

DETAIL / Pedestrian entrance - urban deck 2 - stone deck and steel canopy // photograph by Ervin Husedžinović

Poljana Square in Šibenik: between challenging and honouring the heritage

Nested in the middle of the Dalmatian coast, Šibenik certainly enjoys cultural prestige. It may not have entered the top list of tourist destinations of the eastern Adriatic, but its organic Mediaeval configuration and spread down steep slopes towards the sea distinguish it from the flat planes of Zadar and Split, which followed the urban matrices of the Antiquity and saw complex transformations over the centuries, or from the neat original grid of the old Dubrovnik. And unlike these towns, it went through rather limited spouts of modernisation. Zadar built on its historical layers. Split went through several stages of daring expansion and grew exponentially in population over the second half of the 20th century. And Dubrovnik became enclosed by a ring of impressive hotel complexes, which brought fundamental changes to its urban dynamics and character. The marks modernisation left on Šibenik, however, were not nearly as deep. It saw some high-rise building on its edges and industrial development that died in the meantime. While these other towns are bigger, perhaps even more layered, and definitely more abounding in architecture, they can hardly surpass the authenticity and cultural importance of some of Šibenik's most prominent architectural pieces. Perhaps none can match the monumental setup of St Michael's Fortress on top of the town's central hill or St James' Cathedral, built with mathematical precision by Juraj Dalmatinac, or the radical modernist infills by Ivan Vitić, his Army Home-town museum–elementary school complex in particular. And now finally, after a decade of economic stagnation, Šibenik seems to spring back to life to become a model of urban development and desirable living.

Its network of public spaces in the historical centre has been shaped by its steep configuration. Its squares and piazzettas are connected by horizontal streets that follow the town's isohypses and by vertical stairways and steep passages between the houses. They are like a network of flowing or gushing veins and arteries. One can adjust the speed of movement to their own preference and physical fitness. The pumping heart of the town – the Square of the Republic of Croatia by St James' Cathedral – is enclosed from three sides. Its plateau breaks the town's matrix and overlooks the sea from an elevation. Its westernmost corner develops into a sheltered, cosy loggia, and this pattern can be found at other locations in the town, including a few modernist interventions that snug public space "below" the buildings.

The square's urban counterpart is Poljana, another square within the limits of the historical centre, surrounded by the National Theatre, Town Hall, and Town Library. These two squares complement each other, as they create two hubs. The Square of the Republic of Croatia in the heart of the historical town meets the sea and abandons its matrix for the sake of a looser setup compatible with the periphery. It is in fact a homogeneous place at the bottom of the town's amphitheatre-like configuration where nothing is left to define. It is the hub of open air cultural events such as the International Children's Festival.

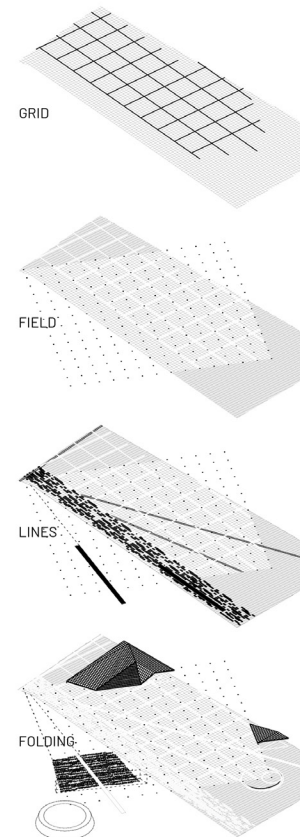
Poljana, in contrast, is heterogeneous, bordered by busy roads, and does not look like a classical square. It is located on top of what used to be a cliff, typical of Šibenik's coastline, but now hardly recognisable as such. Today's plateau took time to form gradually into an urban space proper. It is a combination of tectonic givens and urban development, an example of nature continuously being adjusted to the town's changing means and ends. It has no history of an authentic town square but of ever changing, often controversial uses. It used to be a racing ground, a

place of execution, a park for walks, a venue for parades and political gatherings, a parking lot by a crossroads, an archaeological dig... Its southeast edge meets with a Classicist garden cascading towards the coast, while a triangle-shaped pit between the Town Library and the Poljana plateau reveals the archaeological remains of old fortifications. The Theatre building – an architecturally unimpressive reference to the Venetian style, common in these parts – flanks it with one side but not its front. Further away to the north, there is a sturdy postmodernist Town Hall building with an elevated landing. Is it by coincidence or by design, but all these public buildings seem to look away from Poljana, as if its name ("the field") was either the cause or the result of these choices.

Yet even before this most recent redevelopment of Poljana, this space had acquired a canonical, almost cult status in Croatian architecture thanks to Vitić's Army Home, later repurposed into the Town Library. The Vitić complex was quite literary built on a historical layer cleared of later "additions". Vitić was all but coy as he addressed the coexistence of history and modernity by tearing down the old building of the Town Café and public library and used the reclaimed historical walls beneath (as the legitimate witnesses of important urban layers) to support a new, future-oriented architecture. This balancing between tradition and modernity had already transpired in his design of the adjoining elementary school, as it combines the old Mediterranean scenery with a shady arcade and a metropolitan curtain wall. The Army Home, completed in 1961, reminds of the Incubation Process conceived by his contemporary and champion of Japanese Metabolism in architecture Arata Isozaki. Vitić used the historical remnants of the old town as a landscape foundation of his new construct. He neither deleted nor invoked history, but recycled and absorbed it in the spirit of circular urban metabolism to create a modern architectural cyborg. One could object that the same can be said of Frankenstein's monster, similarly recycled and reassembled, but cannot deny a stark difference between these two in form and function. Frankenstein's monster, being a monstrosity after all, was a failed experiment, whereas Vitić's complex is a seamless, functional, and last but not least, well-received piece of architecture. His approach reflects the many faces of Modernism. Instead of a neat, civilised modernity, however, Vitić champions a style of Radical Will, an uncompromised cultural modernism undergoing perpetual revolution in line with the political programme of the time: *Nothing created should be so sacrosanct as not to be overcome.*

The designers of the Poljana redevelopment project faced the question of how to create a bustling public space from what had just until recently served as a parking lot and had been laden with such a complex background? There were two challenges to overcome. One on the scale of the town and the other on the scale of locality. On the macro scale, the challenge was to complement one of the most beautiful historical town squares in Croatia, the Republic Square by St James' Cathedral, and make the project a worthy counterpart. On the micro-scale the challenge was to turn a non-place into something very much alive (even though its only function until then was take you to the Library) and meet high public expectations, especially in terms of bringing together half a millennium of urban layers. In addition, there was a practical issue at hand; to build a public garage underneath, which was an infrastructural challenge of its own.

The project is based on two premises, and both, each in its own way, are embedded in the history of the locality. The first is that all squares should have their urban function and be able to accommodate a variety of events. The second is to uphold the existing geometries outlined by the configuration of the square. Both premises support each other and partly overlap.

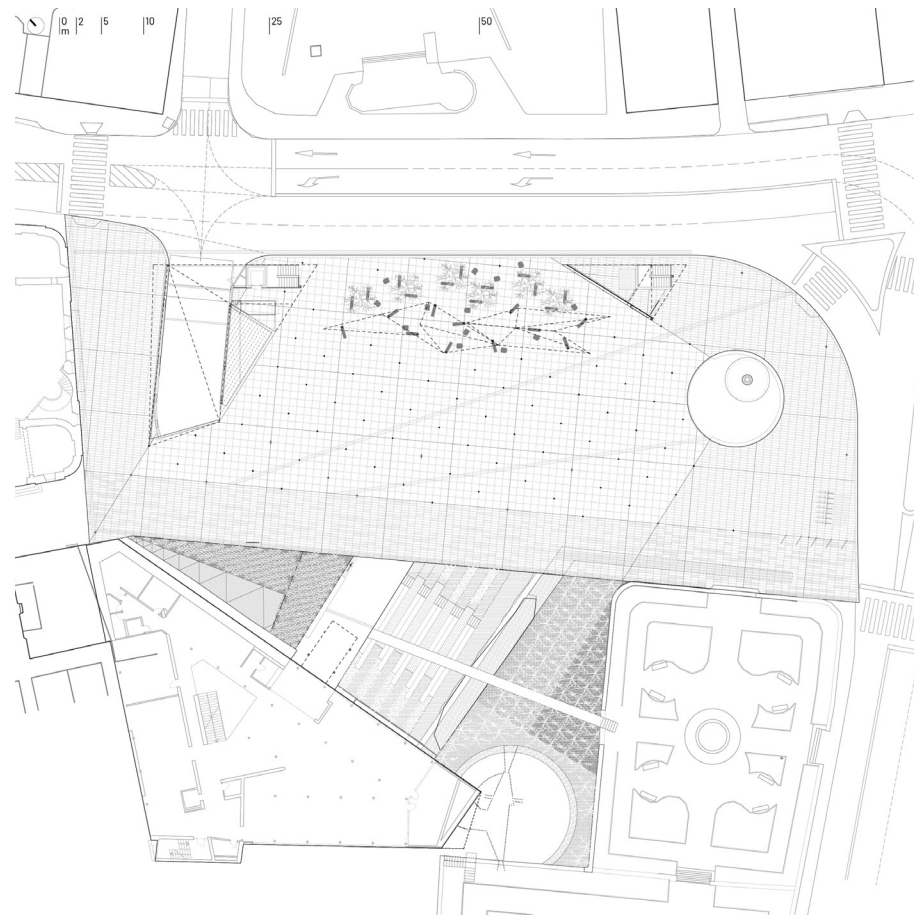


Poljana has seen many functions over the centuries. In the spirit of this tradition, the project seeks to keep options as open as possible. The functional elements of the garage underneath, such as the access road and the stairway, have therefore been used to uphold and even enhance the choice of urban functions of the square. Aptly avoiding to place standalone structures on its surface, the designers came up with an ingenious idea to treat infrastructural elements as vectors that determine how the square's surface should fold. Instead of treating the surface and the structures differently, they've come up with a three-dimensional solution that sets the stage for a variety of events and posts landmarks on a vaguely defined perimeter. The two broken folds that shelter road entrance into the garage and pedestrian exit stairway correspond to the broken square's "façade" across its perimeter. The playful folding of the square's surface is complemented by as playful geometry in the rear plane.

Between the two folds there hovers a "cloud" of triangle-shaped pavilions that bear reference to the outstanding folded roof of the Town Library. Beside the pavilions there are youngling trees planted, enhancing the playful impression as sharp geometries intersect with the tree crowns. The play continues with console-like benches sheltered by the pavilions, which invite relaxed social interaction. (The pavilions and the benches have been designed by a design collective Numen, but they fit the square concept like a glove). The square's uneven configuration and the geometry of the pavilions together form a space that goes beyond abstract Cartesian geometry. At the same time it stimulates and reacts to the flow of urban movement, whether it is cars coming in and going out, people pausing and moving on, cats roaming, or birds landing and taking to flight. And while the folds ascend, a broad stairway / open stand descends into the triangle between the square and the Library and leads to a garden full of aromatic herbs and further to the exposed remnants of a fortification and side access to the garage. The original project also intended to open new, unexpected routes of movement through this complex urban tissue by introducing an overpass that would take pedestrians across the remnant of the fortress, bypass the Library and end on the poorly used plateau on its west side. However, on conservators' request, the authors replaced this original solution with a light steel bridge overpassing the stand-like stairway, connecting with the old Classicist garden, and reaching the plateau sideways. Even though this new route is the result of negotiations and compromise, it still provides an exciting new experience of walking "in the air" and enjoying the new view of the town.

While the square's configuration accommodates for the flow of movement and events that take place there, its surfaces talk to the old urban layers and artefacts. Its grid of paved stone follows the southern line of the plot, while the infrastructure points are aligned with the orientation of the Library building and historic walls. These infrastructure points are all set in a quadrangle that looks like an extension of the Library and is distinguished from the rest of the surface by different slab texture. In the corner to the northeast, there stands a round fountain that seems to echo the shape of the old fortification beneath the Library on one hand and the radius of the intersection where the two major roads meet on the other. Thus it completes the spatial composition of the square. The authors also introduce a third gentle imprint on the pavement, different from the linear grid, which reflects the historical flow of movement across the square. This third geometric layer closes the circle and reminds us of the performative function of the square. While contemporary flows remain open and undefined, the historical flow lines are thus recorded and saved for future generations.

This project introduces a type of public space that clearly responds to the givens of the context it's set in. It is conceived as a non-hierarchical network of situations (by situation I mean the relationship between architectural space and events as Tschumi interprets it) with no "higher authority" defining the main route of movement. It has no specific focus or landmark, save for the fountain to some extent, which had to define the undefined northeast



project_ POLJANA SQUARE/ ground floor plan

curve. The whole composition is balanced well, as it minds the scales, that is, the relationship between the "volumes" of the folds and the surrounding buildings. The larger fold covering the road access interacts with the back of the theatre, while the smaller one completes the line of pavilions and trees. The urban configuration of Poljana is animated and animating at the same time. It encourages movement and action, let's one choose their own place to pause or the best route across. This degree of openness, however, does not imply formlessness, quite the opposite; formal gestures are distinct and convincing. The concept of three-dimensional flow of the surfaces is highlighted by structural elements that mark the folds and breaks, which is particularly clear with the dramatic separation of the audience stand above the road access to the garage. There are no surpluses or elements of "urban design" that look like add-ons or that have been shaped on different principles. The entire square is a consistent, meticulously defined entity (exceptions such as glazed walls were the result of compromise with fire safety codes).

To understand this project, one should be able to understand the relationship between architectural form and function. Sometimes architecture's potential to influence social processes is overrated. Even so, it is quite clear that different spatial configurations treat human body differently in terms of movement. They either speed it up or slow it down. They also determine microclimatic conditions and elicit different emotions in different people. Despite its limited area and repertory in terms of structural elements, the Poljana square provides a great variety of relationships between human body and space. One can climb up the greater fold and sit on the stand, take a break and chat sitting on a bench sheltered by the pavilion or a tree crown, enjoy the aromatic herbal garden at the foot of the Library, skateboard around the fountain, take an air walk across the hovering overpass... This freedom of movement is even clearer at night, when lighting seems to map out all these possibilities mentioned above but does not enforce or limit them. The repertory of public facilities also includes the three-storey garage, which can accommodate public events thanks to higher ceilings and adjusted structural grid as well as to easy access from the bottom of the stairway / open stand on the Library's side.

The authors have embraced Vitić's heritage of radical modernism and have not yielded to narrow-minded expectations. Just as Vitić built on the old fortification walls, making use of them as the structural basis for new architecture, so did our two architects bravely decide to fold the square's surface, turn their back to the side façade of the theatre, or go through the wall of the historical Classicist garden. These "iconoclastic" gestures reflect the view of a town as a metabolic process that does not stand in awe of history but takes from it what it sees as necessary. The infrastructural elements of the garage access are not perceived as a programmatic "impurity" that needs hiding but are the points of departure for a sophisticated architectural and social mise-en-scène.

I personally find this square quite magical. They dug up a crater in the middle of Poljana, gave it a skeleton, and covered it with a shroud of dazzling white stone. The flow of air from the pit below has raised and folded this shroud, marking it with lines where it breaks. On the surface of the shroud there hovers a steel origami-like cloud, beneath which lie scattered the wooden benches like some joyful confetti. In the background, just by Vitić's creation, where the stairway / open stand descends into the archaeological, triangle-shaped crater, the architects give a hunch of the other overlapping urban microcosms, while the steel bridge rises boldly like an arrow looking toward the garden. This is why I believe that the main square by St James' Cathedral has got a worthy counterpart, a complementing urban public space that has found an unconventional balance between challenging the heritage and honouring it. /Maroje Mrduljaš/ translation: D. Čakalo



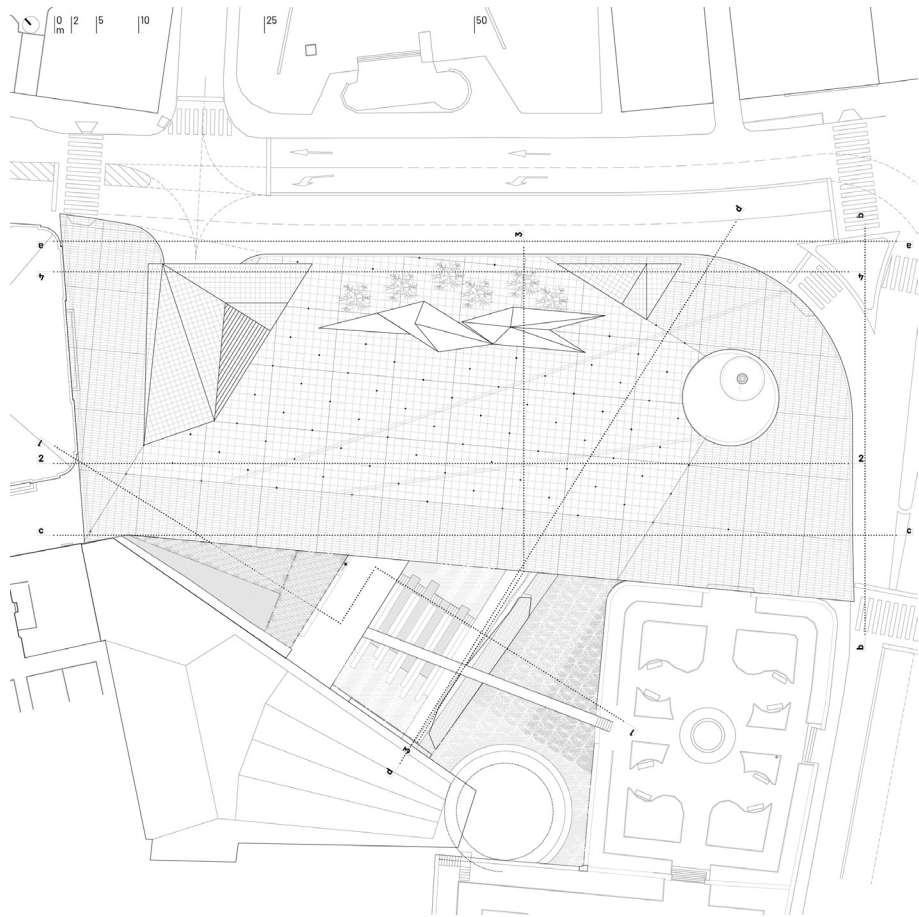
DETAIL / Two elevated round planes, water jets showing exact time // photograph by Ervin Husedžinović



photo by Ivana Tutek



project_ POLJANA SQUARE/ site plan

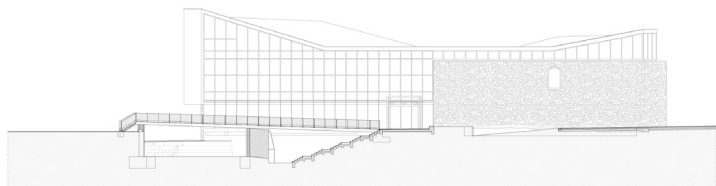


project_ POLJANA SQUARE/ roof plan

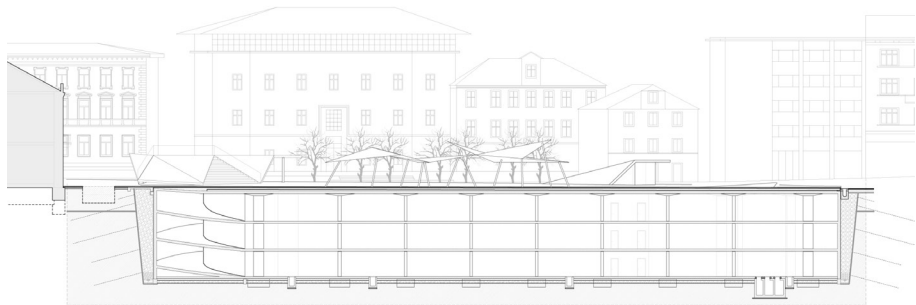


photo by Ivana Tutek

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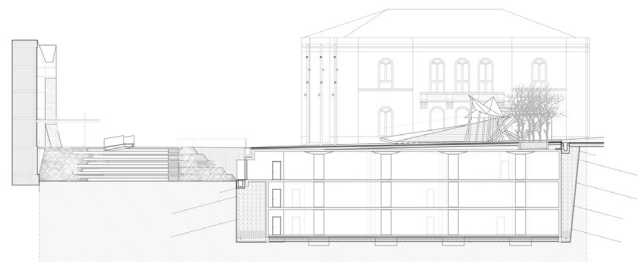
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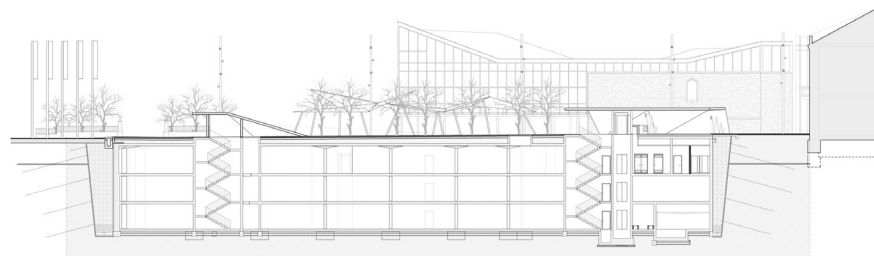
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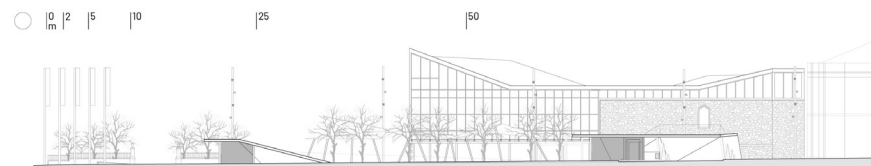


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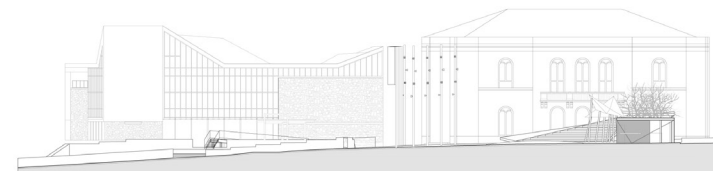
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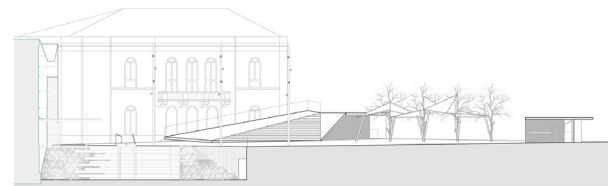
facade a



facade b



facade c



facade d

project_ POLJANA SQUARE/ facades



photo by Ivana Tutek

