

# Serge Domicelj

Argentine Slovenian architect and prominent city planner in South America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia, was also one of the leaders in planning and designing the Australian capital city Canberra. In 1994-1996, he served as the first non-European president of the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP)

By Edward Gobetz

We were fortunate to be able to research the Slovenian Argentine family Domicelj and preserve its distinguished record not only in Argentina, but also in many other countries. It had all started when I received a letter from Mr. Vigor Domicelj, dated February 7, 1971. It stated simply that, upon a suggestion of our mutual friend Victor Sulcic, one of the most prominent architects in Argentina who was also an immigrant from Slovenia, the undersigned Vigor Domicelj (pronounce Domitsell) was sending us some information on his life and career. In 1939, when he received the citizenship of Argentina, his original name Igor was changed to Vigor, one of the examples how in Argentina, too, names of immigrants were often changed, Igor to Vigor, Janez to Juan, or Franc to Francisco.

Igor Domicelj was born on August 2, 1902 in the village of Zagorje, near Št. Peter na Krasu, in the Slovenian Carst area which was then under Italy, but was after World War II granted to Yugoslavia. As it was generally true, under the Yugoslav atheist communist rule, the names of places named after saints were changed, thus in 1952 Št. Peter became Pivka. Igor studied in Gorica (Gorizia) and graduated from the Commerce Academy in Vienna. He then worked for the Credit Bank of Trieste until 1927, when, during the steady rise of fascist dictator Mussolini, he immigrated to Argentina. Since he was fluent in seven languages, he easily obtained employment, at first as a reporter in foreign languages for Interflora, then as administrator of the printing and publishing business Impresa Lopez. In 1944, he became a partner in Editorial Ayacucho, all in Buenos Aires. In 1947, he established his own graphic and printing company which, in 1960, he reorganized into a new company, Papelbril, S.A.C.I. Papelbril produced many kinds of coated and laminated papers, and then increasingly specialized in the manufacture of self-adhesive materials. As president of his modern commercial and industrial company, he employed up to 120 employees and was successful and respected in his field. In December 1970, Edition 236 of *Argentina Grafica*, published an article chronicling ten years of the company's activities, mentioning "a distinguished place it achieved in the first decade of its existence, thanks to high quality of products and services." One of his sons, George, a mechanical engineer, became the vice president and, at 36, president of the company, while Igor, despite suffering from extremely painful bone cancer, remained active in the family business, as well as in the Argentine and Slovenian communities, almost until his death.

Igor was an enthusiastic mountain climber and also climbed the northern face of Slovenia's highest mountain Triglav (2,864 meters or 9,396 feet) before immigrating to Argentina. His son Serge, who later settled in Australia, too, was involved in many sports and even served as the secretary of Argentine skiing and mountain climbing organizations. Serge's brother George, in turn, climbed the mighty Andes Mountains in the vicinity of Bariloche, whence several Slovenian mountain climbers conquered some of the most challenging peaks, one of which Argentina named Campanile Esloveno (Slovenian Steeple), "probably the most difficult rock climb yet made in Argentine," in honor of Slovenians Dinko Bartonec and Francisco Jerman who were the first to climb to its top. A passionate and experienced mountain climber, George Domicelj attempted to conquer the highest peak of Tronadoron on one of its most demanding sites when, slightly before reaching the top, he was caught in a winter storm. As reported by his daughter, Analia Domicelj, he died in that snow storm on March 17, 1991, at the age of 55.

Analia, with a degree in Business Administration, now leads the company, assisted by her younger sister Silvina, while Maria Celia, like her uncle Serge, is an architect (Analia's personal letter to this writer, dated April 2, 1998).

This brings us to George's older brother Serge, an architect and internationally prominent city planner. He was born on January 30, 1933, in Buenos Aires, where from 1946 to 1951 he studied at Colegio Nacional. Then he spent two obligatory years in the military service (1954 and 1955), before returning to studies of architecture and city planning at the University of Buenos Aires. In the school year 1960-61, he continued his studies of comprehensive planning at the Institute of Social Studies in Hague, Netherlands. From February to July, 1961, he was employed by Insituut Stad en Lanschap in Rotterdam, Netherlands, working on a pilot proposal for the urban extension to the east of the city of Rotterdam (Prince Alexander Polder), to cater for a population of 150,000 over an area of some 5,000 acres.

In the academic year 1961-62, he studied at the University of Edinburgh, Great Britain, earning a diploma in Urban-Regional Studies. There he fell in love with, and married, a Scottish fellow-student Joan, a life-long companion who also became a prominent city and regional planner in her own right. From 1963 to 1967, he was a Planner and Group Leader and a member of an interdisciplinary team of planners and economists from Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities, acting as consultants to the Scottish Central Government. Meanwhile, his Edinburgh University thesis of 50,000 words, titled "Postwar European New Towns," appeared in 1965.

From July 1967 to September of the same year, he was Director of Studies for the Ministry of Overseas Development, London, United Kingdom, responsible for organizing and carrying out a program for a seminar on urban and regional planning in Great Britain and for guiding development implementation in Latin America with participant senior planners sponsored by the Organization of American States and the British Ministry of Overseas Development.

In the United Nations Personal History Statement, dated November 15, 1971, he is listed as: Member of British (ANTPI) and Australian (HRAPI) Planning Institutes; Member of International Planning Federation (FIHUAT); Architect-Member of UNESCO-sponsored Franco-Argentine Mission in Nubia, Sudan, 1961; Planning Lecturer in graduate courses, at the Institute S.S., Hague, 1962; Lecturer/Discussion leader at UN Interne Program on Urbanization, Geneva, 1963; University of Buenos Aires, 1965; Edinburgh University 1966; and Asian Institute for Development, Bangkok 1969.

Starting in October 1966, he served as Consultant of the International Development Agency on how to carry out the planning for a major industrial complex at St. Nicolas, Argentina, including blast furnaces, the port, cement works, urban facilities, residential and open spaces and road system. He was also a contributor to three British planning reports, published by HMSO, 1965-68.



Serge Domicelj, architect and city and regional planner.



Igor Domicelj, founder and president of Papelbril, with son George, vice president.



## PAPELBRIL S.A.C.I.

### PROCESOS

Aplicaciones de LAMINA DE ACETATO, BRILLO VIGORIZADO, LACAS SINTETICAS, LACAS NITROCELULOSICAS, BARNICES, HOT-MELT (ceras polietilénicas) y TERMOSELLABLES a papeles impresos o en blanco, en hojas o bobinas.

### MATERIALES

Fábrica de: PAPELES SILICONADOS para separación de materiales pegajosos, soporte de auto-adhesivos en general y como desmoldante; PAPELES Y LAMINAS AUTOADHESIVOS para etiquetas y calcomanías secas; PAPELES TERMOSELLABLES para pouches; HOT-MELT (ceras polietilénicas) para spot; recubrimientos con P.V.D.C., (Diofan, Saran); tratamiento de PAPELES ESPECIALES para industrias.



Papelbril plant, which at various times employed between 65 and 120 employees.



Igor Domicelj (center, with glasses), with some employees, celebrating the tenth anniversary of Papelbril.

From October 30, 1967 to January 18, 1971, he was Senior Planner and Head of Long Planning Section in the National Capital Development Commission — Implementation of Canberra — Government Agency, where his duties included appraisal, definition and review of growth needs, urban and regional planning objectives, strategies, policies and programs for the long (30+ years) and short (5-10 years) development of Canberra, the capital city of Australia. The task comprised a combination of data handling, theorizing and management of an interdisciplinary group of professional staff in order to create a consistent plan for



Šent Peter na Krasu, in 1914, now Pivka, the Slovenian hometown of Domicelj's.

continuous development. His responsibility included compilation of basic urban data; surveys for testing development performance; analysis of economic and social factors; defining development standards and locational density criteria; and studies in land use and transportation. He was also a contributor to the Australian planning report, *Tomorrow's Canberra* (Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1970). Clearly, Serge Domicelj's activities as a leading planner and section chief of Australia's capital city were also a source of pride for his compatriots in Argentina, whose leading newspaper *La Prensa* (December 28, 1970), dedicated a long article to his work, titled "Arquitecto argentino que cumple actividades en Australia" (Argentine architect fulfilling activities in Australia).

We find an outline of information on his planning activities between 1967 and 1971 also in the "United Nations Personal History Statement," dated November 16, 1971, where his speaking mastery of Spanish, English, Italian and French languages is mentioned, together with a limited knowledge of German, and his new address in Brisbane announced, as he became the Senior Lecturer in Regional & Town Planning at the University of Queensland. In his letter of November 16, 1971, to this writer, he mentions that since August of that year he was mostly away from Australia, first attending a conference in Thailand, then on a trip to South America.

He also writes: "Although an architect by training, I have for the last ten years been working in the field of Urban and Regional Planning, in Scotland first and then in Australia. I have also had planning commissions in Argentina and Thailand. ... As a side interest, I have undertaken mountaineering expeditions in the Argentine Andes with a particular interest in the field of archeology. Together with others, and in particular Mr. Mathias Rebitsch of Innsbruck, Austria, I have thus carried out high altitude explorations in search of the remains of the Inca culture up to the height of over 20,000 feet" (6,096 meters). He then adds modestly, "I have been successful in some of our searches." He also writes that, as from December 20, he will be employed by the Economic Commission for Latin America (United Nations) in Santiago, Chile, and his address will be: Sergio Domicelj, Regional Adviser in Physical Planning, ECLA (UN), Edificio Naciones Unidas, Santiago, Chile.



Canberra, with the old and new Parliament House in the Center; note the influence of the Garden City design.

Serge, a modest gentleman, as it is often typical of true achievers, wrote to me on November 16, 1971, when he was already employed as a Senior Lecturer in the Regional & Town Planning at the University of Queensland, Brisbane. He also expressed his view that our research on immigrants and their contributions was a most interesting sociological project and added: "The field of sociology and migrants as they relate to planning is also one of my main interests."

One of the leading city and regional planners in the world, architect Domicelj could have easily written a book or more about his life and professional accomplishments, but he was too deeply involved in his worldwide planning activities, and in the education of students, especially as Professor in the Department of Architecture at Sydney University, to allow himself the luxury of writing about his work, his family or himself. Thus, unfortunately, scattered materials and brief outlines in our archives have remained somewhat incomplete, with some important data missing. So we are deeply indebted to a summary on Serge Domicelj, Planner, 1933-2003, authored by Peter Webber and published in Fairfax Digital, on February 27, 2004, under the title, "Passionate architect for social justice and equity." Let us quote:

*Mindful of threats to the security of his young family in Chile, Domicelj applied for, and in 1975 was offered, the professorship in town and country planning at Sydney University as successor to the founding chair, Dennis Winston. Both men were dedicated and dynamic, but the contrast of their styles and personalities could not have been more pronounced. Winston was English and articulate, passionately concerned with the form and character of our cities; Domicelj was Latino and expressive, equally passionate about*

*bettering communities through social justice and equity.*

*While this new direction did not always lead to the smoothest transition in his new department, his achievements were many. As emphases changed from physical design to social policy, new courses and new staff were introduced. Innumerable former students speak with affection and gratitude of his benign influence, encouragement of multicultural perspectives, and his personal support for the growing numbers of international students. For a decade he served as director of the Sydney University Planning Research Centre, forging strong links with many colleagues, and at various times was a visiting professor at Edinburgh and New Delhi.*

*In cooperation with colleagues, Domicelj developed a new master's degree in heritage conservation, his wide experience in the international arena enriching the program. On occasion his lectures in this course generated spontaneous and enthusiastic applause from students — a rare phenomenon in the academic world.*

*After years of membership in the International Society of City and Regional Planners, he was elected as its first non-European president in 1993, during which time (1994-1996) he introduced the Young Planners program.*

*Between 1971 and 2002 he addressed numerous international conferences and was a consultant to several international agencies, including UNESCO in Paris, as well as representing the Australian government at Hassanuddin University, Indonesia.*

*After moving to the Blue Mountains in 1998, Domicelj served on the committee*



*of the Blue Mountain Conservation Society, studied yoga, continued to teach, and helped with the successful World Heritage nomination of the Greater Blue Mountains, for which he and [his wife] Joan received Australian Centenary Medals. In declining health in his last two years, but ever a loving and supportive friend, father and husband, Domicelj and Joan revisited with joy and enthusiasm his former colleagues and family in Argentina, India, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Italy, Croatia and Slovenia. Daughters Tamara and Gabita and his three grandchildren joined in parts of the odyssey.*

*On January 31 [a day after his birthday] more than 200 friends, family and colleagues came together to celebrate Domicelj's life at his home in the Blue Mountains. ... Many of the tributes spoke of his possessing that elusive quality of "greatness". Sparingly though this term should be used, it is not out of place in contemplating the extraordinary and diverse contributions to international humanitarian causes and, even more importantly, in appreciating the extent of his compassion for fellow-human beings.*

*More than 400 friends had written from many parts of the world, and many of them joined in spirit in a simultaneous, round-the-world tribute, a toast to Serge, which took place in 40 locations. From Ankara to Bangkok, from Paris to Auckland, from The Hague to Buenos Aires, from Tehran to Dakar, from Brussels to Venice, from Lima to Letterson [in South Wales], from Shanghai to Tokyo, glasses were raised in the memory of this most compassionate of colleagues.*

*Woman in Thought, a 2.9 meter sculpture by Slovenian immigrant sculptor Milan Vojsk (pr. Vojsck) was installed in 1973 in front of the Federal Reserve Bank of Australia, in Canberra.*

*This is how Peter Webber ended his tribute to Serge Domicelj, emeritus professor of the University of Sydney, an internationally famous city and regional planner, who helped plan and design the Australian capital city Canberra, the elder son of Slovenian Argentine industrialist Vigor, brother of passionate mountaineer George, husband of a wonderful Scottish wife Joan, and a humble, compassionate friend of fellow-human beings regardless of their social class, religion and nationality, the man who achieved that elusive quality of greatness, Serge or Sergio Domicelj, who died later in 2003 in Sydney, aged 70.*

*A citizen of Argentina, Australia and the world, Serge Domicelj was also always interested in, and proud of his Argentine and Slovenian heritage. We, in turn, are very proud of his professional and humanitarian achievements and of his noble character.*



*University of Sydney, consistently ranked in the top 3% in the world, while its School of Architecture, Design and Planning is number 1 in Australia and number 15 in the world, can also be proud of outstanding architectural design of many of its buildings.*