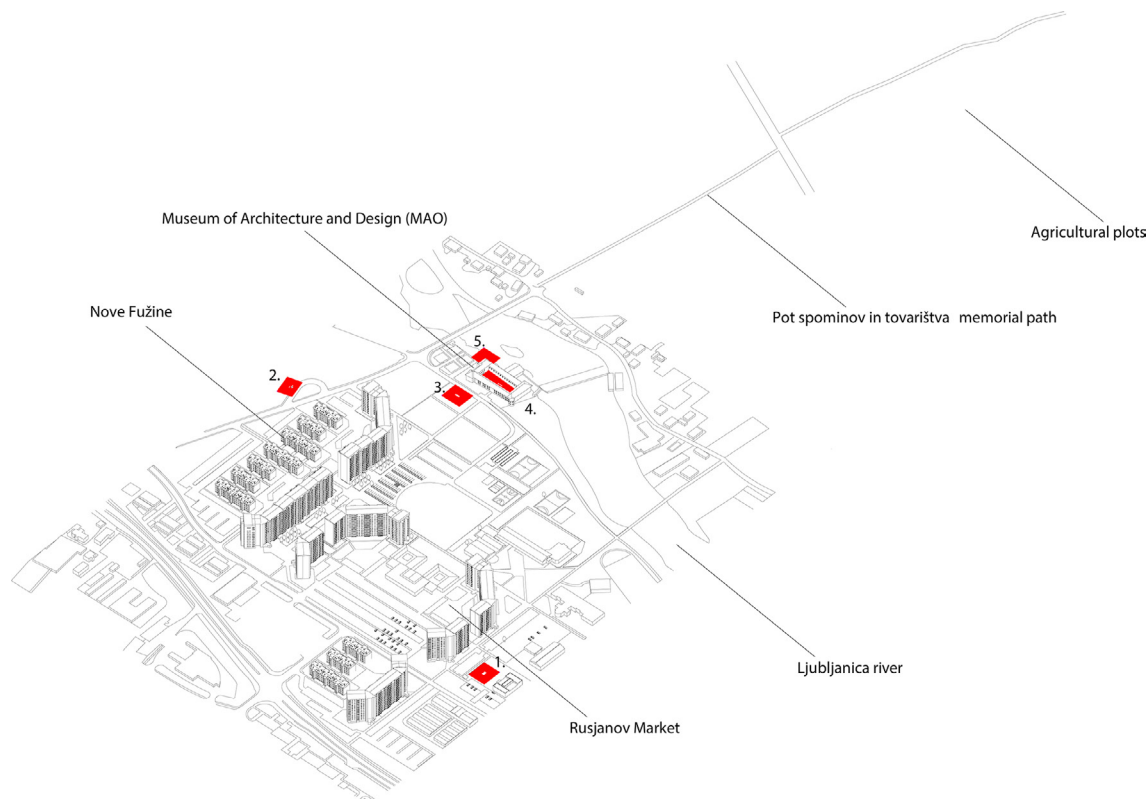


Fig. 7. View of the area and indication of the final site selection (diagram: Johan Nielsen).

scope of the project, its relation to the context and to the future users. Indeed, the focus presented in the initial booklet “Framing Pre-existences” was the promoting of existing local qualities. In this initial approach, the implied uses of the objects, their representations, were diverse but somehow defined; playing, sitting or gardening in significant places. With the plinths, an important simplification was made, reflecting the impoverishment of the local character of the interventions. If publicness and intimacy, driving notions in the project “Common Places”, can be considered as fundamental aspects of the construction of communities¹⁷, in the project of the plinths they remained largely theoretical. Firstly, the plinths are an honest utterance, creating a kind of horizontal threshold to stimulate people to hang back, meet and come into contact with each other. They are recognizable objects, both as a clear physical construction and as a typology, inviting for collective activities and practices of encounter.

They are described by the architects as a shared resource for anyone who would care, a «common good»¹⁸. Torres Campos explains it as follows:

we made a genuine claim by saying that we can use the vocabulary of the plinth, but we can twist it. It is no longer for monumentality, it is not anymore to celebrate power, but to celebrate the community¹⁹.

Secondly, the plinths are supposedly inviting the users to personal engagement. They can be used as a support, «intimate in the activity they generate»²⁰. This intimacy, yet public, opens the opportunities of a plurality of voices, like an intimate speaker's corner that allows a wide range of expressions of personal concerns. Through a conceptual relation between publicness and intimacy, the plinths appear as a generic construction addressed to a sort of ideal community. Ultimately, local context lost its importance and the utilization of the objects was turned into a more abstract – or even vague – notion. An infinity of uses was made possible, whatever the plinth and its position. The simplification of the project into a generic solution as a design response to the complexity of the situation is clearly expressed by the architects when Tiago Torres mentions that

the plinth was clearly the best, and most clear design move we had. It is also the most resilient, the less dangerous and the one that allows the most flexible use²¹.

Thereafter, the project continued to be modified according to local constraints. The billboard on the facade of the castle as a long-term installation was abandoned because of the reluctance of the administration. Besides, the billboard on the facade of the garage building was abandoned due to the impossibility to reach an agreement with all the co-owners of the building. Conversely, the idea of the plinths was kept even if their sizes and positions were adapted on several occasions, showing a great capacity to adapt to local contingencies. Eventually, the built version of the project inaugurated in September 2016 was as follows (*fig. 7*):

1. A plinth situated in front on a community centre, aimed to support the activities taking place in the centre (*fig. 8*).
2. A second plinth situated in a small field, next to a bus stop designed by renowned Slovene designer Saša J. Mächtig.
3. A third plinth located in the garden surrounding the castle.
4. A fourth plinth laying inside the courtyard of the castle.
5. A fifth plinth situated at the riverbank, at the foot of the castle (*fig. 9*).

▪ *Findings and conclusion*

Despite the relatively small size of the intervention, the examination of the project “Common Places: micro interventions in Nove Fužine” implies a necessity to consider international dynamics and local specificities. Observations can be formulated about this attempt to embed locally a project initially developed for the urban conditions of the South and implemented in Europe.

Firstly, the migration of the project from South to North deserves attention as it puts into light networks and opportunities offered by a global architectural culture, with significant impacts on the architectural project. To achieve its migration from Chile to Slovenia, the project benefited from a multiplicity of personal connections and the massive publication of the Chilean production through online platforms.

Fig. 8. Plinth next to the community centre (picture: courtesy of MAO Slovenia).



Initially conceived in the South, the project reached an international character when Plan Común transformed it into an open research project. In Europe, the project acquired a local existence when the international Call of the MAO offered a real-life test to the proposal. This double movement of internationalization through publication and local implementation through a public Call required an intermediate form of the project. It had to become a reflective research, an exercise of radicality, in order to be broadcasted worldwide and, later, selected for local implementation.

Secondly, the pertinence of a reflection developed in the South and confronted to local contingencies in the North can be questioned. As a matter of fact, the neoliberal policies enforced in Chile in that time encouraged Plan Común to reflect on the quality of contemporary urban spaces and the necessity to support local communities. The design method of the project “Common Places” was then initially articulated on the dichotomy public use / private space. In Slovenia, the local implementation of the method was an opportunity to express the potential of the idea, with the necessity to achieve local embedding in order to reach the local communities. At first, the architects developed a quasi-romantic perception of local realities, genuine and, to a certain extent, a little naïve. The subsequent proposal faced a complexity that surprised them. This complexity has numerous causes, mostly due to a lack of awareness of the local reality. Prominently among them a cultural gap not faced by the organizers, a misunderstanding with the local inhabitants and an aborted participatory process, an unexpected bureaucratic interference and a wrongful assessment of the local structuration of the real estate by the architects. The subsequent difficulties prevented a satisfying implementation of the project in the local context. The promising method imagined in the initial project “Common Places” in Chile did not fully bear fruit as if the situation was less dichotomous than initially considered. Finally, the project took a generic twist, with a loss of its political pertinence.



Fig 9. Plinth at the river bank (picture: Yves Schoonjans).

Thirdly, the different versions of the project shed a light on the difficulties encountered in such remote practices in producing contextual design suitable for local communities. It is worth noting that the relation to the local context and the local communities is ambiguous in the initial project “Common Places” as conceived in Chile. As a reflective research, the interventions appeared as contextless and addressed to an ideal community, made of anonymous citizens. In contrast, in Nove Fužine, the architects had the ambition to interact with actual communities. It was the initial objective of the design process. Nevertheless, the difficulties experienced prevented an actual involvement of the communities of Nove Fužine. A common interest was then hard to define. These circumstances forced the architects to reshape the project, transforming a site-specific project focusing on local qualities into a formally generic proposal, where publicness and intimacy remained theoretical notions. Without real interlocutors, the plinths seem to be addressed to an ideal community, instead of an effective one.

Today, four years after completion, some of the plinths are still existing. The plinth next to the bus stop has been demolished, judged irrelevant by the owner of the small field, and the plinth into the castle courtyard has been dismantled for the need of another exhibition. The last three are still there, available for public use, as a memory of a persuasive effort to create a sense of community. Nevertheless, the impact of the project on local minds will be long lasting, and we can guess that the coming transformations of Nove Fužine will be influenced by this project once designed by foreign architects from the South. However, the major effects of the proposal are probably not to be found in Slovenia. Through broadcasting and international echo, the project contributed to launch both the international career of the architectural offices and a better international visibility for the MAO.

▪ NOTES

¹ SIMMEL 1999.

² DE FERRARI, TORRES CAMPOS 2016, p. 7.

³ ZABUKOVEK 2014.

⁴ PLANIŠČEK 2012.

⁵ See, among others, the projects of redevelopment of these open areas such as the Muste family park or the Renovated Embankment of the Ljubljana River on <<https://www.ljubljana.si/en/ljubljana-for-you/environmental-protection/revival-of-overlooked-areas>>.

⁶ 33 km long and 4 m wide, Pot spominov in tovarištva surrounds the city of Ljubljana. It commemorates the barbed-wired fence set up by fascist Italy during the second world war to prevent the Liberation Front activists in Ljubljana to contact the Slovene partisans in the countryside.

⁷ <<http://futurearchitectureplatform.org/about/>>.

⁸ NAVARRETE-HERNANDEZ, TORO 2019, p. 915.

⁹ GRASS 2020, p. 6.

¹⁰ Felipe de Ferrari, interview with Johan Nielsen (February 28, 2017).

¹¹ <<http://www.plancomun.com/common-places#/0-intro/>>.

¹² de Ferrari and Grass are the initiators of the online audio-visual service On Architecture, addressed to universities and private institutions around the world.

¹³ <www.plataformaarquitectura.cl>, developed at the PUC, is the prototype of the worldwide online platform <www.archdaily.com>.

¹⁴ Tiago Torres Campo, interview with Johan Nielsen (September 20, 2017).

¹⁵ DE FERRARI, TORRES CAMPOS 2016, p. 21.

¹⁶ Felipe de Ferrari, interview with Johan Nielsen (Santiago de Chile, May 10, 2018).

¹⁷ Theoretical models exposing constitutions of communities on this base is defended by the current of Pragmatic sociology. See in particular THÉVENOT 2014, p. 16.

¹⁸ THÉVENOT 2015, p. 16.

¹⁹ Tiago Torres Campo, interview with Johan Nielsen (September 20, 2017).

²⁰ Tiago Torres Campo, interview with Johan Nielsen (September 20, 2017).

²¹ Tiago Torres Campo, interview with Johan Nielsen (September 20, 2017).

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