

CONSIDERING SOURCES OF PLEČNIK'S DESIGNS

William M. Singer

Several fundamental issues of analysis and understanding of Plečnik's buildings remain unresolved. These issues affect our ability to comprehend the imaginative power of Plečnik's individual works. This article will deal with Plečnik's urbanism minimally before addressing broader concerns about Plečnik scholarship.¹ Regarding theoretical tradition, classically-based Renaissance design principles form the core of Plečnik's urban design.² In designing architectural insertions into the urban fabric, Plečnik creatively used inexpensive materials and idiosyncratic inversion of the classical tradition. Most scholars perceive this practice as Modern. I suggest that Plečnik inverted architectural elements in his larger urban schemes to achieve a unique, personal design effect. Two examples:

The lock on the Ljubljanica River (1940) is a stylized triumphal arch that concludes Plečnik's urban design of the Ljubljanica's riverbank. Triumphal arches are normally bi-directional. Yet Plečnik's triumphal arch marks the monodirectional end, not the beginning, of the Ljubljanica's journey through the heart of Ljubljana. This monumental gateway celebrates the physical control of water exiting Ljubljana's city center. The locks, literally a vertically operable dam, regulate the Ljubljanica's rate and level of water flowing through a portal, an opening through which no person will ever triumphantly pass—an unprecedented use of a triumphal arch. By employing it for the locks, Plečnik radically alters the meaning and purpose of this traditional building type. When exploiting a triumphal arch in this situation, Plečnik redefines its meaning. Inversion is the main event of

¹ This article is based on the views I presented at the 1998 convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) and in a paper entitled, "Plečnik's Urbanism: His 'Modernism' Revealed," and a lecture given to the University of Ljubljana Faculty of Architecture in October 1998.

² Here I agree with 1998 AAASS presenter Robert G. Dyck, though we reach our conclusions through different understandings of Plečnik's urbanism. Jorg Stabenow's *Jože Plečnik Stadtebau im Schatten der Moderne* (Wiesbaden: Vieweg & Sohn, 1996) presents a third approach.

this architectural structure. Its details are secondary but no less important in attempting to understand this object's symbolic meaning. This is clear even if we do not attempt to decipher this eclectic collection of decorative symbols. Interpretive questions involve, for example, the reason for Pengov's sculptural faces looking downriver instead of greeting the water; implications of the mixture of Egyptian, Greek, and Etruscan architectural elements; and what the composition means as a whole.

Plečnik retreated from his initial, 1933 design of the locks, which was more abstract, seemingly more functionally simplified, and less adorned with ornament than the finished lock of 1940. The design became more figurative, more functionally complex, and more ornamental. Yet wrapping, dressing, or enclosing this functional engineering project in an abstracted composition of classical motifs and iconographic references does not make the locks modern. In light of Plečnik's certain familiarity with his student's, Paval Janek's lock at Predmerice nad Labem, Czechoslovakia (1915, destroyed 1932) the reasons that Plečnik pursued such a symbolically and ornamentally enriched lock design are of interest. The incorporation into his revised lock design of such rich symbolism, one closely resembling that found in Žale Cemetery, is likewise curious. Plečnik revised the lock design between 1933 and 1940, the period of time when he was designing Žale. Triumphal arches are used as major design features in both projects. Both arches refer to the passage of time, which is monodirectional. The flow of the Ljubljanica and its locks foretell the human journey and arrival at Žale, and passage to the other side of its entry arch.

The Trnovo Bridge inverts the classical sense of bridge design as an engineering problem—to span space between two points as structurally efficiently as possible while providing the required path of travel between those two points. In one sense, however, Plečnik designed this bridge as a civic ornament to carry both vehicular and pedestrian traffic from the six streets that feed the road that crosses it. In addition, it is also designed to support birch trees and statues that were added at the edge of the roadway and sidewalk. Adding the weight of soil for trees to a bridge contradicts the idea of designing for structural efficiency. The birches and statues continue the articulation of Emona Street over the Gradaščica, a small tributary of the Ljubljanica. In Plečnik's hierarchy of urban design importance, Emona Street is the primary north-south axial connection from Trnovo Church to Napoleon

Square and Vegova Street and then on to Congress Square. Emona Street terminates at, acts as a visual frame for, and is the primary route to the “spiritual center” of Trnovo, its parish church of St. John the Baptist. To accomplish the axial framing of the church and to create a theoretical forecourt for it, both the bridge and the Gradaščica nearly disappear with Plečnik’s addition of unrequired mass. Yet in another sense the bridge, the church’s forecourt, is a zone intentionally made and used for pedestrian and vehicular travel. It is not used as a gathering place; it is not a plaza or piazza where the public can congregate.

This bridge forecourt is a *profanus*, a place before the temple.³ In a sense the space defined by the bridge is profane. Its function is secular and sacerdotally irreverent—not concerned with religion or religious purposes. Moreover, so that the bridge and the stream do not literally vanish under Emona Street’s symbolic prominence, Plečnik places his favorite iconographic marker, stone pyramids, at each side of the bridge to show that something noteworthy occurs here. But whether they signify bridge or profane space is a question.

The building code-required balusters, modeled on the pagan drinking vessel of Minoan *rhyta*, functionally define the edge of safe and usable pedestrian bridge space. They concurrently reinforce the symbolic meaning of profane space in front of the temple. Those same *rhyta*, however, are the framing skirt for the base of the statue of St. John the Baptist. The linking of pagan and Christian symbols may allow us to read the Gradaščica for the River Jordan. The straightening of Emona Street and of Trnovo Bridge leading to the parish church may reflect the prophet John’s message of making straight the path. Plečnik has created a tableau where the spiritual meaning of the call to a Christian life is literally presented in the sculptural, figurative form of John the Baptist rising out of and placed above the classical and pagan world. The architect uses the same theme of sacred ascension in the Church of St. Michael in the Marsh and in the National and University Library.

Perhaps Plečnik is making a simple, though subtle, pun based on the etymology of the word *rhyton*. A *rhyton* is an ancient drinking horn, made of pottery or bronze, having a base in the form of the head of a woman or animal. The noun is derived from the Greek neuter form of

³ In Latin, *pro* means before and *fanus* means temple.

rhytos, which means flowing. Instead of acting as a civic symbol of “forecourt before the temple,” the bridge is really about flowing—the movement of vehicular and pedestrian traffic across it and of water below it. Yet in trying to combine both the flowing characteristic of “bridgeness” with the civic mediating space of “temple forecourt” Plečnik may have failed to achieve either. The success of his Shoemaker’s Bridge as a pedestrian and bicycle oriented piazza that mediates both banks of the Ljubljanica sharply contrasts with the confused design and function of the Trnovo Bridge.

Statements that Plečnik is a Modern architect abound in the scholarship on his work, though often without definition of what it means to be a Modern architect and how Plečnik’s work might fit that definition. Such declarations may confuse the layman and diminish Plečnik’s artistic achievement. The “modern” classification does not legitimize an architect’s work or its historical value, nor necessarily aid the acceptance and appreciation of his work in the architectural community. In my view, Plečnik’s architectural oeuvre is definitely not Modern. The defining characteristic of Modern architecture centers on both the architect’s idea and articulation of space. Space is the medium—the manipulable element—of Modern architecture. In “pre-Modern” or classical architectural space was created by either adding or subtracting mass. Conceived as solid blocks, classical buildings were conceptually designed by removing mass from or adding mass to the exterior and, most important, by carving mass out of the interior. The classical space is evident when a solid’s material is eliminated—a hollowing out of mass to make a void. The classical articulation of space results when mass is deleted.

By this definition, Modern architecture began with the early work of Frank Lloyd Wright. He created a paradigm shift in the understanding of space and how it is physically articulated. Space itself is, paradoxically, the thing that is created by defining its limits. Wright turned the fundamental idea of classical architecture on its head. Limiting space through architectural articulation, not hollowing out mass, is the Modern architect’s method of manipulating this medium. Limiting space in a way that manifests spatial definition in the least obtrusive, least massive, way is the necessary, reductive corollary to using space as a medium that can be articulated. To do otherwise, to limit space with mass, confuses the intent and method of defining space and implies Classical architecture.

Wright demonstrated this new way of perceiving and using space and mass perhaps mostly clearly and earliest in the Heurtley house (1902), the George Gert "Double House, Bridge Cottage" (1902), the Cheney house (1904), the Coonley house (1907), and the Robie House (1909).⁴ In the Heurtley house, walls of mass define the edge of space and walls of glass permit a limitless sense of spatial continuity between inside and outside. With a transparent weather boundary, exterior space seems to fill the living room. Though only a lakeside cottage in the woods, the Double House, Bridge Cottage, perhaps even more succinctly than the Heurtley house, demonstrates a clarity of the open plan, a continuity of spatial connection between inside and outside, and a mediation from inside to outside.⁵

Wright's development and use of the open plan consequently led to transparency in architecture. Transparency is, perhaps, the foremost and salient defining characteristic of a Modern spatial sensibility. Wright created a new relationship between the inside and outside of buildings. Space, as a conceptually manipulable and plastic element, flows between a building's interior and exterior through the transparent plane of windows. Space is defined by using as little mass as possible. Space is meant to be unencumbered and to be connected continually between the inside and outside of the building. Space continues between or among a building's rooms and between the inside and outside of a building since load bearing walls are replaced with the fewest piers or columns as possible. Walls are eliminated between rooms. The mass of exterior walls is replaced with as much glazing as possible. Thus light could travel deeply into a building or, with the appropriate design, through it. Wright's clients would then have the experience of immediate and substantial visual connection with the outside—an almost visceral link. Mediating the transition from inside to outside by layering hierarchies of space definers, which have as little mass as possible, was one of Wright's greatest skills. The open plan

⁴ Grant Hildebrand's *The Wright Space: Pattern & Meaning in Frank Lloyd Wright's Houses* is an excellent analysis of the development of the open plan and its attendant ramifications on the manipulation of space.

⁵ William Allen Storrer, *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion* 74. This text provides basic information and analyses of Wright's oeuvre which are essential for a thorough understanding of his architectural development. A diagrammatic analysis of the Double House, Bridge Cottage will not be found in Hildebrand's book.

provides freer and greater accessibility to natural light. Manipulating the plasticity of space in the open plan became the central tenet of all Modern architecture.

The second defining attribute of Modern architecture is the development of a rationalized building industry, of innovative structural and mechanical designs, and of construction methods, materials, and the required detailing to express those innovations. These all informed and served the development of the open plan by allowing mass to appear as dematerialized. Long spanning structures with a minimum of material and improved glazing applications reinforced the manipulation of space as a flowing and plastic medium. Mass was no longer needed to support a building. Buildings could be built using a simple stick-built or cast-in-place frame (cast iron, steel or reinforced concrete) and then enclosed with an exterior panelized skin, preferably a translucent skin. Modern mechanical systems created the opportunity for improved living and working conditions. Plumbing, mechanical heating and air handling, and electricity for power and communications provided the opportunity for healthier environments. This development also informed and served the open plan.

Modern architecture's third defining characteristic centers on the socio-political and ideological realms. In terms of political theory and application, a rationally organized construction process would help a greater percentage of the public obtain a healthier, more open, light-accessible domicile or work space. Industrialized building procedures would primarily reinforce the ideological agenda. By using economic efficiencies, economies of scale, and the will of political power, architects could help provide better housing and workplaces in a non-nationalistic, non-chauvinistic style. Architecture was meant to have an international purpose and represented in a non-nationalist style. By transcending the politics of nation-states and their political borders, a humane and international architecture could help unite large groups of citizens to act as a human antidote to the socioeconomic causes of war. Eliminating "national" architecture would improve lives. The European disaster of militaristic nationalism, as demonstrated in WW I, clearly provided the impetus for internationalism. At a basic level, Modern architecture intended to express symbolically an international cohesion of human beings—the universal value of human life that transcended national tribalisms. Plečnik took a different path. He saw his role as one of creating a Slovene architectural tradition. Before Plečnik, the

Slovene architectural tradition was that of the Habsburg, Austro-Hungarian tradition.

Plečnik surely knew Wright's work, if not through publications, then at least through the work of his close personal friend and professional colleague Jan Kotěra. Kotěra's City Museum of Hradec Kralove, Czechoslovakia (1906–12) exemplified Wright's idea of manipulating space "with a free, asymmetrical groundplan, probably the first structure in Europe to apply Wright's ideas."⁶ Plečnik turned away from using the open plan after exploring its use in The Church of the Holy Spirit (Vienna, 1910–13). I think this project is the closest Plečnik came to realizing a building of Modern architecture. Although this church is modeled in plan, section, and elevation on classical basilica designs, what is most important in it is Plečnik's innovative use of structure, the long-spanning concrete deep U-shaped beam. Using structure in this way to carry the roof load created a column-free nave. The structural technology of spanning 20.1 meters (66'-0") provided Plečnik with a method of achieving a refined, proto-modern shaping of space.⁷

The reinforced concrete columns and capitals in the crypt in The Church of the Holy Spirit (Vienna) are often cited as proto-modern and/or proto-cubic. These observations miss the fundamental point of Plečnik's masterful and experimental use of the deep reinforced concrete beams and his idea of articulating space. Plečnik achieved a sophisticated integration of structural innovation to enhance the creation of a new type of architectural space. In a limited way Plečnik also succeeded in eliminating mass between the outside and the deep recess of the crypt. He created a way for natural light to reach the crypt by making a transparent connection between the building's exterior and the nave through the roof/wall clerestory. The nave and the crypt are then visually connected through the glazed nave wall of the altar's

⁶ Slapeta 59.

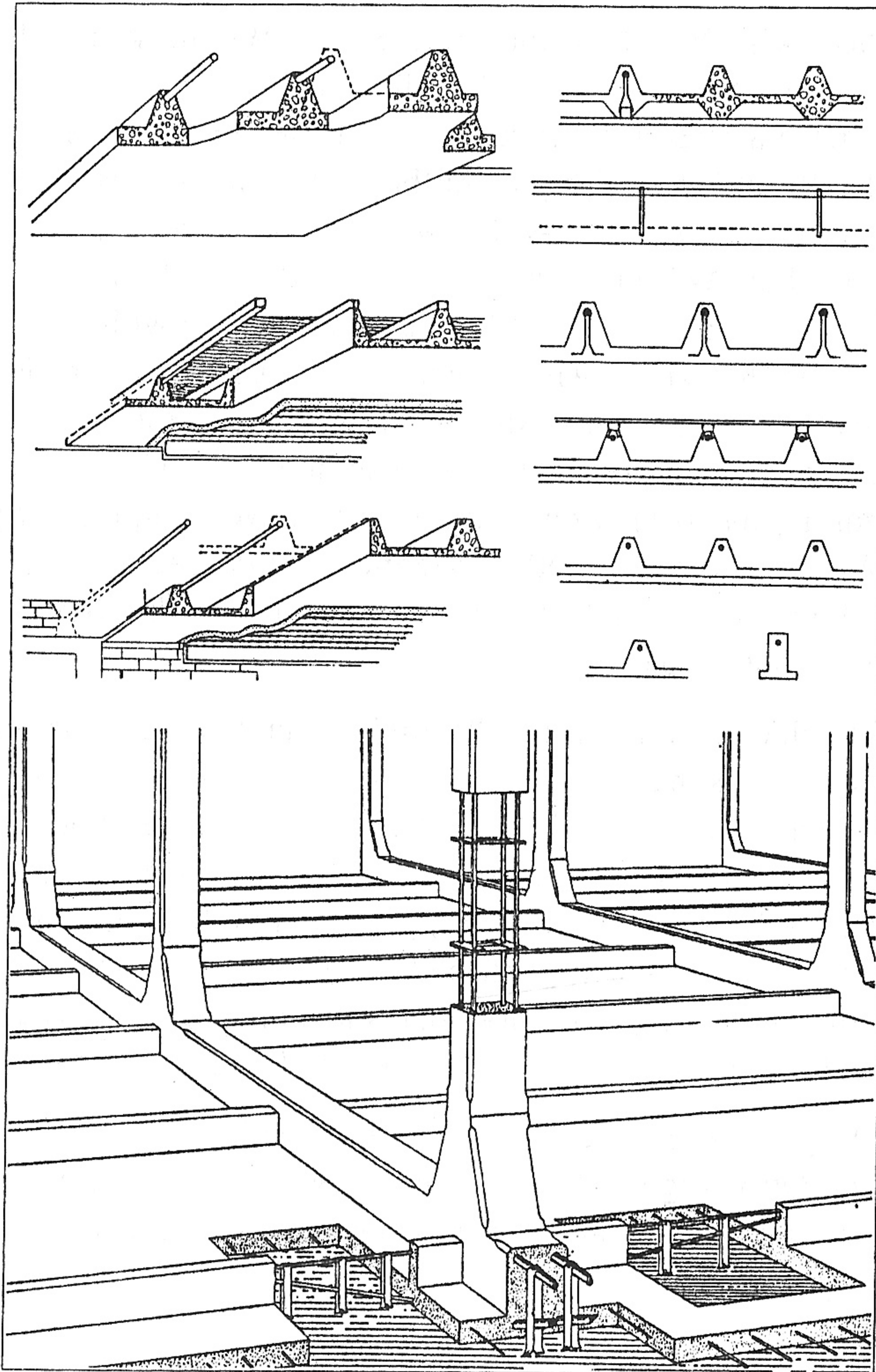
⁷ It is uncertain whether Plečnik consulted with a structural engineer on this project and if so, who it was. He may have designed this U-shaped beam himself. In terms of the church's design evolution, it has to be determined when did the U-shaped beam, as a design element, become apparent as a possible way of freeing the nave floor plan to allow space to continue uninterrupted from within the sanctuary to the outside. This beam may have been part of Plečnik's earlier cubic design of 1909.

plinth. On a sunny day one notices the accomplishment of this remarkable design when daylight illuminates the spatial/volumetric connection that occurs between the crypt and outside space. Plečnik would emulate the achievement of bringing natural light into a crypt sixteen years later by artificially illuminating the crypt in his Prague Church of the Sacred Heart (1928).

Classifying the columns, capitals, and beams in the crypt of the Church of the Holy Spirit “proto-modern” or “proto-cubic” inadequately conveys the importance of the structural work in Plečnik’s earlier Zacherl House (1903-1905) and the connection of that building’s superstructure to the Church of the Holy Spirit. The structural system in the Zacherl House, on which Plečnik was required to design, was an innovative proprietary steel-reinforced, cast-in-place concrete construction system patented and licensed by François Hennebique (figure 1). The form created by this system at the juncture of the column capital and the floor beam is close to an exact match to Plečnik’s column capitals in the crypt of the Church of the Holy Spirit. Plečnik added some surface articulation to the columns, capitals and beams; in Hennebique’s system the edges of these elements were already chamfered. These elements in the crypt are not proto-modern nor proto-cubic; they are an expressed and ornamented Hennebique system. Though Hennebique’s system was innovative in its materials, its use of them, and the construction process, it finally remained in form and function a trabeated system. As with all trabeated systems, it was limited to the spanning capacity of the beams and shear capacity of the beam/column connection.

Nevertheless, for Plečnik to use Hennebique’s structural system in the crypt makes sense. From his hands-on experience with it in the Zacherl House Plečnik already knew the Hennebique system’s strengths and weaknesses from aesthetic, structural, and constructability points of view. Plečnik used this familiar structural system in the crypt for its structural spanning efficiency to bear both the live and dead loads of the sanctuary floor above, for its low cost, ease, speed, and simplicity of construction, and for its capacity to be ornamentally articulated. The Hennebique structural system was appropriate for the building’s budget, for its schedule and for the options of design aesthetic that it provided Plečnik, who could then manipulate it to achieve an architecturally unique and symbolically appropriate spiritual space. The

Hennebique system was a rational and inexpensive method of construction. It also freed him artistically and intellectually to focus on
 Fig. 1. Hennebique's reinforced concrete construction system, 1897.⁸



⁸ Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (Cambridge: MIT, 1995) 122. Reproduced and caption quoted with permission of MIT Press.

the more important design considerations of the spatial and architectural articulation of the nave—the church’s sanctuary above the crypt.

I wonder what influence, if any, Wright’s Unity Temple (1906) had on Plečnik’s Church of the Holy Spirit? Wright knew Plečnik’s work; we cannot be certain that Plečnik knew Wright’s work. We can, however, make a reasoned assumption that Plečnik knew of Wright, if not specifically of Unity Temple. Anthony Alofsin, in his *Frank Lloyd Wright The Lost Years, 1910-1922: A Study of Influence*, has clearly demonstrated how Wright knew Plečnik’s work. Wright visited Vienna in either the spring or summer of 1910 and spent time with the German sculptor Franz Metzner, who executed the Atlantae on Plečnik’s Zacherl House. Wright knew Metzner’s work from Berlin and wanted to see more since he thought Metzner had achieved what he had been striving for in his own architectural decorative sculpture. Metzner showed Wright, among his other Viennese work, the Zacherl House project.⁹ Metzner and Plečnik remained professionally friendly after the Zacherl House project.

No documentation in Plečnik’s extant letters or in what remains of his personal library indicates that Plečnik knew of Wright directly through publication.¹⁰ The art and architecture magazines and journals in Plečnik’s library that he collected up to 1911, the time when he had effectively completed designing The Church of the Holy Spirit, do not include any that had published Wright’s work.¹¹ This, however, does not preclude the possibility that Plečnik knew of Wright from professional discourse with his colleagues in Vienna.

Wright was in Vienna also to see the work of Joseph Maria Olbrich and Otto Wagner. Wright was known in Europe at this time as the “American Olbrich,” and Wright knew of this moniker. Wright also

⁹ Alofsin 127–33, 176, and 179.

¹⁰ Krečič’s letter to the author states: “As far as I know the name F.L.Wright was never mentioned in Plečnik’s correspondence. But it is possible that I overlooked it or that my studies on certain correspondence were not so detailed.” Krecic’s letter also includes a list of the magazine and journal holdings in Plečnik’s library with dates for each entry.

¹¹ Sweeney 1-20. This section of Sweeney’s bibliography covers Wright publications through 1911.

came to see both the individual works of Wagner and that of his urban planning, i.e. the city new subway system.

Whether Wright met Wagner is unknown, but Wright at least spoke highly of him and knew him well enough to have his address three years later when Wright's son John considered studying in Vienna. Wagner, at the age of seventy, was at the end of his career as a practitioner and teacher at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, one of the few schools where Wright considered the principles of a new architecture could be pursued. Before he stopped teaching entirely, however, he acknowledged Wright's work in 1911 as it appeared in the *Wasmuth Sonderheft*, telling his students, "Gentlemen, today I have something special. This man knows more than I do." Wagner was especially impressed with the Larkin Building and Unity Temple.¹²

Though Wright's *Wasmuth* edition was not published until 1911, after Plečnik completed designing The Church of the Holy Spirit, we do not know if Wright brought proofs of this book to Vienna and, if so, whether or not Metzner saw them and told Plečnik about the work. Regardless, Wagner knew Wright's work, and Plečnik would most likely have known of it through Wagner. Though no direct link can be made between Plečnik's knowledge of Wright and the design of The Church of the Holy Spirit, when one compares Plečnik's summer–fall 1910 "cubic volume" design proposal for the Church, one is struck by the visible similarities between Unity Temple and the Church.

Wright stated that "Unity Temple is where [one] will find the first real expression of the idea that the space within the building is the reality of that building."¹³ Though Wright expressed this fundamental principle of Modern architecture in 1952, it is a question whether Plečnik knew and recognized at the time of Unity Temple's completion the importance of both how Wright manipulated space in it and how he used reinforced concrete to accomplish the specific modeling of this space. Is it coincidence that the square plan of Unity Temple is almost replicated in The Church of the Holy Spirit and that an innovative use of reinforced concrete construction for the superstructure and the exterior finish material occurred in each building? Yet how their visual

¹² Alofsin 58.

¹³ Storrer 93.

images differ. Is it coincidence that though both architects used a square building plan for the sanctuary neither used a central plan organization scheme? Both sanctuaries are directional since in each space the altar is not centered but is located near a wall. Though the bilaterally symmetrical volume of Unity Temple is inherently nondirectional, the location of the altar at one side of the square creates a directional focal point, which in turn creates a primary and secondary axis. The primary axis in The Church of the Holy Spirit is much more strongly pronounced than in Unity Temple since Plečnik was forced to use the inherently axial volumetric shape of the basilica form. Nevertheless, a plausible hypothesis can be advanced that Wright's Unity Temple exerted a notable design influence on Plečnik's Church of the Holy Ghost.

Plečnik's initial work with reinforced concrete superstructure construction in the Zacherl House coincided with Auguste Perret's structural concrete experiments. Perret's Rue Franklin apartment building and his four-story parking garage were completed in 1903 and 1905, respectively. The near concurrence of Plečnik's experiments in cast-in-place reinforced concrete with those of Perret's is interesting in light of Plečnik's later refusal to acknowledge Perret's importance as an architect.

Once [France Tomažič] deliberately left a monograph on Auguste Perret lying on the table, and was surprised to find an unmistakable message from Plečnik in: "I can't do what Perret can do—but he can't do what I can do. No drop-outs here—and this applies to everyone—so shut up and continue to serve."¹⁴

In the Zacherl House Plečnik also displayed a bold and innovative use of the skeleton frame in a panelized skin building. Plečnik exploited Hennebique's patented system of reinforced concrete frame superstructure by hanging a granite weather-barrier skin from it. The exterior walls of this building are among the first curtain wall buildings in Europe. Despite his curtain wall daring, the plan organization of the Zacherl House remained traditional—rooms organized in an *enfilade* and/or along an axial corridor. The image of granite's material solidity, though it is a hung skin, also creates the classical appearance of the building as mass. The punched windows,

¹⁴ Prelovšek 159–60.

which reflect the building's traditional internal spatial organization, reinforce the image of a hollowed out mass. Plečnik designed this solid skin in a highly textured and geometrically sculpted way in contrast to exploring the use of a transparent skin with its image of dematerialized mass. Modern glass curtain wall design was not available to Plečnik; Jean Prouve developed it in 1937. Nevertheless, Plečnik did choose to enclose the Zacherl House with a granite skin instead of exploring the diminution of mass through the use of contemporary glass window framing systems. London's Crystal Palace of 1851 was still standing when he designed the Zacherl House, and Plečnik surely knew it through his interest in Gottfried Semper, who worked on it.¹⁵

After realizing the Zacherl House and The Church of the Holy Spirit, Plečnik turned away from Modern architecture to pursue his own form of idiosyncratic antiquarian classicism. His buildings kept the image of mass. His plan organization remained classically axial. He veered away from structural innovation. His buildings employed figurative symbols in the service of national or cultural identification and consciousness raising. And his detailing and use of materials maintained a richness almost divorced from purpose. When one compares the work Plečnik's architectural colleagues created after WW I to Plečnik's oeuvre of the same period in terms of spatial and plan organization, in terms of structure, materials, detailing, building image, and in terms of the building types Plečnik worked in, either by choice or necessity, one must acknowledge that he does not fit into the Modern architectural lineage.

Though Plečnik's work may be considered expressionistic, it is not expressionistic in the Modern architectural tradition, which ranges from the figurative German Expressionists, on the one hand, to the socio-political expressionism underlying abstract, geometric Russian Constructivism on the other. During the height of his career, approximately 1920 to 1940, Plečnik created, what seems to me, his own expressionistic legacy—idiosyncratic, hermetic and inimitable. Idiosyncratic in that his architecture possesses individualizing qualities and characteristics not common to his peers. For example, he relied on manipulating the proportions and capitals of figurative classical columns to express the connection of Slovenia's cultural heritage to the

¹⁵ Whether Plečnik and Zacherl discussed this design direction, the idea of exploring a transparent skin for the Zacherl House, is an open question.

Etruscans. Hermetic in that it seems impervious to external influences from his peers and in that many projects are symbolically indecipherable. And inimitable in that his projects are matchless in the hidden meaning of symbolic expression that is created from a vision of monumental power—works of mass executed in masonry or concrete. Like Wright, Plečnik's architecture cannot be recreated, but unlike Wright's, it leaves no clear, coherently comprehensible theory or body of underlying principles that can be followed and reinterpreted.

In the face of Wright's Modern architecture, of engineering-like Functionalist buildings or of an architecture in the "International style," Plečnik seems to have retreated progressively into a secure and understandable classical tradition. Working within a tradition he could personally manipulate with ease as he drew from an eclectic palette of culturally recognizable images whose meanings he freely reinterpreted. He created a safe but unique architecture for conservative clients (e.g., Czechoslovak President Masaryk, the Catholic Church, the City of Ljubljana, commercial entities, the government of Yugoslavia) who wanted something new, special and, if not comprehensible, at least recognizable. In the fiercely competitive and radicalized world of European architecture with its limited opportunities during the economically depressed and unstable era between the two wars, Plečnik found a client base sympathetic to his own vision. Not subscribing to the world view of Modern architects, he created an architecture acceptable to those in positions of funding projects who also did not subscribe to the Modernist vision. And their inherent conservatism also probably restricted his exploration of modernist principles. Thus his clients' conservatism and his own re-embrace of classicism may have coincidentally and mutually reinforced each other. For Plečnik, was it not better to compromise his barely discernible modernist leanings and have the chance to realize buildings than to continue investigating ideas that could jeopardize that opportunity to work? Plečnik was no business fool. He knew what the great nineteenth-century American architect Henry Hobhouse Richardson knew: "Ninety percent of architecture is getting the next job." A strong case can be made that Plečnik was so wedded to the classical tradition that, after his youthful adumbrations of Modernism in the Zacherl House and The Church of the Holy Spirit, he self-consciously redirected the course of his career to immerse himself totally in Classicism, even if eclectically.

In light of my definition of Modern architecture, Krečič's comparison of Plečnik and Palladio as modern architects,¹⁶ and Prelovšek's insistence that the theoretical basis of Plečnik's work lay singularly in Semper's writings deserve discussion. It seems to me that Palladio's oeuvre was the culmination of a 150-year tradition. The Villa Rotonda (1568) pristinely codifies the development of classical architecture's rebirth that commenced with Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy (1421). Classical architecture, as thought about and built in the Renaissance, was new, radical, and modern in its time. Its practitioners also created an intellectual paradigm shift that overthrew the Gothic order. Plečnik's work culminates no tradition; his idiosyncratic use of classicism and of antiquity relegates his oeuvre to an unfollowable branch of classicism. He neither created nor represented an architectural intellectual breakthrough that changed how architects think about and make architecture.

Plečnik did, however, leave Slovene architects a rich and broad legacy. He created an almost unbearably burdensome and unshakable moral philosophy about the teaching and practice of architecture—one must do both with strict ascetic dedication or else one is not worthy of the calling. Both Krečič and Prelovšek maintain that Plečnik created a “moral” architecture. What does that mean? How morality is manifested and articulated in architecture is open to discussion, as are the source of those morals—the client, the architect, or the building's users.¹⁷ To label Plečnik's work “moral” requires further clarification. To apply Adolf Loos's definition of ornament as crime or sin in architecture is but one way to counter the theory of Plečnik's presumed architectural morality. In 1928, midway in Plečnik's career as Prague Castle architect, Pavel Janak, a former Plečnik student, a colleague and Plečnik's successor as the Prague Castle architect, lamented Plečnik's wide use of extravagant materials.

Down in the town it is a fight for how to think and how to build, how to find a unique and universal opinion that can be pushed through and supported against any other possibility, to make it

¹⁶ See Peter Krečič elsewhere in this issue.

¹⁷ Even if we suppose that a type of moral architecture is possible and users could identify it, a moral person may intend to make moral architecture but still not succeed. Indeed, an immoral person could make supposedly moral architecture.

not only generally accepted but also unquestionable. Up here [i.e., in the Castle] he [Plečnik] is an artist who only builds seemingly without doubt. The work here totally differs from the work in the town: it follows a different, and also a personal line. Down in the town he [the other architects] tries to find the most rational, the most favorable way of construction whereas here he seems to be a man who does not know the price of material and who specifically praises its rarity, as he uses the most expensive and the most refined building materials. Down in the town only the reasons of necessity are sought. This artist thinks of, and is fully preoccupied with, the size of columns. Down in the town we only hear: calculation, activity, organization, usefulness, profitability. Here it is a type of art which only displays humbleness, pure exultation. Here we have an art full of modesty and devotion.¹⁸

By all accounts Plečnik led an exemplary moral life, which was centered on the practice of his Catholic faith, on his architectural practice, and on his teaching career. A life of architecturally focused commitment was one of Plečnik's legacies. The practice of religious faith and of architecture in Plečnik's life were not mutually exclusive; they may have truly informed each other through the common exercise of discipline. But as interests and practices they are distinct and exert different and separate effects in the living of life. Plečnik may have thought he was building to the greater glory of God. As a devout, practicing Catholic he had to be sure that practicing architecture did not substitute nor replace his faith. Designing, building, and teaching must have been expressions of faith, not substitutes.¹⁹

Plečnik gave the Slovene design community a foundation for working in rich materials, or being highly creative with less expensive

¹⁸ Slapeta 54-55. Slapeta used this same quotation in his essay "Jože Plečnik in Prague," in the Pompidu Center show catalogue. See Slapeta 1989, 91.

¹⁹ Whatever degree of influence Plečnik's belief in and practice of Catholicism had on his architecture, I maintain that a good working knowledge of Catholicism is necessary to decipher of Plečnik's iconography and symbolism. As concerns biographical interpretation, the extent to which Plečnik's religious beliefs informed his architecture is an open question. Did it inform ecclesiastical work more or differently from his secular work? This is an area of Plečnik's work that has received little scholarly attention.

ones when costlier ones were not available. Regarding detailing, he focused attention on the imaginative use of details. Yet his detailing is most often symbolically hermetic. Plečnik certainly did not exercise a light touch in his selection of materials and in his detailing. He left a large body of work artistically rich in symbolic meaning, though not necessarily easily decipherable. That legacy, however, does not define his work as Modern.

Prelovšek presents the idea that Plečnik religiously followed Semper's theory of architecture as it is mostly notably and expansively defined in *Der Stil*. There is no doubt that Semper exerted a strong and lasting influence on Plečnik, but to suggest that Plečnik's work is so narrowly derived from Semperian theory denies influences from other sources and lessens Plečnik's own inherent artistic genius. Semper theoretically identified the basic elements of architecture and showed how their development evolved into the Western classical tradition. Plečnik surely believed Semper's theories about the classical tradition, one in which he obviously practiced, but not to the exclusion of other influences. If the available biographical material is accurate, Plečnik's Rome Prize trip to Italy, especially to Venice and Rome, had a profound lifelong effect on him. I suspect that Plečnik's artistic sensibility resonated fundamentally and irreversibly in the presence of the work of the late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century Italian masters—among others, especially Peruzzi, the late work of Giulio Romano and Michelangelo, Zuccari and Borromini. Their work may have affected Plečnik as much as or even more than Semper. The influence of their work on Plečnik and the mannered aspect of his work have yet to be researched and critically assessed.

A strong and constant influence of Italian Renaissance mannerist architecture and art seems to exist throughout Plečnik's work. Besides his professed interest in and use of antiquity to embellish the symbolic meaning of his work, Plečnik also seemed to rely on his memory of works in the Roman and northern Italian renaissance traditions when executing both the formal and iconographic composition of his designs. The following description of Mannerism in late Renaissance art can apply to much of Plečnik's work—both architectural and decorative.

Mannerism originated as a reaction to the harmonious classicism and the idealized naturalism of High Renaissance

art ... Mannerist artists evolved a style that is characterized by artificiality and artiness, by a thoroughly self-conscious cultivation of elegance and technical facility, and by a sophisticated indulgence in the bizarre. Mannerists sought a continuous refinement of form and concept, pushing exaggeration and contrast to great limits. The results included strange and constricting spatial relationships, jarring juxtapositions of intense and unnatural colors, an emphasis on abnormalities of scale, a sometimes totally irrational mix of classical motifs and other visual references to the antique, and inventive and grotesque pictorial fantasies.²⁰

I suggest that Plečnik used antiquity and mannered compositions to free himself from the harmonious classical compositions that Semper's own work and theories displayed and implied. Semper's writings and realized buildings strive to verify, clarify, display and codify the historical basis for naturalism in classical architecture. Harmony for Plečnik had to be achieved in a way other than by imitating Semper's theories or copying his richly textured, highly ornamented yet cerebrally balanced architecture. Compare Semper's Dresden Opera House or the Vienna Art History Museum to Plečnik's National University Library. All share a common antecedent in classical planning and spatial organization, but the articulation of the elevations is exceptionally different. Plečnik seemed to place multi-brick-wyeth-dimensional stone blocks randomly throughout the brick composition of the library's upper exterior elevations. The appearance of randomness does not occur in Semper's work. If Semper strove for a harmonious naturalism, then what was Plečnik striving for? If it is true that Plečnik rejected Otto Wagner's personal reinterpretation of Semper's architectural theories to pursue them independently and directly, then Plečnik's manipulation and articulation of his buildings' mass and elevations belie either a rejection of Semperian theory or a strict adherence to the fundamental tenets of those theories. In either case

²⁰ "Mannerism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed. I use the EB definition here only for clarity and succinctness. I base my ideas about Mannerism on Arnold Hauser's "Mannerism." Though Marxist in cultural analysis, this treatise remains a fundamental text for finding the characteristics of Mannerism, which I think are germane to the argumeny that Plečnik is essentially classically mannered architect.

Plečnik rejected Semper's interpretative execution of his own theories. Plečnik's work clearly does not look like Semper's.

As a creator, master designer, and impassioned artistic genius who strove solely to invent compositions that transcended theory and were pleasing to the eye, Plečnik was thus not a strict adherent to Semperian theory. Prelovšek states that "the facade of the Library is like a great ornamental carpet, with the coarse threads of stone 'worked' into the brick ground."²¹ The fundamental idea of Semper's theory of cladding, *bekleidungsprinzip*, is that walls originated by hanging textiles from log frames. Prelovšek explains Semper's understanding of the importance of cladding symbolism as:

the tectonic structure achieves monumentality only by emancipation from structural and material realism, by the symbolic spiritualization of the expression of its purpose. He [Semper] developed his [own] theory of cladding, an area in which textile art assumes a central role. Textile art and ceramics produce the initial symbols that are subsequently converted by architecture. They are either borrowed from nature or they are the traditional form of different social eras and their industrial art. Thus for Semper the symbolic forms refer to the function of the individual parts of the building, the whole, the purpose, etc.²²

Thus if Plečnik's National University Library walls express the Semperian idea of cladding, then Plečnik fundamentally alters Semper's concept by introducing randomness as a compositional design tool and expressive motif. Textiles were traditionally woven in repetitive patterns, realistic representations of nature or stylized patterns—all forms exhibiting regularity.

An interpretation of Plečnik as a Semperian literalist denies his inherent skill, commitment and interest in formal compositional design as an abstract artistic endeavor. By positing Plečnik's strict adherence to Semperian theory one does a disservice to the artistic integrity of Plečnik's oeuvre by diminishing his own formal artistic talent. Rather, it may have been that Semper provided a theory that Plečnik worked out and executed in his own artistic way. Semper did not prescribe how

²¹ Prelovšek 1997, 256.

²² Prelovšek 1997, 9.

walls were to be built, rather he theorized about why they developed the way they did, what their symbolic meaning was, and why and how monumentality and symbolism were integrally and synergically important to each. Thus Plečnik had to figure how to design walls that were both classically derived yet personally expressive. Plečnik did not depart from Semperian theory; he individualized it in his own, personal mannered way to fulfill his own artistic needs, the program requirements of his clients, and the inherent symbolism of the building types he worked in.

The study of Plečnik as a mannered architect must lead to the analysis of his work in a formal and systematic way, but this remains to be accomplished. No methodological examination of form generation in Plečnik's architecture currently exists. Investigations into Plečnik's architecture like those of Furnari, Hildebrand, or Clark and Pause would reveal important knowledge and understanding of the significance of his work. The bulk of Plečnik research and publication has been historical in nature—biographical, social, and cultural. Little has been written about Plečnik's architecture as formally composed artifacts. Even the two Phaidon "Architecture in Detail" monographs on Plečnik, Gooding's and Margolius's studies fail to provide adequately appropriate analysis of form generating relationships.

Gooding, however, does address the importance of Italian Mannerist influences on Plečnik's design and provides appropriate narrative explanations to the simple symbolism of the National and University Library's ornaments as they serve and inform the *parti*. Yet he fails to compare the mannered monumental stair of The Church of St. Michael in the Marsh to the way the mannered central stair in the library functions. Plečnik's work on The Church of St. Michael in the Marsh can be considered a prototypical design exploration for his library. The power of the ceremonial entry's vertical ascent and axial thrust into the church is not successfully resolved as it is shifted perpendicularly to become the axis of the asymmetrical nave. Due to abundant space in the library, a luxury of design, Plečnik could successfully resolve the stair's axial thrust into the reading room by mediating its 90-degree shift at the information desk and at the unusual chandelier overhead to become the reading room's central axis.²³

²³ The study Plečnik as a mannered architect must also lead to a careful analysis of his use of symbolic ornament and iconography. There is a growing body of

Other than the obviously simple symbolic narratives that are already known, such as the sacerdotal nature of the central staircase's ascent in the National and University Library, little research has been done to explicate Plečnik's hermetic symbolic meanings. For example, why would Plečnik use Slovakian folk art patterns to decorate the interior of The Church of St. Michael's in the Marsh, a small parish church for peasants? What would they know about Slovakian folk art? Why would Plečnik assume it would mean anything other than decoration to farmers who lived on the edge of a Slovene marsh? And what did the Slovene politicians and intelligentsia think of using foreign imagery? Why would Plečnik chose to expropriate another culture's imagery? Even if he were truly acting in a pan-Slavic way, why is the arbitrarily selected Slovakian folk art better for this church than other Slavic decorative folk art? As a creator of the new Slovene nation's cultural identity, why would Plečnik not simply create new decorative patterns in a Slovene folk-like motif? Even though the church was a new building, would not Plečnik's own decorations add more to the church's legitimacy as part of the nation's future cultural heritage than it would be by expropriating Slovakian folk art?

What is Plečnik's fascination with columns and capitals about? Why is the exaggerated, mannered, Ionic column purposefully placed in front of the National and University's Reading Room's two glass walls? Besides the conventional wisdom that considers the Ionic column a symbolic reminder to the Slovene nation of its rich and ancient classical heritage, might it not have other meanings? Is Plečnik perhaps not symbolically stating that an exaggerated symbol of antiquity, which has no structural or tectonic purpose, means more than the nearly modern glass walls that visually frame the ends of the library's Reading Room, which provide the columns' background—does history supersede, transcend, take precedence over the present, over the Modern? Or does it stand there to remind the nation's intellectually engaged youth, who use the Reading Room, that an exaggerated ancient order bounds both their past and future as they diligently pursue

work on the sources Plečnik used for his symbols derived, for instance, from Minoan, Etruscan, and other Mediterranean basin influences, but little has been written about his Christian symbolism and iconography. And almost nothing has been written that attempts to explain Plečnik's symbolic composition—the formal composition of his buildings—or the grouping of symbols and images with their presumed content or meaning.

knowledge—they are caught in spite of knowledge, learning and training in a gilded cage of history? Perhaps the meaning is more optimistic—knowledge and learning will aid you to see around and beyond the long attenuated past. Moreover, why is the column exaggerated in the first place? Why is the column pedestal unarticulated and made to appear taller in proportion to the column shaft than a pedestal does in a classically articulated columnar composition—a pedestal that includes a plinth, dado, drum, cornice and column base? The column shaft seems to grow out of the pedestal instead of appearing as a separate element that is placed on the pedestal. Why is the column shaft length approximately twelve to thirteen times its diameter at the base when the classical proportion is 8:1? Why is this mannered column supporting a nearly modern entablature--one composed of an unarticulated, flat frieze and architrave with no cornice but with a highly articulated and stylized dentil molding, which is made from roof tiles? Why does this specific degree of exaggeration occur here, or did the composition just look right to Plečnik's eye? And how does the symbolic meaning of this column/entablature/window composition fit into the building's larger symbolic structure?

What methodology can be used successfully to reveal the meaning of Plečnik's work—the analytic techniques derived from Freud, Jung, Marx, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Semiotics, Deconstructionism or the Medieval Four-fold method? Are there deeper symbolic meanings in Plečnik's work than those derived literally from each symbolic reference or should we view it solely from a formal compositional point of view? These questions cannot currently be answered. We must wait for more scholarly research to be done, which we hope will be published soon. We need this scholarship so the work of Jože Plečnik can be freed from the inadequate ideas that have surrounded him so far.

New York City

Works Consulted

- Alofsin, Anthony. *Frank Lloyd Wright The Lost Years, 1910-1922: A Study of Influence*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1993.
- Burkhardt, Francois, Claude Eveno, and Boris Podrecca. *Jože Plečnik: Architect: 1872–1957*. Trans. Carol Volk. Cambridge: MIT, 1989.
- Burckhardt, Lucius and Linde Burckhardt. "Ljubljana, the City of Plečnik." *Abitare* 272 (March 1989): 228–37.
- Clark, Roger H. and Michael Pause. *Precedents in Architecture*. 2nd ed. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1996.
- Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture and Decorative Arts 1910-1925*. Ed. Alexander von Vegesack. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.
- Ferlenga, Alberto. "Riverbank among the Trees." *Lotus International* 59.3 (1988): 6–13.
- Ford, Edward R. *The Details of Modern Architecture*. Cambridge: MIT, 1997.
- Frampton, Kenneth. *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*. Ed. John Cava. Cambridge: MIT, 1995.
- Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect*. Ed. Terence Riley with Peter Reed. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994.
- Furnari, Michele. *Formal Design in Renaissance Architecture from Brunelleschi to Palladio*. New York: Rizzoli, 1995.
- Garmaz, Magdalena. "Architecture of Jože Plečnik." M.A. Thesis. U Cincinnati, 1990.
- Gooding, Mel. *National and University Library, Ljubljana: Jože Plečnik*. London: Phaidon, 1997.
- Hauser, Arnold. *Mannerism: The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art*. 1965. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986.
- Hildebrand, Grant. *The Wright Space: Pattern and Meaning in Frank Lloyd Wright's Houses*. Seattle: U Washington P, 1991.
- Hrausky, Andrej, Janez Kozelj, and Damjan Prelovšek. *Plečnik's Ljubljana: An Architectural Guide*. Trans. Viktorija Premzl. Ljubljana: DESSA, 1997.
- Krečič, Peter. Letter to the Author. 6 April 1999.
- Krečič, Peter and Rok Kvaternik. *Jože Plečnik: Ciboriums, Monstrances and Sacramentariums*. Trans. Martin Cregeen. Ljubljana: Založba Rokus, 1997.

- . "Trois grands architectes slovenes de ce siecle." *L'Oeil* 473 (July-August 1995): 68–75.
- . *Plečnik: The Complete Works*. New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1993.
- , Rok Kvaternik, and Edvard Primožič. *Plečnik's Chalice*. Trans. Martin Cregeen. Ljubljana: Založba Rokus, 1993.
- . *Plečnik's Ljubljana*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva Založba, 1991.
- Long, Christopher. "Jože Plečnik, architect: 1872-1957." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 54 (March 1995): 98–100.
- Lukes, Zdenek, Damjan Prelovšek, Miroslav Repa, and Tomaš Valena. *Josip Plečnik—Architecture for the New Democracy*. Trans. varies. Prague: Prague Castle Administration, 1997.
- Mallgrave, Harry Francis. *Gottfried Semper: Architect of the Nineteenth Century*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1996.
- Margolius, Ivan. *Church of the Sacred Heart: Jože Plečnik*. London: Phaidon, 1995.
- McEwen, Indra Kagis. *Socrates' Ancestors: An Essay on Architectural Beginnings*. Cambridge: MIT, 1993.
- The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 15th ed. Ed. Philip W. Goetz. Chicago: Britannica, 1990.
- Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*. Ed. Harry Francis Mallgrave. Santa Monica: Getty Center, 1993.
- Pfeiffer, Bruce Brooks. *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Masterworks*. Ed. David Larkin and Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer. New York: Rizzoli, 1993.
- Podrecca, Boris. "Modernite de Plečnik." *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 305 (June 1996): 92–94.
- Prelovšek, Damjan. *Jože Plečnik 1872-1957*. Trans. Eileen Martin and Patricia Crampton. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997.
- and Vlasto Kopac. *Žale by Architect Jože Plečnik*. Ljubljana: City of Ljubljana, 1992.
- . "Note on the Construction of the Riverbank." *Lotus International* 59.3 (1988): 14–33.
- Random House Dictionary of the English Language: The Unabridged Edition*. Ed. Jess Stein. NY: Random House, 1967.
- Slapeta, Vladimir. "Functionalism in Czechoslovakian Architecture." *East European Modernism: Architecture in Czechoslovakia, Hungary & Poland between the Wars 1919-1939*. Ed. W. Lesnikowski et al. New York: Rizzoli, 1996.

- . "Jože Plečnik in Prague." *Joze Plečnik: Architect: 1872–1957*. Ed. Francois Burkhardt, Claude Eveno, and Boris Podrecca. Trans. Carol Volk. Cambridge: MIT, 1989.
- Stabenow, Jorg. *Jože Plečnik Stadtebau im Schatten der Moderne*. Wiesbaden: Vieweg & Sohn, 1996.
- Storrer, William Allin. *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1993.
- Svacha, Rostislav. *The Architecture of New Prague 1895-1945*. Trans. Alexandra Buchler. Cambridge: MIT, 1995.
- Sweeney, Robert L. *Frank Loyd Wright: An Annotated Bibliography*. Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1978.

POVZETEK**O VIRIH PLEČNIKOVIH NAČRTOV**

Članek razglablja o virih Plečnikove arhitekture in odpira vprašanje, ali njegovo delo sledi klasični ali moderni tradiciji. Čeprav ga sodobna znanost umela v tradicijo moderne, teža stilnorazvojnih dokazov in njegova izraba klasičnega izročila govorita za Plečnika klasicista. Njegov klasicizem je vendar zelo oseben in poseben ter tudi skoraj popolnoma hermetičen. Naravna občutljivost njegovega arhitekturnega sloga kar najmočneje spominja na to, ki jo najdemo v delu italijanskih manieristov v pozni visoki renesansi, in manj na tisto Gottfrieda Semperja, nemškega arhitekta in teoretika 19. stoletja, ki ga najpogosteje omenjajo kot Plečnikovega mentorja. Plečnikovo zgodnje delo na Dunaju razkriva njegovo rastoče zanimanje za moderno arhitekturo in je nekako vzporedno kreacijam Franka Lloyda Wrighta v istem času, posebno Hramu edinosti (Unity Temple). Vendar glavnina njegovega zrelega dela kaže na manierističnega klasicista. V dveh zgodnjih dunajskih delih (Zacherlovi hiši in Cerkvi Svetega Duha) je Plečnik raziskoval inovativne gradbene tehnike in materiale, da bi ustvaril protomoderni učinek. Ti najavljajo njegov potencialni razvoj v modernizem, toda po dokončanju Cerkve Svetega Duha je nadaljeval z osvobajanjem od modernizma. Zdi se, da se je s celim srcem vrnil h klasični tradiciji, Čeprav taki s skrivnostno osebnim momentom.