



Interview to the architect Maruša Zorec

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Para citação: RAMALHETE, Filipa; LOPES, João Caria – Entrevista à Marusa Zorec. Estudo Prévio 13. Lisboa: CEACTIONAL - Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, 2018. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Disponível em: www.estudoprévio.net]. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26619/2182-4339/13.2>

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Tell us a bit about your experience as a student and what, if anything, have you taken from that period that has influenced your experience as a teacher.

I studied at Ljubljana's Faculty of Architecture in the eighties. The school was still quite academic and severe, although it was considered more an "academia" than a technical school. The professors' approach was quite reserved. We (students) worked in studios and shared the same room: a group of students with different ages, with one professor that we could select. This is a tradition that continues and that goes back to the time when (Jože) Plečnik taught here – the studio classes were the initial way of teaching, when students (about thirty) attending the different years were together; it was a kind of an office. Still, we



were not working on a topic in any way connected with real life architecture but rather on imaginary projects on topics that would not probably never exist in the real world.

So, when I started to work it was a very big shift. I came to an office to work with Vojteh Ravnikar and he was very different as a person, very open. From the first day, you could notice a different approach; working with him opened new horizons. We worked on very different topics, from scenography to Prague's urban planning – very different scales, programmatic, etc. These were different challenges from which I grew, and I learned a lot, not only about the profession but also about myself. He was really open and shared all his doubts with us, he did not say “I am the only one who knows”. He shared his not sure with us and that was something new and different. His approach towards his architecture: he was a conceptualist, a contextualist (as here in Portugal, it was a very important issue): How to react to a certain context? What is a concept in architecture? How will the totality of the building and the space react to the program and to the site? This is something that I learned in his office.

After being there for four years, he was invited to teach in the Architecture School and he asked me to join him as his assistant. These were very interesting years: we started by having seven students in our studio; and what I learned from him was his approach, the way he treated his students - as mature personalities -, letting them be what they were. We saw him as a guide through the process of thinking about architecture and space. In that sense, I saw that you need to let students be what they are, to help them grow and be different.

In these first years we weren't many, so we would take a van and travel all over Spain. We travelled almost every one or two years to Portugal and Spain, so we really saw all of Siza's work and I think these travels influenced us a lot. We still travel. So, I my development occurred not only at school but also through working in the office; I learned and grew through this and, after ten years, I was more sure than in the beginning about what I knew and what I wanted to do. After this I founded my own office and I became Independent, also at the school. Vojteh died a couple of years ago, I have got my own studio and now I teach independently. I teach different things: I teach the first year's first class in the first semester, which is very nice, and I teach the last year's last class about Renovation. So, I have somehow the beginning and the end, and, in between, I have my studio with approximately thirty students - from the second semester to the diploma, they are all together in one room. We work literally on one task: we pick a site, a programmatic or a topic, and then we start working together, with models and research. Then, separately, depending on the students' level and the year in which they are, we divide the projects according to their complexity.

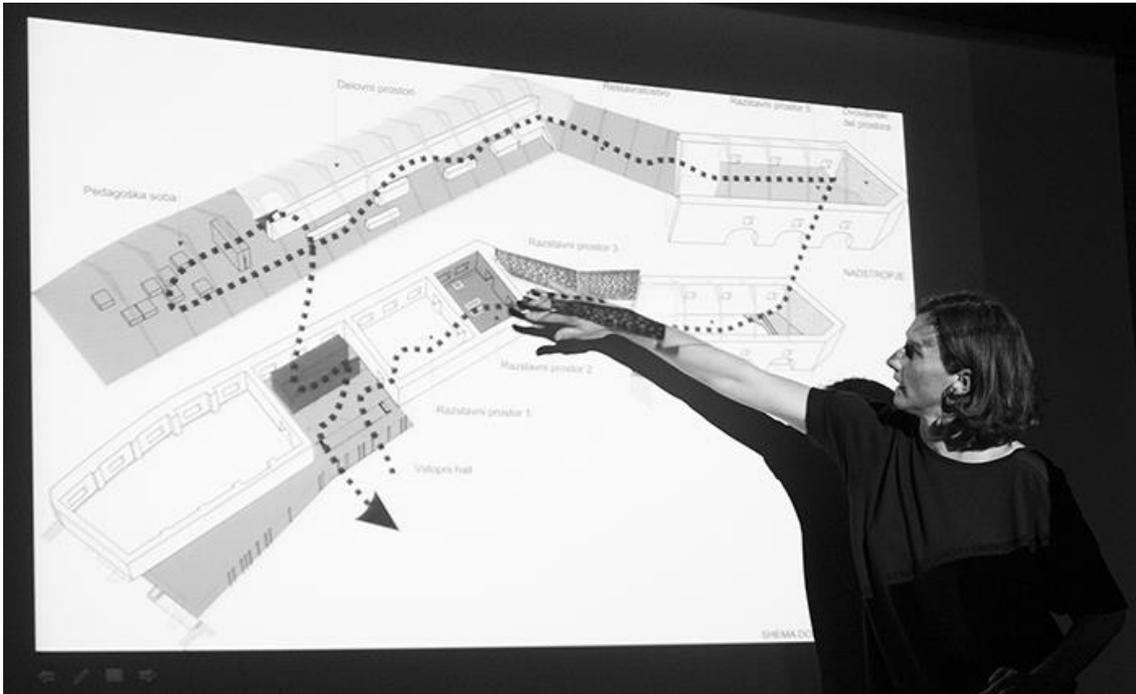
**Is the studio in the school, with a teacher?**

We have fourteen studios which are all run by architects who work in practice. The former dean managed to create a school with people who work. While I worked at the school I also worked at my office, so I have experience at this. Therefore, I am able now to have my own studio. We have other more theoretical classes: History or Construction, and they are not taught by people who work in the profession, in practice – architects. But the studios are all led by architects that also have studios and work independently.

What do you teach in the first and in the last year?

In the first year I teach Architectural Design. In the first year, the students are only working through models: what is abstraction? How do you see an abstract reality? How do you get to the space? How do you bring light in the cube? How do you make a passageway through it? How do you react, in the first gestures, to a contextual site? These are the first couple of projects that we make. In the last year it's more complex and difficult, because we deal with reality and with reading historical monuments mostly, we research about this and about possible interventions in the heritage buildings. It is more specific, to get them to know all the matters in this process and, of course, to make them love the old

buildings in the end. And with this personal affection to convince them to work well in this specific part of our job.



The work developed in your studio and at school is an extension of your office's projects?

Yes, I got this last course in the last year because of my work in the office. Unintentionally, somehow I started working a lot with buildings that are protected heritage, they are state or local monuments. With that processes we learned a lot with those processes: how to deal with all the people who are protecting them, how to discuss and how to develop the project. To continue, to introduce modern architecture principles into the "old buildings": how to introduce a three-floor plan inside a corridor system or typologies. That is what we are trying to do: we are trying to liberate the space and accommodate it for the needs of today. I try to pass these experiences to students as well. It is not easy, because we are not together all the time, they don't go through all the processes in this. And in this field the process is very important. The project is developed through the process, you don't just do something, pass it forward and it is built. You make design a concept, then you discuss it and make compromises - even during the construction, you may find something and you may need to change the project. So, it is an interesting job. For me, it is more interesting than building something new.

You teach other subjects besides theoretical project. Were those subjects, like history, important to you when you were a student?

Yes, they were, but they were not well taught, some subjects were not so well presented. It was more my personal affection for history. And there were some lectures that we had that were not particularly connected with history but with the development of our civilization's approach towards topography, like the Greek example. I profited a lot from the travels. After my trip to Greece with the students... I said "we have to go every year", because it is from this that we see where our roots really are. We had one-week trips to Tuscany, in which we would draw and sketch. I did it again, three or four years ago, with this same professor - I had done it twenty-five years ago – because I wanted to join him. In fact, I did not know what I would get, but I thought that then I had learned things that I was not aware of, which I am still using and doing the same way he had explained to us: how to see space, how to draw your first ideas very clearly... I believe that we learn things, we store them in our mind and they sometimes surface intentionally.





There is another change from our time as students: the world, the offices and the students are much more ‘international’. How do you feel about this challenge?

We don't have much experience of that in the office. We started working on projects abroad, but we mostly take our students to work with us, from my school's studio to the office - and it is through this that they come for competition and then they leave. I find this very good for the process, they are part of the team and, in that period, they develop and progress very quickly. Then, also in the school, we take good older students to teach the younger ones. So, this is a kind of circular process and then, slowly, the best come to work in the office. But the school's international students, some of them, that come on Erasmus, are really interesting: they come from another environment which sometimes is more open than ours, they have to prove themselves in a new team. Although some of them only come for tourism... So, in the studio I don't have much experience of that. There is one thing that I have noticed a bit: the language barrier. Although we all speak English, still, the communication is not so deep, and that's sad. I miss this, especially in the courses that I teach - I want to teach in my language, then I have another class in English, so it is quite complicated. But I think it enriches us anyway, we need to continue this because there are students coming with their references, their approaches and that also widens our horizons.

In your school, like us here at Autónoma School, do you use more and more foreign territories as a metaphor project? For instance, our fourth-year students are now studying Athens. Do you also have that kind of approach?

Not so much, although I plan to do it, I think it is important. It is not the same as travelling. On travels, you go to a place, you study something, you read and you see things. But if you work on a city like Lisbon, for instance, you need to analyse the topography, the first settlements and understand the history of the development. Then, if you stay in a city for a week, just to live there for a while, it touches you much more deeply and this understanding is connected with love. So, it is not just the initial affection... I noticed this when I was in Vienna during three weeks for a workshop. Now, every time I go to Vienna I feel a bit at home and I'm completely well orientated - I know how the city grew, where the focus is. It is also very important to have a certain distance between you and the place you live in to better understand that place.



Are there any new architects in Slovenia who you follow and that you would like to share with us?

Yes, there are many interesting architects: Bevk Perović with Vasa J. Perović, and Dekleva Gregorič are teams that are doing good things... They are a little younger than me or about my age. They are a quite strong generation and now, slowly, a younger generation is becoming known: our students, such as Matjaž Bolčina, they have slowly started working on their own. I think there is a good atmosphere, which we want to continue and somehow want to be more connected than in my time as a student. In our time our generation was so split... We were not connected with the older generation (the 'grandfathers' generation'). But today we wish that this continuity would be more present, as we have learned from Portugal, I suppose. We are always looking to Portugal's examples, how things continue and how modern architecture is working with the past as a part of an integral history - I think this is something our country was not so lucky with.