Small matters:

Explaining the city through a medieval wall

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Abstract

In the city of Kranj, Slovenia, three former medieval defence towers were redesigned as public spaces. The three interventions are positioned and discussed within the frame of small-scale interventions, specifically as urban acupuncture. First, small-scale interventions are looked at as an approach to designing open space, and parallels with landscape approach are presented. Second, the Three Towers project is discussed, focussing on the relationship it establishes between the city and its context. As the city is built on top of a conglomerate canyon, the interventions open up the slopes and offer distinct views of the surrounding landscape. In this way, they rediscover and emphasise the relationships between the existing contextual amenities and the city itself. The experience of the site grounds the visitor in a physical and historical context and thus fulfils the mental map one might create of Kranj. In this way, the three small interventions influence the perception of the whole city.

Keywords

small scale interventions; urban acupuncture; urban design; Slovenia

Introduction

The role of the city and its relationship with the surrounding landscape has been constantly evolving throughout the history. Landscape, once seen as lawless wilderness to be walled out is, nowadays, as cities grew extensively into metropolitan regions, seen as an amenity providing various services such as food, leisure, water retention, climatic benefits etc. The once divided city and landscape are understood as integral parts of a common system. Seeking connections and facilitating flows between the two is among the main objectives of contemporary urban developments. However, while the city-landscape relationship was evolving, spatial organization and built structures often remained the same. Medieval European cities grew fast and far beyond their fortification structures, crawling into the landscape. Old city centres were thus distanced from the landscape while dense urban fabric often hindered possibilities to develop new green spaces. This is somewhat ironic, considering landscape was usually detrimental in siting of medieval cities.

In such a setting, dense cities need to resort to specific design strategies, one of which is small-scale interventions (Marzi & Ancona, 2014). An example of such a small-scale design approach from Kranj, Slovenia, will be looked at in this article through a critical lens in order to explore how, in a dense medieval city, awareness of surrounding landscape and site's history can ground the city within its context and explain spatial relationships to the visitors. Critique as a mode of thinking about design, incorporating both theory-based exploration of projects and evaluation through transparent, albeit subjective, argumentation, is used to elucidate and reflect upon a given project (van Dooren, 2006). It seeks to answer if, how, and why a project is a good project in a certain spatial and temporal context. To this end, small-scale intervention as a design category will be discussed first to establish a framework through which a specific project, supported by on-site observations conducted in the past two years, will be described and evaluated.

Small interventions

Whether small-scale intervention is its own design category is arguable. It appears difficult to conceptualise small interventions – what does the "smallness" refer to? Though the idea is often mentioned (see Topos issue 79 from 2012 dedicated to the theme) discussion seldom dives into its specifics. However, there are some approaches that set small interventions as their main tool of change. Tactical urbanism, for example, emphasises the process – small bottom-up initiatives trigger urban change independently of formal planning institutions (Silva, 2016). In a critique of ubiquitous modernist urbanism, Rowe and Koetter (1986) introduced the notion of pocket utopias as places evoking different narratives and design themes, increasing plurality and diversity of the city. Employing principles of a traditional Chinese method of healing, urban acupuncture is also a frequently used term. It targets and treats specific strategic points which then revitalise the broader area (Houghton, Hee-jeong Choi, & Lugmayr, 2015a), focusing on the relationship between input, which is to be as small as possible, and its effect, which is to be great, implying that definition of small intervention is not related solely to physical scale, but rather to design intentions and their ramifications. Although many practical examples of the concept can be found throughout the world, attention was seldom given to the principle by academia (Houghton, Foth, & Miller, 2015b; Unt & Bell, 2014). However the systemic approach advocated by urban acupuncture is akin to landscape thinking (Harsema, 2011). Going beyond the physical borders of the site to be designed is the main motivation of urban acupuncture, and design decisions are made primarily to follow this objective. Understanding the broader context and circumstances within which we design allows us to determine certain hot-spots or strategic points that influence other areas.

Urban acupuncture was successfully employed to make the Brazilian city of Curitiba more environmentally friendly and walkable, and to improve microclimatic conditions and fight poverty (Rosario, 2016). The key actor in the transformation, architect and former mayor of the city, Jaime Lerner, argues that the imperative of a successful urban acupuncture is preservation and restoration of cultural identity of a place or community (Lerner, 2014, p. 9). Sensitivity to the context and local culture is, in general, stressed as paramount to urban acupuncture and seems to be the principle most authors address as vital for a successful intervention (Marzi & Ancona, 2004; Houghton et al. 2015a; Shidan& Qian, 2011). While such general principles of urban acupuncture – define strategic points and respond appropriately – are widely agreed upon, the more concrete principles of the concept seem to differ across practitioners and theorists. Swift interventions, social inclusiveness, and de-automobilisation are the recurring themes stressed by Lerner (2014). While some propose activist-like actions – being in the area and intuitively coming to intervention ideas (Elkjaer, 2010), others advocate the use of information-communication technologies to collect intervention suggestions from local community (Houghton et al., 2015b) or even to compute the acupuncture points using neural networks (Tortosa, Vicent, Zamora, & Oliver 2010).

While no general theory on small-scale intervention or urban acupuncture has yet emerged, it is possible to place it within other existing planning theories, for example the incremental planning. Charles Lindbloom (1959) described the theory as "muddling through" alluding to gradual steps toward an objective instead of one big comprehensive change. Following incrementalism, the complex reality of spatial problems is best tackled with a series of small, practical, and easily manageable solutions over a period of time. This allows for experimentation with different ideas and makes quick adjustments possible. Each increment is, in essence, a small scale intervention. The small-scale approach is also akin to the theory of everyday urbanism, which deals with the intermittent space between the home, the institution, and the workplace – seeking to intervene in the often-marginalised spaces (Crawford, Speaks, & Mehrotra, 2005; Kelbaugh, 2000).

Looking at small-scale projects can also offer some reflection in the wake of western world's (financial) crisis, when cranes are again beginning to fill the city skylines (EUROSTAT, 2016). Small-scale interventions such as urban acupuncture seem attractive in the times of uncertainty as they mostly require little investment, but still take into account the long-term goals (Pasha, 2015). While the theory on the topic is far from comprehensive, small scale intervention appears to be a convenient design philosophy when dealing with dense historic urban fabric and limited spatial options. Such an example will be looked at next to explore how this can be achieved: 3 stolpi in Kranj, Slovenia.

Basic info

- Original operation name: 3 stolpi
- Location: Kranj, Slovenia
- Contracting authority: Mestna obcina Kranj (City municipality Kranj)
- Offices/authors: LUZ d.d., / Karla Jankovic, Kranjc Urška, Trbižan Gaja, Tina Cotic
  Projecta d.o.o (statics)
  Klimaterm, d.o.o. (electro installations)
  Irgo Consulting, d.o.o. (geomechanics)
- Cost: 1.957.900,29 €
- Total surface area: 415 m^2
- Construction date: 2010 – 2011
- Date of study: mid 2016

The Three Towers

In a general wish to renovate the old city centre, the municipality of Kranj, Slovenia (Fig. 1), decided to renovate areas of three former defence towers, two of which had already collapsed. The project was done at a time when urban development was increasingly focusing on open public space. While the initiative was part of a broader scheme to renovate the city, it is noteworthy that the city authorities recognised the importance of these three specific areas and dedicated special attention to them. For defensive purposes, the medieval city is set on top of a crumbling conglomerate pier surrounded by canyons at the confluence of two rivers below the tip of the pier (Fig. 2). The city used to be guarded by a wall and a series of defence towers (Fig. 3). As defensive functions of the wall and its towers became redundant, the area around them was mostly occupied by private gardens, blocking public access to the city's edge, so it was the main objective of the design to convert the area into public space. The fact that sites were spatially disconnected and relatively small (Fig. 4) posed a question of how to create a coherent urban gesture while respecting the particularities of each site.

FIGURE 1 Location of Kranj. The city is located in northwest region of Slovenia and is its administrative centre.

FIGURE 2 Topography of Kranj. The city is built on a conglomerate pier above confluence of two rivers, with steep slopes on both sides. This combined with dense urban structure leaves little space for open public space development. (Digital elevation model by GURS, 2016; Ortophoto by Atlas okolja, 2016)

The first tower, dubbed Pungart, is located right at the tip of the conglomerate pier. In Figure 4, it is marked by the lower red dot. The site is at the end of the main city promenade. The designers' solution seems simple, but the experience it can offer is quite complex. A circular weathered steel platform is placed along the remains of the medieval wall, extending over the edge of the slope (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6) where the former defence tower used to be. The platform is perforated and visitors can see through it. In this way the platform not only marks the location of the former defence tower, but also expresses the emptiness left by the collapse of the tower. It is not its intention to recreate the tower or its parts, but to evoke a memory, expressed by the emptiness (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8). Preservation of memory ensures that places can

be associated with history and maintains the historical continuity (Karamanea, 2015: 119). The scrutinised design, however, is bold and different enough to differentiate it from historical substance. Designs that exceed mere conservation and formal concerns add another layer to the palimpsest of the city (Heyde, 2015). The design's reference to history is further highlighted by the side sections of the platform being made of walk-on glass, thus revealing the remains of the medieval wall.

Besides the historical narrative, the design also employs the principle of borrowed landscape i.e. incorporating the surrounding landscape into the design (Kuitert, 2015). By opening the city's edge with the extended platform, long vistas are offered to the visitors (Fig. 8). The contextual entities and relations between them become the substance of the design. The suspended platform becomes a focal point, where the relationships can be most aptly understood. Due to dense city structure, this is one of the rare spots where city's edge opens up and one can actually observe the slopes of the conglomerate canyon and the river in it. The design thus grounds the user in the context of the city and explains it. A sort of revelation happens: *This is where you stand; this is where the city is i*s the statement of the design.

FIGURE 3 Kranj in 1649 (top) and today (bottom). The medieval wall and its defence towers are mostly gone, with two exceptions, one on each side of the lower image. (top drawing by Zeiller, 2005; bottom photography by Luka Dakskobler, arhiv Zavoda za turizem in kulturo Kranj, 2016).

Such an experience can be possible because of the small scale of the intervention, as it condenses the experience, as opposed to spreading it out, as might happen if, for example, a design were done over a broader area. The platform is a pivotal point – not only the end of the main city axis, where one has to turn around and go back, but also a place that helps explain the city's context by exposing key landscape features in a multisensory way. The depth of the canyon is exposed by perforated flooring, the rivers by the sound of the rapids, the history by different materials (weathered steel, stone). By involving the whole body in the perception, the knowledge about the city and the landscape can become embodied, instead of remaining just a picture in one's mind. The "smallness" of the intervention allows all the stimuli to be perceived

simultaneously. In frequent visits to observe the site, it was noticed that when people walk to the platform they tend to stop in silence and gaze into the canyon and the landscape, an effect most obviously seen in children who after playfully running onto the platform fall silent.

FIGURE 4 Locations of interventions. The interventions are located on the edge of the city where the medieval fortifications used to be. Remnants of these can still be seen at these places. (Plan by LUZ d.d., 2011).

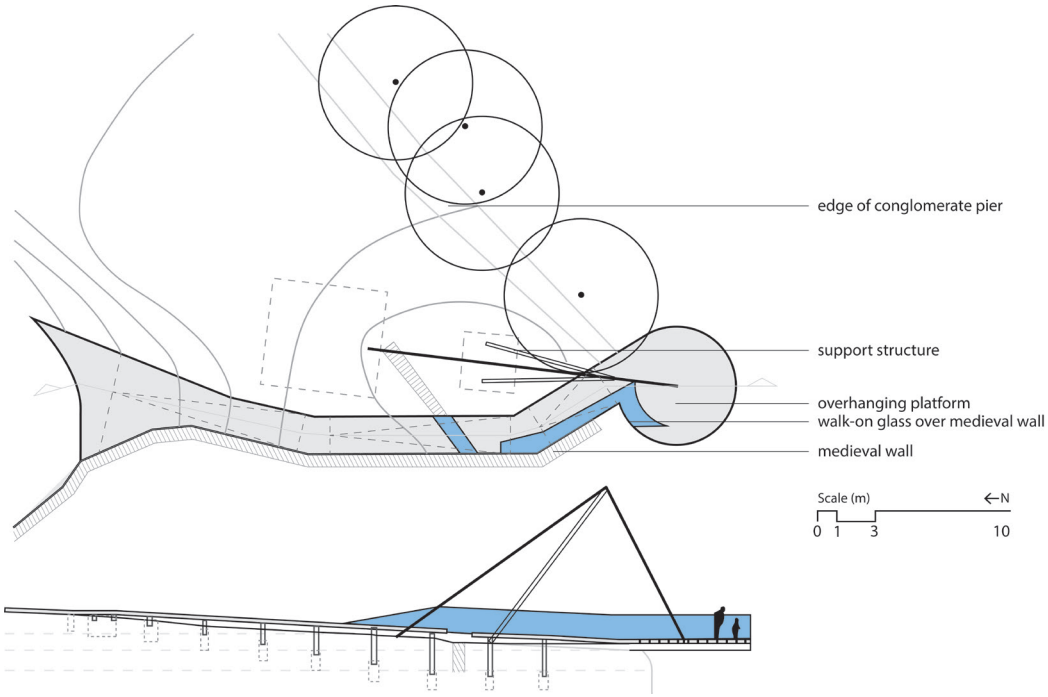

FIGURE 5 Plan and section of the platform. The approach to the platform runs along the remnants of the medieval wall and then over the edge of the slope, where a tower used to be until it crumbeled into the gorge below. While the circular form references the tower's floorplan, the lightness of the overhanging construction, combined with a perforated weathered steel surface, emphasises the emptiness left by the collapse, and offers extensive views of the surrounding landscape. (Plan by LUZ d.d., 2011)

FIGURE 6 Render of the viewing platform. The contrast in materials clearly differentiate the old and the new, adding a contemporary layer to the city. (Render by LUZ d.d., 2011).

The second tower, located at the western edge of the city, employs similar design principles. The site, Vovkov garden, is framed by a 13th century mansion, its wall, and the former tower. The enclosed setting creates an intimate ambience, reinforced by the stable tripartite design of the garden (Fig. 9).

A grass meadow with a line-of-beauty kind of path connects the paved mansion courtyard to a gravel surface surrounding the remains of the tower. The path runs along a former defence bunker, which now serves as a lookout hill (see Figure 9, on the right) from where views of the surroundings can be enjoyed, offering a similar but less intense experience to the one described above. On top of the remains of the tower a half-tube was placed, doubling as a small stage and thus providing a new cultural venue for the city (Fig. 10). The new additions are again made of weathered steel, establishing a clear link between this intervention and the one described above. Even though both designs use the same design language, they create different atmospheres and convey different narratives. The first – the platform – is a logical end to the city promenade. With a nearby playground, the place is lively. On a sunny day, the air is full of children's' laughter, parents' chitchat and the city's buzz. Even on a cloudy or rainy day people stroll to the end of the platform to enjoy the views of a stormy landscape. At the castle's garden the ambience is more serene; there is a peaceful feel to the place, separated from the mumbo jumbo of the city, quite clearly signalled by the walled-in premises. The area seems to be appreciated by the residents, as people sitting and chatting on the benches and youth hanging around is a familiar sight (Fig. 10 and Fig. 11). While the ambience of the sites differ, each is achieved by (re)establishing relationships between existing contextual amenities, which is also the key characteristic of the small intervention approach. It shows how a seemingly modest design gesture can positively influence the perception of a certain place.

The preserved third tower (Fig. 12) was retrofitted to create an exhibition room and a small venue for performances. This intervention is confined to the interior and there is no use of weathered steel, making it difficult to connect this intervention to the other two. When observed from a distance, the renewed tower creates a landmark and defines the rhythm of city silhouette, but other than that, it offers little on the urban scale. Linking it to the other two interventions, possibly by utilising the same materials, could have introduced a specific rhythm to the street, connecting all three and providing a coherent theme along the city's edge.

FIGURE 7 View of the platform from below. The platform extends over the edge of the slope, commemorating the former defence tower.

FIGURE 8 The view from the platform. The perforated surface and walk-on glass expose the medieval wall and the height of the slopes. This is one of the rare places where the river gorge and the height difference between the city and its surroundings can be observed. By also offering long vistas it is a key point for understanding the city's context. (photography by Luka Dakskobler, arhiv Zavoda za turizem in kulturo Kranj, 2016).

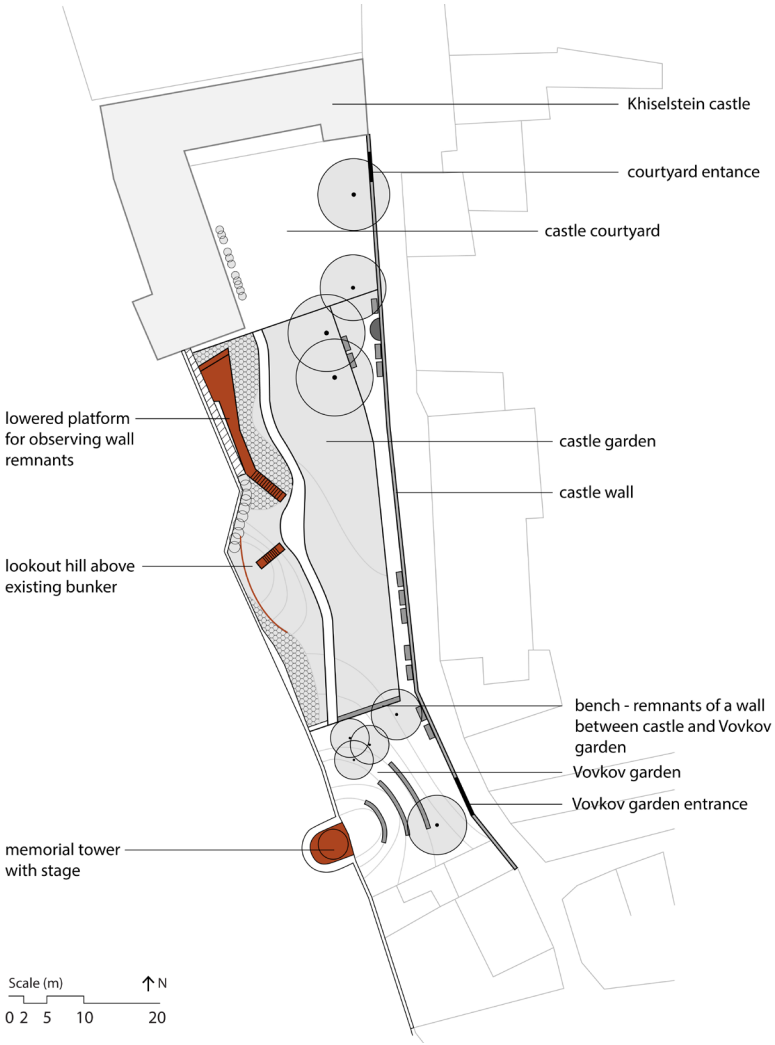

FIGURE 9 Plan of intervention at castle Khislstein. Starting at the north, the intervention is divided on three parts: the castle's courtyard; the castle's garden with a meadow; and Vovkov garden, where another defence tower used to stand. This part is now designed as a small stage providing a venue for events. (plan by LUZ d.d., 2011)

FIGURE 10 Vovkov garden. The weathered steel structure marks the location of the former tower and can also be used for performances. The material is a clear reference to the first intervention – the overhanging platform. Views of the surroundings can, again, be appreciated at this location. (photography by Luka Dakskobler, arhiv Zavoda za turizem in kulturo Kranj, 2016).

Discussion and conclusion

When thinking about urban acupuncture, the question about the relationship between the site and its surroundings comes to mind. The scrutinised project exploits its specific location on the fringe of the medieval city and the landscape. It is respectful of the history while also adding another layer. By emphasising the edge, a clear relationship is established between the city and its context with the design site as a mediator from where the relationship can be best understood. The edge of the city is not really an edge anymore, but a strategic point in the city-landscape continuum. Creating continuity and filling urban voids is one of the principal tasks of urban acupuncture (Lerner, 2014). At the same time, the design is clearly different from the existing urban fabric. Such differentiation creates clear identities for these small places, while also imposing a rhythm to the streetscape and thus adding a new contemporary layer to the city. Amongst a recent increase in urban renovations it is refreshing to stumble upon a project showing how such a task can achieve more than just replacing pavements and "beautifying" the city. The main far-reaching effect of the design is the fulfilment of the mental image of Kranj, exposing the city's key characteristics and contributing to a clear collective image (Fig. 13), while some shopkeepers also report increased numbers of flâneurs since the project's implementation[1]. Increased visits to the sites also generates new flows of people and amplifies weak ones, which is especially important in times when shopping malls continue to rise on the outskirts of cities, pulling residents and businesses out of old centres. The three interventions further introduce three new environments to the city, increasing the diversity of public space. They offer playful, calm, and cultural venues, and in this manner create pocket utopias, which can allow different ideas of living to manifest themselves, increasing democracy and diversity of the city (Rowe & Koetter, 1986).

Urban acupuncture and small-scale interventions alike can offer new possibilities to densely built cities with little space for new development. Instead of going outside of the city limits and expanding further into the surrounding land, small-scale intervention can contribute to revitalising existing sites. It can bring new meanings to places or rediscover forgotten ones. With minimal investment, it could also be easier to try new, as yet untested ideas that can provide the city with a new energy. A plethora of small-scale interventions can make cities more democratic, as each project can be targeted towards a specific group, ensuring an abundance of different environments for different people to enjoy. As shown in the example, small interventions can revitalise a marginalised, left-over space and turn it into a well-functioning public place. Small can matter.

1 The author spoke with two shopkeepers and two waiters in two different cafés. They all reported an increase of people on the streets of the city centre since the renovation took place. However, according to shopkeepers, number of people buying in their shops did not increase in tandem.

FIGURE 11 View towards castle wall. People sitting and enjoying the peace and quiet is a familiar sight at Vovkov garden. The wall behind the benches creates a division between the serenity of the garden and bustle of the city.

FIGURE 12 The preserved and refitted tower. The third tower is one of those that have not collapsed. It hosts performances and art exhibitions. Although there is no use of weathered steel to directly link with the other two interventions, the tower with its recognisable roof is a landmark in the silhouette of the city. (photography by Luka Dakskobler, arhiv Zavoda za turizem in kulturo Kranj, 2016).

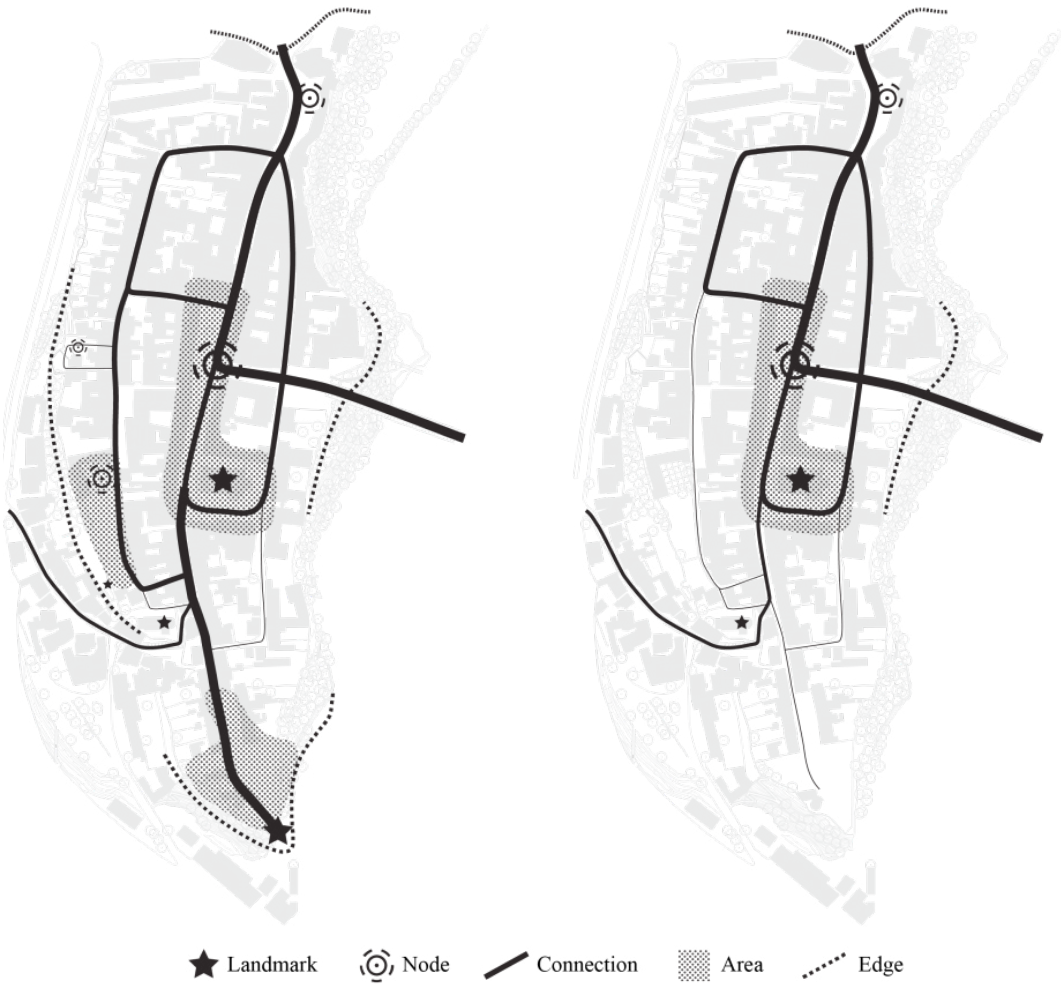

FIGURE 13 Mental map of Kranj before (right) and after (left) the interventions. All three interventions fill some voids in the perception of the city. They create a distinct ending to the main city promenade, help understand the context of the city, and provide different venues for play, contemplation, and cultural activites.

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