

The Experiment of the OHO Group in the Field of Conceptual Architecture

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Discussing the OHO Group's¹ creative activity in the discipline of architecture reaches beyond the canonical status the group currently enjoys in the area of art historical writing, casting light on a segment of their activities that has thus far not been at the forefront. The reason for that was the scepticism, if not discomfort, at the dilemma of whether, and how, it is possible to pursue architectural work in the context of conceptual art. Setting aside the perspective that every architectural project has at its core a concept, it would seem that architectural work is determined to such an extent by materiality and objectivity that this should

1 The OHO Group (1966-1971) (uho = ear, oko = eye, oho = ear + eye) was a Slovenian artist collective and one of the most important conceptual art movements in Southeastern Europe in the late sixties. Permanent members included Marko Pogačnik, Milenko Matanovič, Andraž Salamun, and David Nez; other artists joined the group occasionally and made contributions. They engaged in visual poetry, land art, happenings, body art, experimental film and conceptual works. They moved their artistic activity from the galleries to the streets and parks. In 1971, they made the decision to devote their lives entirely to art and to live in connection with nature and spiritual forces, and moved to a farm in Šempas as an intentional community *Družina v Šempasu*—Family in Šempas, which operated as a commune until 1979. Marko Pogačnik dedicates his work since 1980 to the healing of the earth.

put it in direct opposition to conceptual art, which sought to evade and radically deconstruct both of these notions. Not to mention that it remained fundamentally opposed to any demands regarding functionality that define architecture. The above aspects exposed would seem to rather constrain the scope of conceptual experimentation in the field of architecture— notwithstanding all the successful attempts at a reduction of the architectural form in modernism. Even so, there have been quite a few dispositions within the history of artistic formulations since the 1960s that have exposed opportunities for conceptual architecture. One of them is the OHO Group's collaboration with the architect Niko Lehrman in 1970 on the architectural project of the Argonauts hotel and leisure centre in Nova Gorica² (Figure 1). This was more than just a collaboration between two disparate artistic subjects, the collective and the individual—the OHO Group, through its idiosyncratic approach to collective work, when it welcomed a fifth member based on what their creative practice at the time required, established a new collective creative entity, internalising their collaboration with the architect Niko Lehrman and accepting him as an equal member of the group (Pogačnik, 2012, 38). The group thus absorbed architectural practice as yet another possible avenue of artistic expression. This represented a further expansion of the group's field of activity, which had been remarkably broad since its beginnings, including sculpture, visual poetry, publishing in the *Tribuna* and *Problemi* magazines, art books, comic books, illustrations, body art, performance, *happening*, land art, experimental film and video. It was this versatility, and most of all the fact that the members never let themselves be constrained by any preconceived notions, that was one of the defining characteristics of the OHO Group.

OHO's participation in the project of constructing the *Argonauti* Hotel in Nova Gorica³, which will be the subject of this discussion, has

- 2 Construction of the modern Argonavti hotel and leisure centre began in August 1972 in Nova Gorica. It was projected to be finished in 1974, but the work dragged on until 1976. The project documentation, as well as the expert study, which was brought to my attention by Tanja Martelanc, to whom I owe a special thanks, are kept by the Regional Archives of Nova Gorica. The project exceeded its budget and the polyester roof developed leaks immediately upon completion due to construction errors. During the great flood in Nova Gorica in 1983, water flooded the basement rooms, and the company went bankrupt the following year. In 1985, the *Iskra Delta Argonavti* education centre began operating in the hotel building. The signature yellow and white polyester roof was removed and a new, flat, sheet metal roof was erected in its place. In 1993, Iskra Delta sold its share and *Argonavti* became Hotel Perla. In 1999, during the reconstruction of the building in casino hotel, the owner—the HIT company—demolished OHO's *Sun Dial* sculpture.
- 3 Nova Gorica is a town in western Slovenia, on the border with Italy, built after 1947 as a planned town according to the principles of modernist urbanism. When the Paris Peace Treaty established a new border between Yugoslavia (Slovenia was one of the republics) and Italy, and nearby Gorizia was outside the Yugoslav borders, the socialist government decided to build a modern city that would radiate across the border.

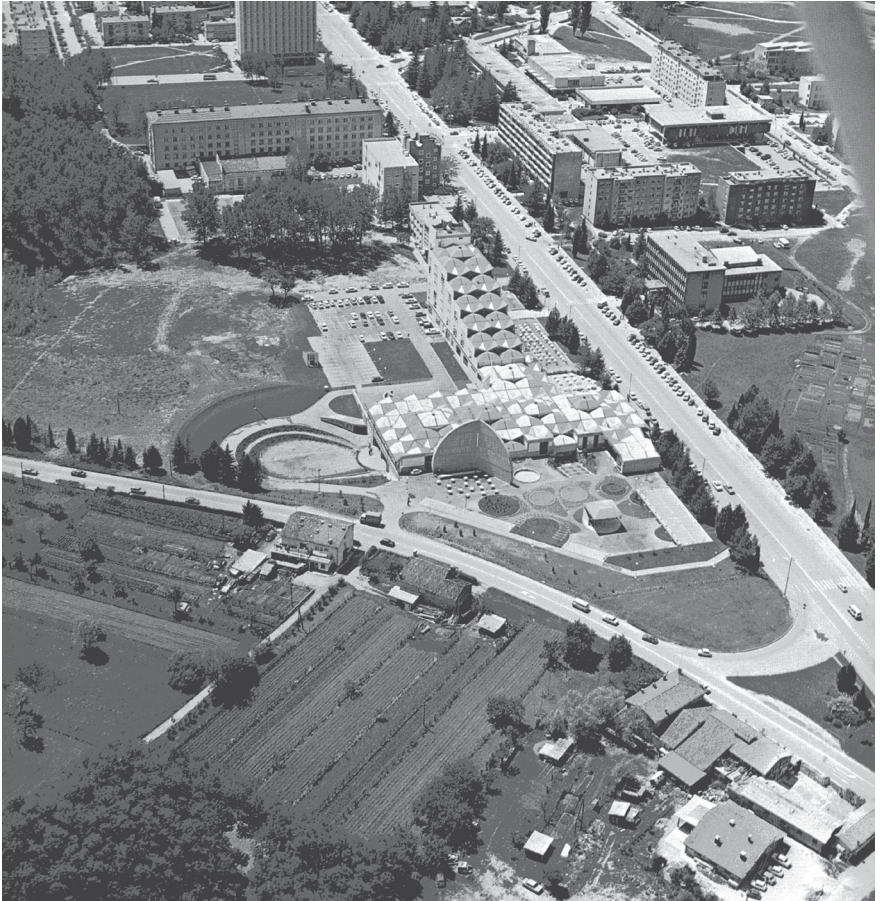


FIGURE 1: Photo of *Hotel Argonauti* on the cover of the book *Občina Nova Gorica 1947–1977*, Nova Gorica, 1977.

so far seemed incongruent with the rest of OHO's history as a whole. Even though the group—after it had already ceased its activities, having transformed itself into the intentional community *Družina v Šempasu*—Family in Šempas in the spring of 1971—exhibited the project at the 7th Paris Youth Biennale that same year, the interest in the project within the art criticism and art history fields remained marginal. In literature, it is mentioned only in passing (Brejc, 1978, 95; Zabel, 1994, 101). Nor has there been any effort within the field of architectural history to evaluate this specific and rare example of conceptual architecture. Contributing factors include in all likelihood its rather negative critical reception, in particular the review published in *Arhitektov bilten* immediately following the completion of the project in March 1976 (Garzarolli, 1976). Matjaž Garzarolli, Jurij Kobe and Janez Koželj mounted a systematic, four-part (Society, Work, Instrument, Result) critique of the newly finished object.

They stated in their conclusion that the avantgarde nature of the building is merely an illusion, since “modern structural patterns, structural details and materials [are used] without understanding the technologies” and that “the design—original in its conceptualism—was lost in the execution, leaving behind just the eccentricity”⁴ (Garzarolli, 1976, 7–8). In the critique, the architectural project is credited solely to the architect, with OHO Group’s participation noted under the criterion “interdisciplinarity in the design of the working concept” and qualified as a contribution in the area of the “psycho-social research by the OHO Group”.⁵ Under the “Price/valuation of investment” criterion, the following was written: “The extensive programme of the object is decisively defined by and subordinated to the vision of one single person—the architect—to the extent that it excludes the possibility of subsequent adaptation. In order to gratify the investor’s desire for the building to have an attractive appearance, the architect employs a cornucopia of different effects. In light of the questionable utility of the object, the use of expensive materials represents an irrational investment” (Garzarolli, 1976, 7). The fact that, on multiple occasions, the critics preferred to rely on Lehrman’s own words instead of evaluating the architecture independently, betrays an obvious discomfort and contradicts the magazine’s open-minded and theoretically progressive slant. Regarding “Consistency of concept execution”, they report the designer’s assertion that “The object is more than just conceptualised architecture [...] it is conceptual art,” while the design/conception and methodology are described thus: “The object is designed for a human being torn between physicality and spirituality and all the way to cosmicity. / Space is an amoeba in which physical boundaries and a human beings are of equal value. / Normative visions of a human being are in constant conflict with those of the investor.” This is followed by: “Execution: aspiration towards complete equality of everyone participating in the design and construction of the object /.../ [but] the process of execution is in itself evidence of the incorrect perceptions and insufficient understanding of the concept” (Garzarolli, 1976, 7).

Niko Lehrman’s decision to invite the conceptualist art group OHO to participate in the architectural project was daring and

4 An even more radical evaluation was provided by Edvard Ravnikar; in a text assessing the urban development of Nova Gorica, of which he had been the first urban planner, he wrote the following: “In the ever faster tempo, the original aspiration to build something that would ‘shine across the border’ was giving way to an arrogant and ignorant pragmatism and that, in turn, ended up completely overpowered by an anarchic subjectivism (*Argonauti*, etc.)” (Ravnikar, 1983, 43).

5 “Interdisciplinarity in concept design: extremely ambitious in scope: the author with architecture, psychosociological research by OHO, construction and technology engineers, tourist marketing /.../ The execution does not adequately reflect this effort, however” (Garzarolli, 1976, 8).

unconventional—the group, while attracting a lot of attention among the representatives of its generation in Slovenia at the time and achieving impressive international successes, did not enjoy wider understanding and institutional support at home—and the architectural experiment was too radical to win support within the field of architectural criticism.

Who was Niko Lehrman, the architect?⁶ He had studied architecture, graduating in 1965 under the mentorship of Professor Edo Mihevc. In 1959/60, during his studies, he worked as the technical editor, satirist and cartoonist for the student newspaper *Tribuna*. After graduating, he first worked in the field of propaganda design at ČGP Delo and afterwards in the architectural design bureau Agens,⁷ which he had founded with a group of colleagues. When he was commissioned to design *Argonauti*, he was still a member of the editorial board of *Problemi*, a magazine in which the OHO Group regularly published.

From the outset, the form of collaboration between the architect and the OHO Group was one that was well established in OHO practice, i.e. the concept of the “fifth member”. In addition to its constant four members—Marko Pogačnik, David Nez, Milenko Matanović and Andraž Šalamun—the group, in this last period of its operation, undertook a series of collaborations, each with a different person, depending on the theme of the project, taking them on as temporary fifth members. In 1969 and 1970 it was a poet Tomaž Šalamun as a theoretician and artist, then Naško Križnar as the author of several experimental films, e.g. the film *Beli ljudje* (*White People*) in 1970. The American conceptualist artist Walter De Maria was similarly welcomed when he visited the group in August 1970 (Fig. 2). Architect Niko Lehrman was another one of those who joined as temporary but equal “fifth members” (Pogačnik, 2012, 38). The intensive collaboration on the design of *Argonauti* lasted only a few months, during the autumn and winter of 1970/71, and was limited to the conceptual project phase. By the time construction began in August

6 He was born in 1939 in Ljubljana. He attended a grammar school in Kranj and enrolled in an architecture course at the Technical Faculty in Ljubljana in 1957/58. In 1965, he graduated under the mentorship of Professor Edo Mihevc with the thesis *The Regional Plan for North-Western Istria*, Synthesis, 1:25.000, which received high marks. The biggest project of his life was *Hotel Argonauti*; due to the numerous technical and economic issues encountered in its construction, this project would be his last. The only other published piece of information about him is an obituary written upon his death in 1998 by his architectural colleague and friend, Fedor Žigon (Žigon, 1999).

7 It was founded in 1968 or 1969 and operated in the basement of the apartment block at 8 Cigale Street in Ljubljana. Aside from Niko Lehrman, founding members included Fedor Žigon, Sonja Završnik Podlesek, Marjan Loboda, Jure Apih. Fedor Žigon was also on the editorial board of *Problemi* magazine, and in 1970, in the early period of the *Argonauti* project, the director of the studio, until he was replaced in this position in 1971 by Sašo Pöschl. (Due to the lack of archival documents, the history of the studio can only be roughly reconstructed. I was assisted in collecting the data by two former colleagues of the Agens Studio—architect Marinka Pogačnik Arnič and graphic designer Sonja Završnik Podlesek).

1972,⁸ the OHO Group was no longer monitoring, nor involved with the project, despite the new centre of their activities being Šempas, a town in the immediate vicinity of Nova Gorica. In 11 April 1971, they moved into an abandoned farmstead and ended the activities of the OHO Group, reinventing themselves as *Družina v Šempasu*—Family in Šempas—an intentional community aiming to transform life into art. It was precisely their involvement in the *Argonauti* project that brought the Goriška region to their attention. They ended up completely absorbed in the grand project of building a commune; establishing a subsistence economy challenging enough that life began to seem more powerful than art, and for a while this isolated them from everything going on outside the commune, not only from Lehrman and *Argonauti*, but from the art world, exhibitions and events in general.

Let us now return to the beginning of OHO's reflections on the connection between art and outdoor space. In 1970, *Sinteza* magazine published a conversation between Braco Rotar and members of the OHO Group—Marko Pogačnik, Tomaž Šalamun, David Nez, Milenko Matanović and Andraž Šalamun (Rotar, 1970, 46–48). It was intended as a theoretical reflection on the innovations in the group's mode of operation that had taken place since the summer of 1969, i.e. the shift from galleries to the external natural ambience, towards environmental art. The interview was intended, in Braco Rotar's words, to shed light on "the phenomena, concepts and terms such as programmed art, environment, materials and the like, which occur in connection with the activity of the group or as a product of its activity" (Rotar, 1970, 46). Rotar defined the summer projects carried out in 1969 in Zarica, Sorško polje and Čezsoča as "a form of outdoor sculptures or, more precisely, organisations of open space." These steered the group towards an ever deeper contact with nature, from designing with natural materials to an increasingly sensitive and spiritual relationship with the cosmic forces that govern nature. It became a new stage for art, the medium from which new art was born, but at the same time, as a specific place, a vehicle for memory, a stage for displaying the awareness that landscape bears traces of past cultures. Members of OHO were convinced that interventions must resonate with the locality, and for this to happen, the space must be explored, the layers of cultural memory recognised and the energy field lines perceived. David Nez pointed out that "in an open space, we merely establish a pre-existing configuration of natural phenomena," indirectly drawing attention to the non-invasive attitude towards the environment that had always characterised OHO (Rotar, 1970, 46).

8 *Primorski dnevnik*, 17 August 1972: Construction of the modern Argonauti hotel and leisure centre in Nova Gorica begins, 3.

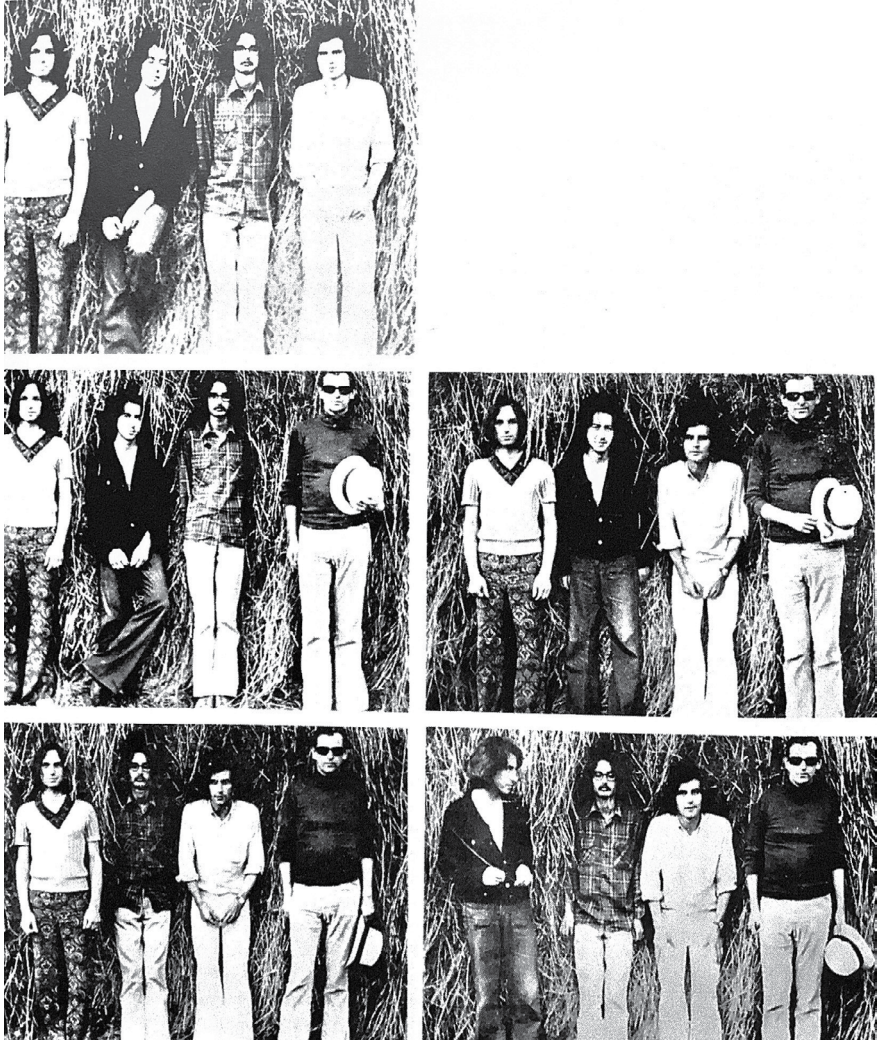


FIGURE 2: Walter de Maria and OHO, 1970, collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana. Photo: published with permission from the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

In relation to the materials and technique, OHO did not insist on total de-objectivisation and replacement of the object with an idea. They tolerated them and insisted on the inclusion of the material in the realisation of a project, as unpredictable configurations of elements can only be triggered in a material selected rationally, for its specific characteristics. In the aforementioned interview, Marko Pogačnik said that “you choose the rods, for example, for their flexibility, their schematic nature and optical clarity,” and then “you intuitively choose positions to put them in, so that they bend, schematise, and so on.” (An example of this are Milenko Matanović’s *Installations with Wooden Sticks* in the

Forest in the summer of 1969). The characteristic feature of the OHO Group, as summarised by Tomaž Šalamun, is that “they visualise time, they visualise force, or they visualise temperature, distance, relations in general that no longer have anything to do with material, the material is just the mail service, representing permeability, as a permeable institution” (Rotar, 1970, 48).

When exactly it was in 1970 that Lehrman decided to invite OHO to participate cannot be ascertained from the published chronicles of the group’s activities, but it can be assumed that it was towards the end of the year (Brejc, 1970, 95; Zabel, 1994, 101). That year the group achieved several major international successes. In July they were introduced at the Information Show at MoMA in New York, one of the most important exhibitions of conceptual art in history, and in July they appeared at the 4th Belgrade Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, which was at the time the most important exhibition of the Yugoslav contemporary art. In August they were visited by Walter de Maria—together, they carried out one of the night projects—and in September they exhibited at the Aktionsraum in Munich, a reference institution. In November of the same year they organised the final exhibition of the group’s career at the City Art Gallery in Ljubljana. It was in that autumn that collaboration with Lehrman took place (Brejc, 1970, 95; Zabel, 1994, 101).

Lehrman had just finished the wildly successful project of designing and outfitting the Laško beer hall, the first beer hall in Slovenia, which also featured the country’s first bowling alley. The beer hall, which opened in August 1969, was on Masaryk Street, close to its intersection with Reselj Street. The beer hall could accommodate 300 guests and featured its own car park and children’s play area. In six pavilions with roofs of fire retardant straw, the guests sat on padded kegs, which also concealed lighting fixtures. The tables were constructed from wooden beams and all the furnishings were in what the newspaper report at the time called “Old Slavic” style.⁹ The beer hall achieved “a level of popularity that was beyond all expectations” (PANG-104, 2167, 4, 12) and just over half a year later the investor—the trade union tourism company Alpe-Adria in Ljubljana, headed by the director Zlatko Šindič (Schildenfeld before the WW2)—began planning an expansion of its catering business. This was a time when Yugoslav politics began to quietly foster consumerism, as well as develop commercial tourism in addition to trade union tourism in order to obtain foreign currency. Nova Gorica, next to the Italian border, was therefore a sensible choice

9 Delo, 13 August 1969: Kuštrin, R., Citizens of Ljubljana get their first beer hall, 6.

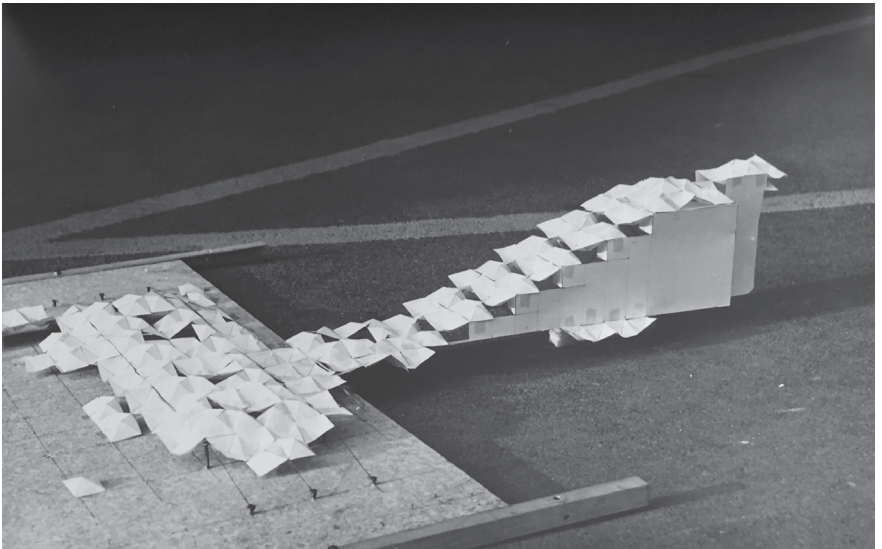
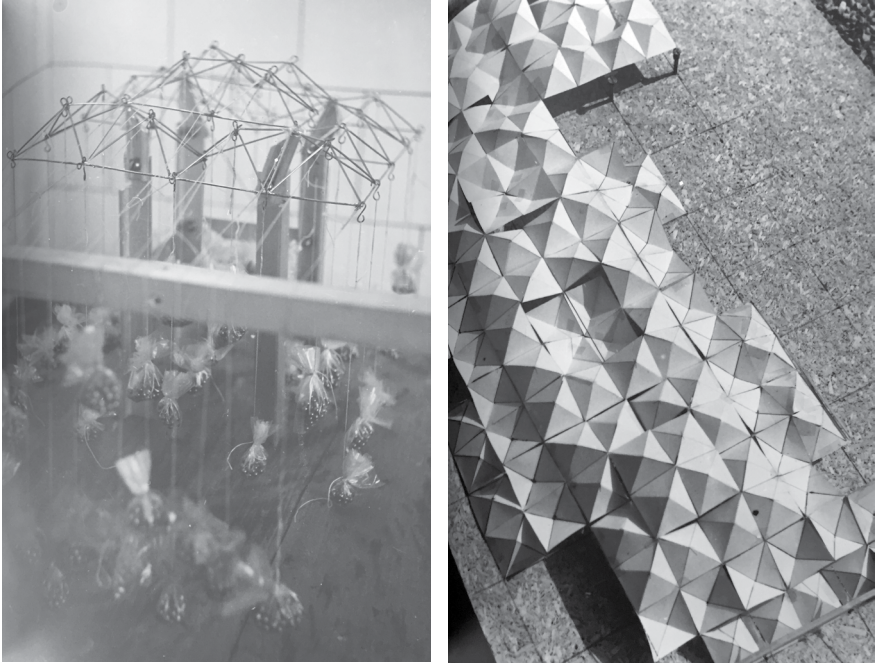


FIGURE 3: OHO, architectural model mobile, 1971, Regional Archives of Nova Gorica, Municipal Assembly of Nova Gorica, fonds 104, t. e. 2167, 4.
Photo: published with the permission of the Regional Archives of Nova Gorica.

FIGURES 4, 5: Architectural model of *Hotel Argonauti*, 1971, Regional Archives of Nova Gorica, Municipal Assembly of Nova Gorica, fonds 104, t. e. 2167, 4.
Photo: published with the permission of the Regional Archives of Nova Gorica.

for the site of the new project. Šindič entrusted the new commission to Lehrman. In May 1970, the *Cvetlična pivnica* (*Cvetlična* beer hall) project in Nova Gorica was submitted to the municipal authorities (PANG-104, 2077). By autumn, at the initiative of the municipality, the project had grown in ambition, with the beer hall transforming into a leisure centre and the hotel—in all likelihood the collaboration between the architect and the OHO Group had already begun at that point—into the *Argonauti* project (Figelj, 2019, 25). At the end of 1970, the architect, together with the members of the OHO Group, set off to Nova Gorica to survey the intended site of the building. They strung up a copper wire across the plot—a few old houses slated for demolition still stood there at the time—which was meant to detect the energy field lines of the site. To ensure that the collaborators' work on the project would be coordinated and in tune with the energy of the site, the wire was cut into five pieces, with each of the five collaborators carrying one in his pocket whenever they met in the office, and Lehrman keeping his permanently on his desk (Pogačnik, 2020).

The extent of OHO's participation in architectural planning can be more precisely assessed with the help of the detailed project study, where their ideas are recorded in the section "The general project of design and artistic furnishing" (PANG 104, 2167, 4, 37-41). It lays out the plans comprehensively and at all levels: from information design, visual communication and graphic design of the navigation signage, through interior design, colour studies and the car park layout, to the idea of having 13 different staff uniforms. In addition to the expert reports, the study includes three photographs, with two of them showing a paper architectural model and one showing an architectural model mobile. This was a structure made from wire; the roof was a three-dimensional lattice consisting of small pyramids with air-filled bags containing small globules hanging suspended from the nodes where the edges of the pyramids intersect the base plane (Figure 3).

The paper model demonstrates the modular design of the object, featuring a square grid in which each field was divided diagonally into two triangular surfaces. These were slanted to break up the surface, forming a relief. The roof was modelled from paper using the origami technique, designed to give the impression that the pyramids were being constantly reconfigured, much like in the game of paper fortune teller. The abundance of symbolic forms is immediately apparent. The intent was for the pyramids to be realised as thin polyester shells, giving an impression of lightness. They were supposed to resemble tent fabric thrown over a temporary lattice structure to serve as an impromptu accommodation. The roof was conceived as a polyester



FIGURE 6: Balcony railing with shields, detail of the north-western side of *Hotel Argonauti*, *Hotel Argonauti*. Yugoslavia, tourist leaflet, undated, France Bevk Public Library, Nova Gorica.

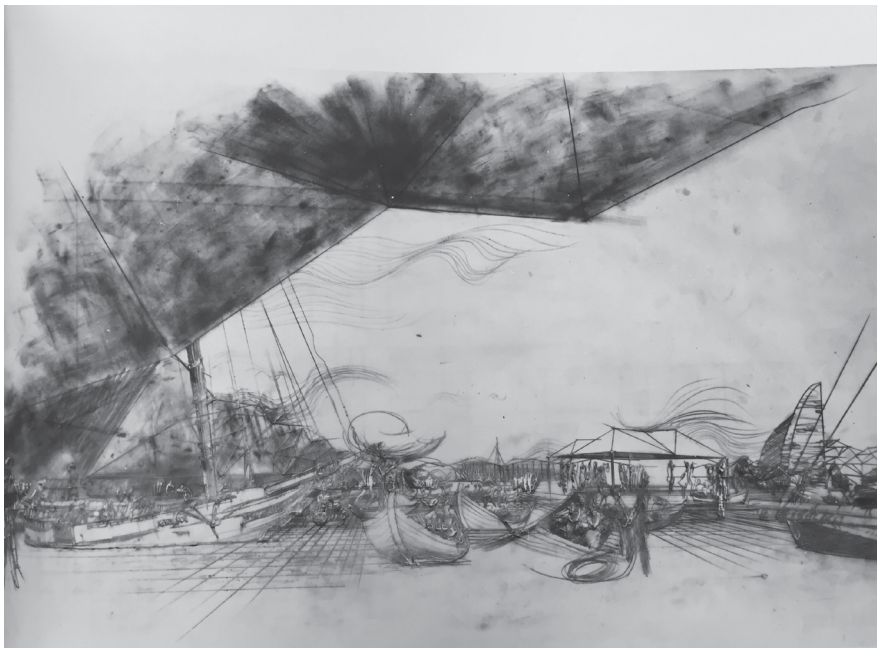


FIGURE 7: Niko Lehrman, Outdoor beer hall, 1971, architectural model of *Hotel Argonauti*, 1971, Regional Archives Nova Gorica, Municipal Assembly of Nova Gorica, fonds 104, t. e. 2167, 4. Photo: published with the permission of the Regional Archives of Nova Gorica.

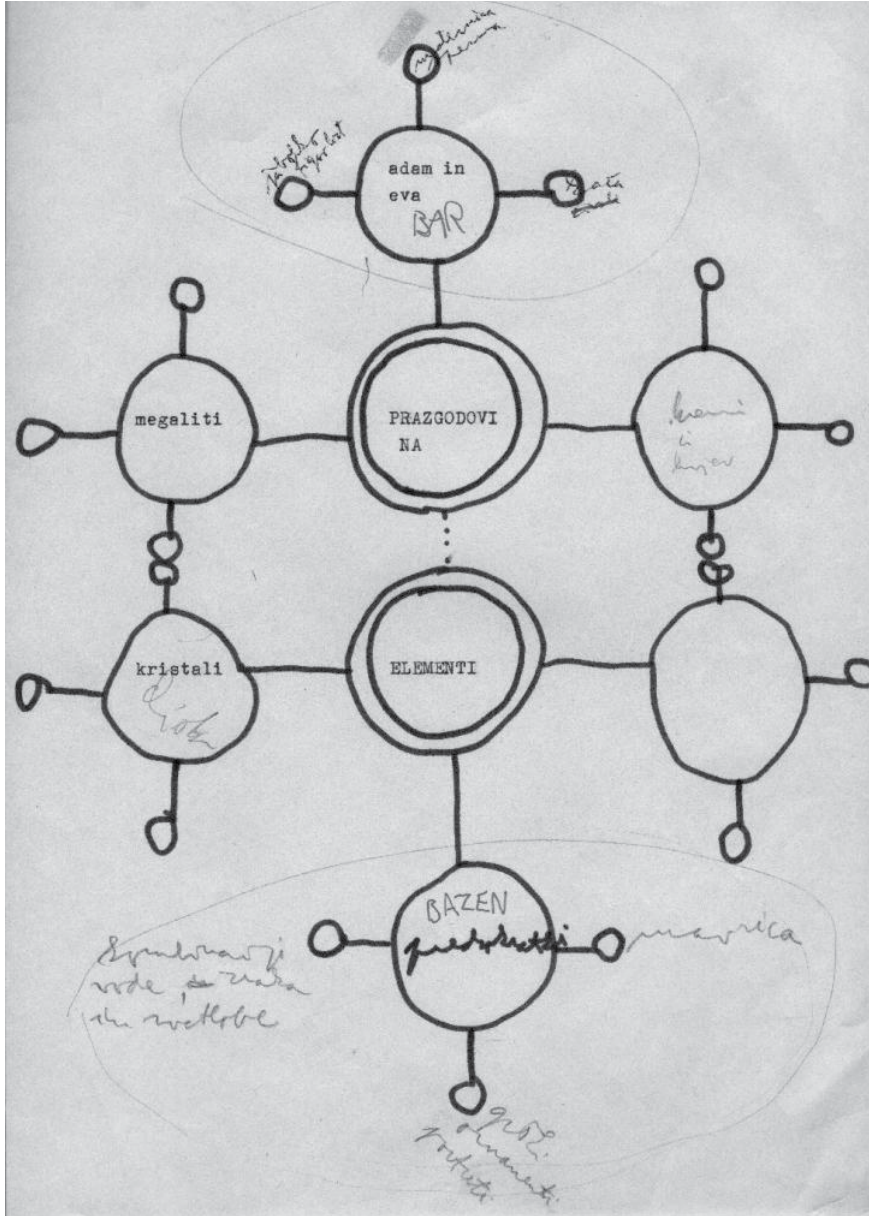


FIGURE 8: Marko Pogačnik, The concept for Hotel Argonavti, 1970, 29.3 x 21 cm, felt-tip pen, typed text and ball-pen on paper, collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana. Photo: published with the permission of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

shell resembling tent fabric supported by a visible structural framework inside the building (Figure 4). The design thus resembled a cluster of holiday tents; in addition to being an effective visual metaphor, the idea has to be seen from the perspective of its function—conjuring an ambience appropriate for a hotel and restaurant, leisure and entertainment centre, evoking a sense of relaxation and ease and leaving a pleasant memory of the holiday (Figure 5). The rhythmical repetition of shapes, the simple geometry and the alternating squares, rombi and triangles brought to mind the notions of play and chance—play is an activity associated with leisure time and is therefore one of the aspects that hotel and restaurant architecture ought to fulfil. The idea of play as kindling for creative ideas can be found both among the principles of Bauhaus and in the playfulness of the hippie culture, with the latter being a major source of inspiration for OHO's project.

Tent- and dome-like shapes were a popular element of futurist architecture in the 1960s. They were associated with social utopias and visionary projects, speculations about cities on other planets, enclosed in structures that enable life in a carefully controlled climate. The ideas of Buckminster Fuller, an American architect, inventor and visionary, regarding modular architecture and geodesic domes fascinated people across the globe at the time. In 1966, he was invited to deliver the keynote address at a student seminar taking place as part of the congress of the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA) at Bled, together with the 2nd BIO.¹⁰ A year later, at Expo '67 in Montreal, he designed the American pavilion, Biosphere, in the shape of a hemispherical dome. There, the visitors could also see the German pavilion, which Otto Frei conceived as an 8,000m² space covered by a tent-like roof of translucent polyester and supported by a steel structure. The following year, Fuller erected a dome of similar design for the summer theatre in Spoleto—not that far from Slovenia. In this country, similar thinking began to be developed in 1966 by Saša J. Mächtig, who designed a geometric, undulating pyramidal structure resembling a floating cloud that was installed as a canopy at the Evropa café in Ljubljana.

Nowadays, Marko Pogačnik highlights two of OHO group's concepts as having been at the forefront in the *Argonauti* project (Pogačnik, 2020). The first one is the myth of the Golden Fleece and the Argonauts, who sailed along the Danube, Sava and Ljubljanica rivers before Jason's warriors were said to have carried their ship *Argo* to Vipava, sailing along the Vipava and Soča rivers before reaching the sea. The myth linked the

10 *Delo*, 15 July 1966: Bogdan Pogačnik, R. Buckminster Fuller: "More with Less", 5. The title of the lecture was *Zrušimo jezikovne pregrade z grafičnimi simboli*, or Breaking Down Language Barriers through Graphical Symbols

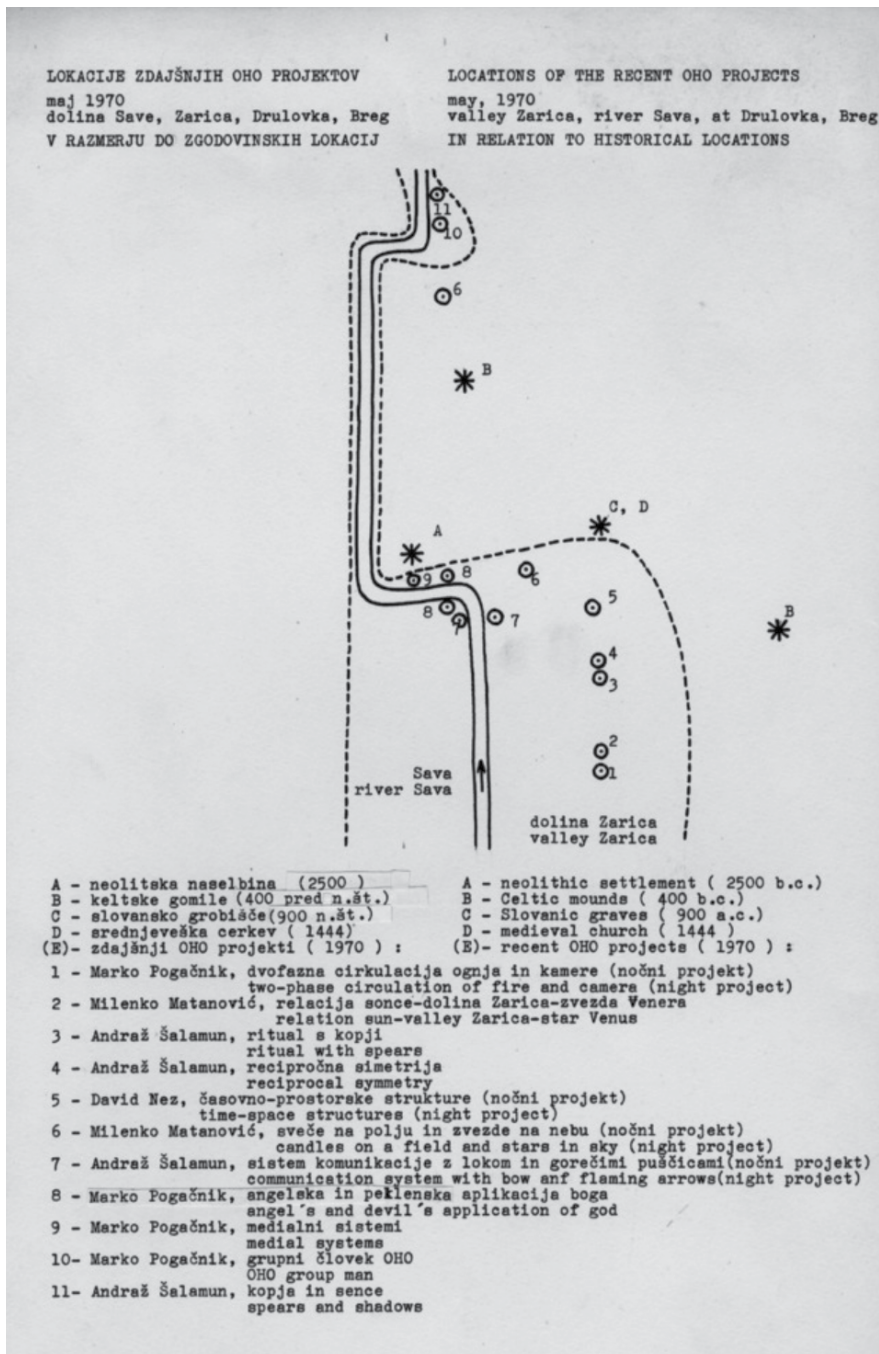


FIGURE 9: Marko Pogačnik, *Locations of current projects in relation to historical sites, Sava Valley, Zarica, Drulovka, Breg, May 1970*, photocopy, 50 x 23.3cm, collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana. Photo: published with the permission of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

territories of Yugoslavia and Italy, and in the spirit of good cooperation between the neighbouring countries at the time appeared to be an effective political metaphor for a tourist project that was meant to connect the urban population of both Goricas (Nova Gorica in Slovenia and Gorizia in Italy), as well as attract Italian tourists from the wider Italian heartland. Two further metaphors justifying the project were travel, which connects space, and the ship *Argo* as a means of transport for the Argonauts (Figure 6). The use of modern materials, polyester and colour—the roof was yellow and white—gave the architecture the appearance of a vessel from some different, otherworldly geography; the connection to the *Argo* galley is further accentuated by shields of yellow polyester affixed to the longitudinal balcony on the north-east side of the object, which resembled those that adorned the sides of ancient galleys. In order to illustrate the myth in an even more tangible and expressive way and to use functional objects to create an ambience similarly attractive as the one in the Laško beer hall in Ljubljana, they considered purchasing old Dalmatian wooden boats, which would have been built into the floor and used as seating for the guests in the open-air beer hall, but the idea was never realised (Figure 7).

The second concept was a vision in which moving between different rooms would be like passing between historical layers, deposits of past civilisations, in other words the concept of a “time vessel” (Pogačnik, 2020). The path through the architectural object was a journey through time, through layers of historical memory, which began deep in the basement with Adam and Eve as the origin of humanity, in a nightclub featuring, accordingly, a bar in the shape of a snake and seats resembling apples (PANG-104, 2167, 4, 38–39). In the context of pagan worship of nature it seems odd, at first glance, to include in the genealogy of the world the Christian myth of the origin of humanity with Adam and Eve as the first parents, and to depict it using the aesthetics of the palaeolithic, a period which in actual fact reached back several hundred thousand years. The story of Adam and Eve ought to be understood in the context of exploring the specific spiritual roots of (the Slovenian region) place, but also in the spirit of the time. The ideal of hippie culture, which was completely unencumbered with ideology, was to live in Paradise, reverting to the way of life of the first parents in a time before the original sin. For them, nakedness was a natural state, and their life in paradise was free of existential worries¹¹ (Figure 8).

11 Recall the references to Biblical iconography in the notorious *Paradise Now* as performed by Living Theatre in 1968, as well as OHO's *Hepening Pasijon* (ali *Biblijske zgodbe*)—*The Passion Happening* (or *Tales from the Bible*), performed by OHO in September 1968 at the BITEF festival in Atelje 212 in Belgrade. The hippie culture and hippie-ludism influences on OHO's production from that period are noted by Miško Šuvaković (Šuvaković, 2009, 127–135).

The natural setting that prompted Marko Pogačnik to reflect on these themes was the Zarica canyon of the Sava River, near Kranj. That was the site of one of his first works—an abstract sculpture carved in 1962 from a rock in the canyon. In the summer of 1969 and spring of 1970 the canyon was the site of the group's summer projects, and in the summer of 1970 these included the group's one-day (day or night) training sessions. This is where Marko Pogačnik came up with the idea of the "time vessel". "This valley conceals an unusually rich and robust spiritual tradition," writes Tomaž Brejc. "It begins with Neolithic settlements and continues with Celtic mounds, a Slavic burial site, a medieval Gothic church—and now, as the newest layer of memory imprinted on this almost sacred piece of nature, the projects of OHO" (Brejc, 1970, 31) (Figure 9). Marko Pogačnik represented the vessel physically in the form of a container with layers from the Cretaceous period to the present-day artifacts of the OHO group, exhibiting it at the retrospective exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in 2012 (Pogačnik, 2012, 58).

From the palaeolithic in the basement, the path ascended to the surface, representing the neolithic, and towards what was the "dominant motif in the composition of the objects" (PANG-104, 2084) and the most striking architectural element conceived by the OHO group—the Sun Dial, *Sončna ura*, "recapitulating the tradition of megalithic sun shrines such as Stonehenge in England" (Pogačnik, 1987) (Figure 10). At 15 metres in height, the monumental reinforced concrete sculpture loomed over the rest of the building. It took the shape of a semi-circular surface split down the middle into two halves meeting at an obtuse angle, which looked like lung lobes. During construction, special attention would need to be paid to the vertical junction of the two lobes, where a vertical slit was supposed to let through a ray of sunlight to illuminate the stone tables, which were planned to be decorated with carvings of the zodiac signs. This particular feature was key to the entire concept, with the whole effect of a calendar, as well as its accuracy, depending on it (PANG-104, 2084). The execution of this detail was not successful. As a result, Marko Pogačnik preferred to call the construction Solar Sculpture (*Solarna skulptura*) instead of a sun dial (Pogačnik, 1987). Had it not been destroyed in 1999, this sculpture would be among the most striking monumental sculptures in Slovenia and a magnificent contribution to the currently trending brutalist architecture.

The only part of architecture that has survived all the transformations and can still be seen today is the stepped structure of the hotel room wing. It was designed to look like a stepped pyramid resembling a Mayan temple. A continuous staircase runs down the middle of the pyramid all the way from the ground to the top floor. Its orientation



FIGURE 10: OHO (Marko Pogačnik), *The Sun Sculpture* next to *Hotel Argonauti*, 1971–1972, black and white photo, collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana. Photo: published with the permission of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.



FIGURE 11: *Hotel Argonauti*, circa 1980, black and white photo, archive of the Pavšič Zavadlav photo studio. Photo: published with the permission of Fotoateljje Pavšič Zavadlav, Solkan.

presents the person ascending, or rather descending, the staircase with an uninterrupted view of the religious sanctuary on top of the nearby hill—*Sveta Gora*, or Holy Mount—thus enabling communication with the surrounding space and the sacred site within it (Pogačnik, 1987) (Figure 11).

The architecture, as envisioned by OHO, was to be a synthesis of all the good created in the global cultural past. With the undulating shape of the architectural shell enveloping the modular design, the building gave the impression of a mass constantly being moulded by the same forces that shape nature—tectonic shifts, erosion, decay; the organic nature¹² of the architectural form underscored the fact that its conception involved observation of natural elements and phenomena, the morphology of the landscape, the motion of the planets; as well as the peeling away of the cultural/spiritual layers of the space. It was a symbolic statement of what was expected of the new architecture.

By breaking down the idea of architecture as it was supposed to be, we have come closer to understanding that what we perceive—the specific configuration of the built environment, if architecture is what we have in mind—is only one aspect of a more complex phenomenon: the realisation that in every environment there are deeper structures that influence communication. In his text *Notes on Conceptual Architecture* from 1970, the architect Peter D. Eisenman points out how important it has always been to reflect on form in architecture, but that while this reflection used to be focused on problems of aesthetics, we have now begun to think of form as an informed shape establishing relations to past stages. We are no longer concerned with aesthetic problems, with the analysis of proportions, textures, colours...but with the relationships between the elements established by the architecture, such as an interval, sequence or scene. A specific environment that triggers a set of reactions is the basis for a certain configuration. When extracting, from formal data, the iconographic or symbolic elements drawn from cultural sources, we must also be aware of the difference if these originate from an external space and are perceived by the individual through the senses—sight, hearing, touch, etc.—or if the information regarding iconographic interpretation is at a different, more abstract, level of relationships, since we cannot see or hear them, but we can become aware of them (Eisenman, 1970). The tendency to organise is linked to a deeper realisation. The OHO Group's claiming of the open space that they were contemplating could be understood as a spatial re-qualification that would act to awaken self-awareness in the

12 It is somewhat of a paradox that this was executed using synthetic materials; it should be noted, however, that plastic materials enjoyed considerable popularity at the time.

individual observing this transformation and trigger a new perception of self, and above all harmonise the individual with the natural, earthly and cosmic energy lines.

For OHO, the shift towards architecture opened a new field for visual art research, yet another of the diverse forms of artistic expression that the group had tried in the course of their career. Architecture thus found its place among the rest of the media. More than that—if we think carefully, paying attention to what Marko Pogačnik is saying, we could think of architecture as a pivotal field, whose complexity, arising from the way it incorporates the issue of habitation in its totality, facilitated the transformation of the group's method of operation from one form into another, from OHO Group's collective work to *Družina v Šempasu*—Family in Šempas. It contributed to the realisation of the dependency of forms of habitation and self-awareness of the living conditions. It would be difficult to argue that exploring the identity of elements, examining the effects of gravity and their positions, and delving into the cultural identity of a space—themes that OHO were concerned with—was an obvious path into architecture, but on closer examination, those issues are exactly what architecture is concerned with. A building ties the inside and the outside together, anchoring the space; it is at the mercy of gravity and under the influence of natural elements, whether in the form of the building materials or the climate. From this perspective, OHO's turn towards architecture seems not just unobjectionable, but even necessary and understandable. In the case of this particular architectural undertaking, a multi-purpose social centre that is “neither an ‘amusement park’ nor a ‘dance garden’, nor a Munich beer hall, nor a youth centre, nor a children’s playground, nor a promenade, nor a bar, nor a restaurant; instead it combines all of these into a coherent whole we call a ‘mini city’, for short,” (PANG-104, 2167, 4, 11–12) offered an additional opportunity, since public architecture, by virtue of its social function, opens up the possibility of social effects, promoting social transformation at a much broader and more comprehensive intersection than artistic activity, which addresses its narrowly selected recipients within the isolated space of the gallery, and is similarly isolated and limited in terms of its recipients even when it occurs in an open natural space. When generously presented with an opportunity to communicate with individuals who are not already formed as recipients of art, the members of OHO gratefully accepted. A succinct summary of their perspective is offered by Marko Pogačnik, who says that architecture, while outwardly serving various functions, should internally represent a nest of potentials capable of facilitating a quantum leap—a space for habitation should hold the seed of the future (Pogačnik, 2020).

Designing architecture for the city that Nova Gorica had evolved into in the early 1970s also meant facing certain specific socio-political concepts that had motivated the foundation and development of the city and helped shape its identity. It was here, in the “city of youth” at the “open border”,¹³ that the idea had developed of an architecture that would concretise, on a large scale, with modern materials and programmes and a trendy aesthetic, progressive social concepts and demonstrate the successes of socialism to the West. The new architectural forms were to facilitate a radically new culture of habitation and lead to a new, better society. The social utopias inspired by the revolutionary 1960s that were supposed to come to fruition in the 1970s were buried in the 1980s by the regressive turn towards postmodernism. Just as the ideal of architecture as a “utopian project” in the form of the *Argonauti* multi-functional social centre, with its free interplay of public, social and commercial interests in the context of social ownership, where the individual could enjoy the luxury of leisure time afforded by a post-industrial society, remained unfulfilled, so did the idea of a commune, instead of being realised as the highest form of society, became in modern times a mere utopian memory.

What began in the “city of roses” as *Cvetlična pivnica* grew into the cross-cultural myth of the Argonauts in the “City on the Open Border”, transformed into a global hub for education in the field of cutting-edge computer technology, long seen as the golden fleece of our civilisation, during the time when Iskra Delta’s education centre was operating there, until its final transformation into HIT’s Perla casino hotel, a home for the most exploitative of the tourism industries in liberal capitalism. A phantom presence in space, alive only in documentation, the *Argonauti* project remains a semaphor of the changing society and art at a pivotal time.

13 *The City of Youth, The City at the Open Border, The City of Roses* are some of the popular nicknames for Nova Gorica, the city, which was build as a socialist project to make .

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