

Gizmo Architecture

Or How Ofis Arhitekti Rework the Idea of Aesthetics in Architecture

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A return to capitalism

With the Republic of Slovenia declaring its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 Slovenia became an honourable member of the world of late capitalism, and in 2004 a member of the European Union. It was what you might call a soft revolution; no long and bloody wars were fought, as we know from the picture books of history. What was once put on hold during the era of President Josi Broz Tito (from 1943 till 1980), namely a society under the guidance of capitalism, was with one declaration of independence invited to take control. The question was not how can we start from scratch and reinvent a new society, clearing the landscape of all existing values, including those of Communism and capitalism. No, the question was how Slovenia could quickly and efficiently make a great leap forward via a return to capitalism. The only complication was that, knocking at the door, late capitalism had converted itself from an industrial to a post-industrial global information society. The classical city, defined in the past as a collective space, had given way to a more private, more commercial city where shopping, tourism and the media changed the very definition of the city and its architecture. In dealing with the urban atomisation of advanced capitalism, the disintegration of social and spatial units, and a culture of sprawl with incidental wonders built by star architects, Slovenia had to look and go abroad—something she had already benefited from in the past due to her proximity to neighbouring countries Austria and Italy.

It would take too long to explain in detail why Slovenia became a successful member of the empire of late capitalism, but what can be said of architecture is that several young architects such as Špela Videčnik and Rok Oman¹ of Ofis Arhitekti became familiar with the blurring of the distinctions between art, fashion, high and low culture, design and politics, individualisation, and consumption at the end of the grand narratives of emancipation in the last years of President Tito's welfare

state. Not only Ofis, but other young architects oriented themselves to the West and decided early on in their careers to study architecture in post-Fordist countries like England, the United States of America, the Netherlands and Finland, thus making the leap from a Communist welfare state into a late-capitalist state—with the help of their international aesthetics²—easier and more promising for Slovenia. From that moment on, a new generation of architects paved the road for Slovenia to move into world capitalism. Like the private investors, the new generation had nothing to lose, no stains of the past.

For the established architects of Slovenia it was much harder to adapt to the rules of the free market. As an architect you were part of a bigger team. The work appeared on your desk, and that was it: no contracts, no fights about money or payments; there were other people in the company who took care of that. The many private clients who give commissions today in Slovenia are the nouveau riche who have earned their money in just a few years through privatisation. They have no long-term perspective, aren't tapped into culture, neither do they belong to an elite with good taste. Things have to be done quickly; profits must be guaranteed and earned fast. In this complex climate Ofis have managed to develop a strategy for playing the market while negotiating a free space by developing a quality architecture that goes way beyond the tasteless operations of the market.

In this article I shall analyze the work of Ofis Arhitekti from this transnational perspective while pointing to some of the specific qualities I detect in their work. Which doesn't mean that Ofis Arhitekti is not building upon the local economic, geographic, cultural and intellectual capital present in Slovenia, factors like the relatively high quality of craftsmanship, low wages, a historically rich and internationally acclaimed architectural tradition³, and a relatively good architectural education⁴.

A new generation takes command

With the rise of globalisation in our information age, democratic and Communist institutions caring of the many (the common good) had to give in to privatisation and the global outsourcing of labour and production. The nation-state caring for the collective came under pressure in both the West and East. What once was

confiscated by Communism for the common good was returned to its previous owners, or what belonged to the nation as a whole was sold to private companies. With this de-nationalisation we arrived at a culture of sprawl and mobility in which individuals work on their own do-it-yourself biography. Many forms of life are experienced as a matter of the free choice of a lifestyle. We no longer imagine the Promised Land to be governed by the state but by the free market. The desire for design—spin-doctored by the creative industry—dismantles state or religious ideologies. Design becomes a new religion. We no longer represent the collective by architecture, but create our own utopias at home with the help of design. Through the fulfilment of desires—form follows experience—we move from a functional landscape in the name of the public (the many) to landscapes of individuated desires (of the One), often operating within the similar logic of control we know from the supermarket and the theme park.

A lot of (great) Western criticism attempts to question this new global condition. Instead of looking for opportunities within the system they push the research (and its readers) away from experience and devote all their energy towards the deconstruction or critical theory side. Theorists like Michel Foucault and Theodor Adorno accord a paramount place to ideology and culture critique but minimise the possibility of emergent or alternative consciousness allied to emergent and alternative phenomena and groups within the dominant society. Trapped in “winner loses”, Fredric Jameson notes that the more Foucault wins by portraying society as corrupt the more he loses insofar as his critical voice of refusal allows alternatives. There is the theoretical insistence, against Foucault, of a guaranteed insufficiency in the dominant culture against which it is possible to mount an attack. Raymond Williams says that “however dominant a social system may be, the very meaning of its domination involves a limitation or selection of the activities it covers, so that by definition it cannot exhaust all social experience, which therefore always potentially contains space for alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project⁵.” What appears to be guarded against in Williams’s approach is immediacy, the unknown, that untreated bolus of direct experience, experiences that cannot be reflected as a whole. The critical thinking of Foucault and Adorno looks backward, is armed with prior

theory, but what might be called Williams's projective attitude is not one which comes armed with prior theory but instead one which helps to formulate new problems or suggests new concepts. The very act of doing entails a commitment to the future, more particularly, a commitment to appearing in or making a contribution to the future, or to forming and affecting it in various other ways. When Ofis Arhitekti develops a housing project they don't research some kind of essentialist idea of what housing should be independently of the market, the context or our actuality. Instead, they develop a tactic that involves an appropriation of the given. The "minimum-existence" demands of free-market housing are not criticised in the Izola or Ljubljana housing project but are taken further. They outsmart the developer by researching more profitable solutions such as proposing an intelligent 3-D wrap of balconies around the urban block, thus increasing the amount of square meters you can sell while giving each individual house its own identity and the block its unique urban expression.

In the light of this, instead of critical architecture, Bob Somol, Sarah Whiting and myself⁶ have proposed the term *projective architecture*. One form of critical architecture—exemplified by the work of Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, Diller + Scofidio, and Bernard Tschumi—offers comments within architectural/social discourse and avoids looking for better alternatives in advanced capitalism. The Frank House by Eisenman, for example, forces the couple living in it to think about the psychology of their cohabitation by placing a slot in the floor between their beds. Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting⁷ have provocatively argued that we should stop burning our fingers on this kind of "hot" architecture, which insists on confrontation. Whiting and Somol discourage an architecture born of pain or the need to sabotage norms. Instead, architects should initiate "projective" practices that are "cool"⁸. (Why the word *projective*? "Because it includes the term *project*—that is, it is more about an approach, a strategy, than a product; it looks forward [projects], unlike critical thinking, which always looks backwards," according to Sarah Whiting in an e-mail). With demystification, critical architecture hoped to break open our corrupt reality, and arrive at works that Gilbert-Rolfe has called, "everything will survive as a critical image of itself."⁹

Another critical approach resists or evades critique and retreats into the discipline of architecture, such as the critical regionalism developed by Kenneth Frampton, Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, which hopes that the tectonic can resist late capitalism.

Critical practices reject and react unsubtly to the positive things that have been achieved in contemporary society, such as the vitality of much popular (sub)culture, including its hedonism, luxury, and laughter¹⁰.

In contrast to both deconstruction and critical regionalism, projective practices aim to engage realities found in specific local contexts. Instead of hanging ideological prejudices (derived from utopian dreams or from criticism) on built form, the architectural project must be rendered capable of functioning interactively. With a projective practice the distancing of critical theory is replaced by a curatorial attitude. By systematically researching reality as encountered with the aid of diagrams, smart calculations and other analytical measures, all kinds of latent beauties, forces and possibilities can, projective architects maintain, be brought to the surface. Now that a government has lost its capacity to say in our denationalised world, “This is what I want, this is why, and therefore this must happen,” projective architects such as Ofis and many other members of a new generation in Europe understand that instead of talking about ideology the debate should be about forms, the organisation of functions and the possibility aesthetics has. Design—image-making—and the organisation of space might be more appropriate and efficient ways of doing things than straightforward politics. Ideology is not something Ofis makes a point of; a priori statements are foreign to them. Ofis makes the road while walking, by experimenting with images, organisations and connections. In the making, in its materiality, the project advances and starts to tell its unique story. When you study the many 3-D wrappings Ofis has experimented with over time, you see how the rhythms of lines, inside/outside relations, colour schemes, and the rhythms of repetition and difference become more and more advanced over time. Clearly the logic of the hand sketching and creating, organising sections and plans, allows for what a priori thinking would never be able to perform due to its lack of experimenting with the

real.

I have discussed elsewhere¹¹ three basic projective practices of this new generation of architects, types that display “projective autonomy,” “projective *mise en scène*,” and “projective naturalisation.” Projective autonomy primarily confines itself to models of geometry. Projective *mise en scène* and projective naturalisation, by way of contrast, experiment with architecture as infrastructure. Projective autonomy tries to restore contact with the user and the contemplator through passive experience, while projective *mise en scène* and projective naturalisation seek interaction. While projective autonomy is interested in abstract form—what the minimal aesthetic is able to be by its own means—projective *mise en scène* seeks the creation of theatrical situations, and projective naturalisation seeks strictly instrumental and operational systems. With the work of Ofis Arhitekti we face a fourth approach that I like to call projective absolute aesthetics.

Absolute aesthetics

There are several reasons why I think the term *absolute aesthetics* is appropriate to Ofis Arhitekti. Not so much because the projects of Ofis have an unique and attractive aesthetic feel to them—which is undoubtedly true and important in itself—but because the role of aesthetics and what they can do as an architectural dimension has to be rethought when we look at their work. Both projective autonomy and projective absolute aesthetics believe in the expressive power of form, of the image. They both apply graphic effects, except that projective autonomy limits its scope to a minimalism found within the intrinsic logic of architecture. In that sense it is self-referential, it speaks the language architects can relate to, like so much correct (and boring) Swiss architecture, often with a tectonic and material touch but without the public being able to relate to it or finding enjoyment in it. It makes the same mistake modern architecture did, it lacks references to the everyday life world; the man in the street needs a thick user’s manual in order to be able to utilise it.

In opposition to projective autonomy, absolute aesthetics generate effects that appeal to the general public. It is a technique of dressing, architecture as fashion;

where the colours, the many foldings, what's translucent, hidden or transparent, what's background or up-front generates sex appeal and understanding. It disturbs and satisfies desires. Like the new iPod Nano, its cool design and interactivity causes heads to turn. Tectonics—how it's constructed—is of lesser importance. It is all about the performance it can generate. Using glue or stitching a building together, or using facade panels with a wooden photo finish print as in the Izola housing, say, is no crime for Ofis Arhitekti.

Figure/ground relations don't provide an Ofis project with its true quality but figure/form weaving does endow a project with its full potential. Although it may be plonked down in each situation with unerring precision, the true meaning of a project is established by form sculpting figurations. The houses designed for the European competition for Graz are the result of a dynamic and graphic figuration of the landscape. The 3-D facades—or deep surfaces—wrapped around the 650 apartments in Ljubljana—with a non-identical repetition of the same in each—give the block its urban scale, while on the other hand allowing flexible choices for each inhabitant when choosing his/her own open or closed balcony. In so doing, the presence of the block is both urban as well as an expression of individuality. Ofis understands that in our culture of proliferating images you cannot ignore the power of the visual. Not so much content—that you have to solve with genius calculations such as Ofis does with great talent in their housing projects—but the aesthetic dimension(s) intelligently wrapped around the project allows architecture to communicate with society at large without dumbing down architecture through iconographic clichés taken from the work of Venturi & Scott Brown, who mostly invest in gentle and reassuring established values instead of opening up new avenues of understanding.

The absolute aesthetics of Ofis are not so much about representing values—monuments, vistas, durable and massive objects—as about what Gilles Deleuze calls *action-images*, images which motivate you to act; *perception-images*, which trigger your intellectual capacities; and *affect-images*, which address your often unconscious feelings. The route along the spiral ramp in Villa Bled invites you to become a *flâneur*. As you walk up the ramp you can peep into bedrooms, catch a

glimpse of children playing, find yourself on a catwalk or be otherwise surprised by frames replete with hedonistic possibility. Instead of separating off the villa's different functions by walls on the new extended ground floor, you enter a (semi) transparent landscape full of interfaces that allow all kinds of interpenetration between the diverse living complexes. The construction of active agencies—with the help of the spiral and the use of frames, rather than fixed constructs—invites intervention and flexible processes in the villa. With the help of the spiral ramp in the City Museum in Ljubljana, not only are spaces knitted together but continuity between the different histories is established as well. Instead of shutting history – the prehistoric graves, Roman wall and medieval palace – away in separate rooms, the visitor is presented with the challenge of making a montage of these different histories, which are encroached upon when walking up or down the City Museum's spiral ramp. Even on the level of detailing the old and the new respect one another by openly striving to be different. The spiral ramp in both the museum and the villa operates as an interface where past and present meet. While in the villa the national heritage norm is maintained *à distance* in the landscape—at night on its pillow the villa is flooded with light—fluid access through the interior destroys the classical representation of the villa when one enters the space. The jump cuts between the representation of the past and one's experiences in everyday space restore the real rather than representing it. Instead of a fixed meaning of ideas and functions, a mobile meaning emerges over time. The time frames Ofis Arhitekti create are unstable; they dissolve into the flux of time. Time leaks out through the borders of the frame and challenges the user to actualise his/her perception in space.

In 1965 Roland Barthes wrote about the absolute aesthetic qualities of the Eiffel Tower, his understanding being that the form and figure of architecture is much more than just a style. It is this strong design quality that Ofis architects develop further. The aesthetics of Eiffel's architecture in fact triggers many different time-space-image sensoriums. "Eiffel saw his Tower in the form of a serious object, rational, useful; men return it to him in the form of a great baroque dream which quite naturally touches on the borders of the irrational. The double movement is a

profound one; architecture is always dream and function, expression of a utopia and instrument of a convenience. [...] The Eiffel Tower is comfortable, and moreover, it is in this that it is an object either very old (analogous, for instance, to the ancient Circus) or very modern (analogous to certain American institutions such as the drive-in movie, in which one can simultaneously enjoy the film, the car, the food, and the freshness of the night of air). Further, by affording its visitor a whole polyphony of pleasures, from technological wonder to haute cuisine, including the panorama, the Tower ultimately reunites with the essential function of all major human sites: autarchy; the Tower can live on itself: one can dream there, eat there, observe there, understand there, marvel there, shop there; as on an ocean liner (another mythic object that sets children dreaming), one can feel oneself cut off from the world and yet the owner of the world.¹²”

Gizmo architecture

The absolute aesthetic projective practice of Ofis architecture makes us aware of the fact that the dimension of the aesthetic and what architecture is needs to be rethought. We have to begin to think differently about buildings. When we use a building, we have to emphasise the continuing interplay between the building and its users. It is mentally easier to divide humans and objects rather than to understand them as a comprehensive and interdependent system. All too often we look at the world and say, People are alive, objects are dead, people can think, objects just lie there. This taxonomic division blinds us, as Bruno Latour has remarked¹³, to the ways and means by which objects do change us, and it obscures the areas of intervention where design can reshape things. For that reason I prefer to talk about the quasi-object instead of the classical object. These quasi-objects are both social and technical. Agency—how the quasi-object establishes relations through its aesthetics—is the key to understanding and creating them. Quasi-objects oppose a reading of things that are purely functional, or that the object is just there as a white canvas upon which to project a social value. The quasi-object is both projection and materiality, and even more so in its hybridity of use. In 1965 Reyner Banham spoke of “The Great Gizmo”¹⁴ when referring to portable gadgetry, or the need for a theory of gizmology, an understanding of the world from the

perspective of the quasi-object. He believed that the wall of academic ignorance had to be demolished. The monumental souls of classical architects cannot appreciate the potentiality of Bucky Fuller's Dymaxion House, how technology can make a dream a fact (as we saw with the Eiffel Tower), or in the words of Arthur Drexler, "make the Earth a garden, Paradise; [...] make the mountain speak." A lot has happened since the idea of the gizmo was described by Banham in the 1960s. Now that we cannot but embrace the empire of globalisation there is no possibility of effectively returning to the monumental or classical condition. Architecture should learn, rather, from the iPod music player. The iPod is highly interactive, an object of desire, connected to the network, user-friendly—a true gizmo, in point of fact. In short, when we want to communicate with society at large we have, whether we like it or not, to deal with our contemporary society of images, moods, advertising, fashion, or in other words the everyday invaded by technoscience. Going back to the machine age, or the functional artefact of wood and stone no longer works—we should create gizmos instead.

Bruce Sterling, science-fiction writer and lover of industrial and graphic design, explains, as the first theoretic of Gizmology¹⁵, that "Gizmos are highly unstable, user-alterable, baroquely multi-featured objects, commonly programmable, with a brief lifespan. Gizmos offer functionality so plentiful that it is cheaper to import features into the object than simplify them. Gizmos are commonly linked to network service providers; they are not stand-alone objects but interfaces. In this gizmo world new capacities are layered onto older ones. The move from an artefact in our industrial age to a gizmo world is a sudden explosion of information. Gizmos have an aim to educate—and of course to indoctrinate by an often interactive dimension or address. A gizmo is luring me to become more knowledgeable about the product. It wants me to recruit me to become an unpaid promotional agent, an opinion maker. To participate in this gizmo world I need to think about things, talk about things, pay attention to things, be entertained by things."

In the past—before Windows software and the Apple Macintosh computer were invented—we looked at numbers and codes on the screen. Computers were controlled by typed commands. Modern architecture was not much different: hard

to read and needful of instructions explaining to people in the 1950s how to live a modern life. In the 80s whiz kids at Xerox Parc invented the Graphical User Interface (GUI): by moving a gadget with your hand—the now-familiar mouse—you could click icons on the screen. Through a graphic interface and logos a complex world was suddenly accessible and understandable to a large public. The Ofis project for a tourist resort in the Maldives, especially the individual “villa” guestrooms, can be read as true gizmo architecture. It is a graphic and spatial interface which allows a polyphony of activates to unfold through the actions of the user. For a gizmo, being fixed in one place is of lesser importance: you only need to charge the battery somewhere. A groundless ground—just like Villa Bled, which is literally lifted from the ground—replaces the idea of ground: a traditional house is floating on a pillow of glass (see night photo). Direct connection to the ground in all its old glory of geography and territory is turned upside-down; it functions rather like an iPod in your hand, allowing for many different directions and sounds, and for being able to tap into a network of possibility through its infrastructure. In the Oaks villa the building is not only literally a gizmo with its kilometres of advanced cables for computers, cameras, ubiquitous air-conditioning and security systems—all the rooms are spatially and visually interconnected. Just as in the 3-D wrapping of their housing projects, Ofis is intrigued by techniques of layering and interconnection. With this Oaks villa we also see that gizmo architecture allows you to interiorise many of your life experiences; everything is just a mouse click away. You create your own cocoon or immune system, with everything on board and without the need to leave your own built utopia too often. While the housing projects are perhaps more cosmetic in their approach—what else can you do when the client doesn’t allow you to intervene in the floor plans except use kilos of beautiful make-up?—due to their limited budgets, and display some similarity in approach to Yamamoto’s fashion and Issey Miyake’s folded dresses, the villas and public buildings go way beyond the intelligence of 3-D cosmetic wrapping and display the truly complex potential of layering and folding the different programs spatially¹⁶.

With their love of the gizmo, Ofis Arhitekti moves from a functional kind of world

to a designed one. Or in other words: form no longer follows function, but the shape and logic of a building follows design aesthetics. An aesthetics that moves beyond the bottom line of price and performance, invests in style, summoning a client and user willing to pay a little more in order to be different, to look cool, to be hip, to feel the thrill of belonging to an elite with a certain contemporary frivolity and luxury status. As iPod creator Steve Jobs of Apple Computer said in a 1996 interview, “Design is a funny word. Some people think design means how it looks. But, of course, if you dig deeper, it’s really how it works. To design something really well, you have ‘to get it’. You have to really grok¹⁷ what it’s all about.¹⁸” Gizmo architecture is there to stimulate imagination and interactive experience. The software (the programme) and the hardware are so well integrated that the user doesn’t need to do anything other than to plug into the house, as in the case of the Oaks villa. The gizmos of Ofis are not symbols of wonder, beauty or the representation of the world of kings, but are there as actual, corporeal physical presences. It’s all about the now, the super present where fiction, the artificial—the imagination—and the real meet. As Ofis shows, the time of ornament in architecture is over, spatial graphics interfaces have the future, especially the frivolous, surprising, happy and colourful ones of Ofis Arhitekti.

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¹ *Six Pack: Contemporary Slovenian Architecture*, Ljubljana, 2004.

² See also: Van Toorn, Roemer, “International Architecture”, in *Six Pack: Contemporary Slovenian Architecture*, *op. cit.*

³ Jože Plečnik (1872-1957), Maks Fabiani (1865-1962) and Edvard Ravnikar (1907-1993).

⁴ School of Architecture, Ljubljana University.

⁵ Williams, Raymond, “Politics and Letters” (interview), in *New Left Review*, 1979.

⁶ Van Toorn, Roemer, “No More Dreams? The Passion for Reality in Recent Dutch Architecture... and Its Limitations”, in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Winter 2004.

⁷ Whiting, Sarah; Somol, Robert, “Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism”, in *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal*, 33 (“Mining Autonomy”), 2002.

⁸ Whiting, Sarah; Somol, Robert, *op. cit.*

⁹ Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, Allworth Press, New York, 1999.

¹⁰ See also: Johnson, Steven, *Everything Bad Is Good For You. How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making us Smarter*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2005.

¹¹ Van Toorn, Roemer, "No More Dreams? The Passion for Reality in Recent Dutch Architecture... and Its Limitations", *op. cit.*

¹² Barthes, Roland, "The Eiffel Tower" (1964), in Sontag, Susan (ed.), *A Barthes Reader*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1982.

¹³ Weibel, Peter; Latour, Bruno (eds.), *Making Things Public, Atmospheres of Democracy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 2005. See also: Latour, Bruno, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, Éditions La Découverte, Paris, 1991; (English version: *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge [Mass.], 1993).

¹⁴ Banham, Mary (ed.), *The Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.

¹⁵ Sterling, Bruce, *Shaping Things*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 2005.

¹⁶ This complexity of form/figure and folding, turning around a corner in so many ways, is something we also find in the architecture of Ravnikar and Plečnik. There is a true Slovenian tradition, then, one that is being continued.

¹⁷ A geek's word, *to grok* is a coinage of science-fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein, meaning to understand something thoroughly by having empathy with it.

¹⁸ As quoted in: Young, Jeffery S.; Simon, William L., *iCon, Steve Jobs. The Greatest Second Act in the History of Business*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken (New Jersey), 2005.