

JOŽE PLEČNIK IN VIENNA AND PRAGUE, 1900–1921: THE SEARCH FOR ARCHITECTURAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Christopher Long

In the summer of 1900, after working for nearly a year in Otto Wagner's atelier, Jože Plečnik established himself as an independent architect. Over the course of the next twenty years, first in Vienna, and later in Prague, Plečnik worked out the rudiments of his own distinctive architectural idiom, which he would develop fully in his renovation of Prague Castle and in the numerous buildings he designed in Ljubljana during the interwar years. Two main concerns drove Plečnik's investigations during this formative period: the attempt to assert his identity as a Slovene and a closely related interest in exploring his ideas for the reform of the Catholic Church along purer and more democratic lines. Yet in neither instance did Plečnik adopt conventional solutions: on the one hand he pointedly rejected the use of standard folk motifs as a means of asserting his Slavic heritage; and he was sharply critical of the "style without confession" (*konfessionsloser Stil*) embraced by most of his modernist contemporaries, including his mentor Wagner, for church and other religious designs. Instead, Plečnik sought to forge a new architectural language, one that expressed modernity without abandoning history. But this, in turn, posed two fundamental questions for Plečnik: how to determine which historical forms still had validity and power, and, at the same time, how to recast them in such a way that they could articulate his beliefs. Plečnik's buildings and projects of his first two decades chart his progress in seeking answers to both of those questions.

VIENNA, 1900–1911

During his brief tenure in Wagner's office from 1899 to 1900, Plečnik assisted in the design of the Vienna city railway (*Stadtbahn*) project. Little is known about his specific activities, but in a letter to Jan Kotěra, he mentioned that he worked on the design of the Rossauerlande and Schottenring stations.¹ The Rossauerlande station does indeed show

¹ Plečnik, letter to Jan Kotěra, dated August 1901, cited in Damjan Prelovšek,

some of Plečnik's later mannerisms, including the rounded-over quoins, simplified surfaces, and monumental stair. But after barely eleven months in Wagner's employ, Plečnik struck out on his own. His reasons for leaving were partly connected to his belief that Wagner placed too much stress on the technical and economic—rather than the purely artistic—aspects of architecture. Much more important, however, were their contrasting nationalist and moral views.² Plečnik, who after a visit to Kotěra in Prague in the summer of 1900 (where he met many of the leading Czech modernists) was becoming increasingly strident in his avowal of his own Slovene identity and fervent Catholicism, and he wanted to seek his own avenues for expression.

For a time, Plečnik contemplated going abroad, but he ultimately decided to remain in Vienna, although his prospects there were limited. Because of his Slavic heritage—the little check over his name as Kotěra referred to it—and his lack of a technical education, positions in the state bureaucracy or higher education were effectively closed to him, and he had few personal connections that might have secured him commissions. Soon after setting out on his own, he formed an ill-fated partnership with Wagner's son, Otto Jr., but soon dissolved the arrangement because of what he perceived as the younger Wagner's questionable business practices.

Despite his break with his mentor, Plečnik's first independent works still clearly reflected the specific *Jugendstil* inflections of Wagner and the other Secessionists. But increasingly, starting already in the autumn of 1900, Plečnik began to move away from Wagner's vocabulary of forms. A first step in this direction is evident in his design for the Langer House (1900–1901), on which he experimented with a decorative facade featuring a wavy, vegetal motif, conceived—in clear opposition to Wagner's ideas—as an autonomous entity.

The lesson for Plečnik was a significant one. The notion that an architectural language could be treated freely and independently, and thereby express one's beliefs suggested to him an avenue for communicating his own artistic, national, and religious convictions. What Plečnik

Josef Plečnik, 1872–1957: Architectura Perennis (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1997) 24.

² Damjan Prelovšek, *Josef Plečnik, Wiener Arbeiten von 1896 bis 1914* (Vienna: Edition Tusch, 1979) 45.

lacked, however, was an appropriate vocabulary. And, indeed, over the next several years he explored a number of different formal lexicons.

In the Villa Loos in Melk (1901), Plečnik again experimented with a dynamic form language, but he limited it to basic geometric shapes and lines. To further animate the composition, he employed an admixture of different stucco surfaces, as well as brick and multi-colored *majolica*. His attempt to find an alternative to the Secessionist style, however, as he confessed in a letter to his brother Andrej, had failed.³ The problem that Plečnik encountered was not only that motifs were too dependent on the standard Viennese *Jugendstil* dialect or that they were poorly integrated with the building as a whole, but that—beyond a basic affirmation of modernist intent—they also were uncommunicative.

The design of the Langer Apartment Block in Vienna (1901–2) presented Plečnik with this same quandary. Much of the surface decoration—the abstracted classic elements, multiple frame panels, and other geometric motifs—were borrowed more or less directly from Wagner or the other *Wagnerschüler*. Yet in an article on Plečnik in *Volné směry* in 1901, Kotěra wrote that he also detected in the building's ornamental scheme unmistakable signs of Plečnik's South Slavic sensibility—a combination of Mediterranean classicism and other elements borrowed directly from his Slovene homeland. Unlike many other Slavic architects, however, who sought to express their sense of nationality through the direct appropriation of folk motifs, Plečnik, Kotěra argued, had sought to distill out and abstract their essence. "You will search in vain in his work for illogically-borrowed motifs from Slovene needlework, peasant houses, or rustic crocks." Although Plečnik had a "heartfelt love for primitive folk art, he searches and finds in it characteristics that he can carry over into his art—simplicity and acerbity."⁴

"I once remember," Kotěra continued, "the pleasure he derived from visiting our [Czech] folk art museum, and how the sincerity of the forms and the color combinations (white and gold, black and silver) bought him joy. But his eye did not observe that these were apples or cornflowers, or that this or that form had changed over time"; rather, "he felt in his soul ... all that which is important in his art and which

³ Prelovšek, *Josef Plečnik, Wiener Arbeiten* 66.

⁴ Jan Kotěra, "Jože Plečnik," *Volné směry* 6 (1901–2): 98.

embodies so much of what is Slavic: the acerbity, which can sometimes sounds a note of sharpness in the main theme, and a lyricism, which despite its spare form seems almost soft." This hint of simplicity and acerbity, Kotěra argued, is what set his work off from that of the Viennese, whose tendency was to be "glib, light, and shallow." To preserve his edge and the danger of assimilation, Plečnik, he wrote, "had to be unmercifully strict with himself."⁵

The simplicity and acerbity that Kotěra described are perhaps evident in the surfaces of the Langer Apartment Block. Yet it is difficult at the same time to discern any substantive difference between his façade for the Langer building and the apartment house designed by former Wagner student Rudolf Farsky (an ethnic German who later taught at the Staatsgewerbeschule in Brünn [Brno]) on the Hietingzer Hauptstraße two years later.

This lack of specificity and content evidently also troubled Plečnik. In his design for the Weidmann House (1901–2), he explored the use of more traditional vocabulary, a modernized Baroque, for the house's façades. On the one hand, the Donatello-inspired putti and classical moldings seemed to reflect the preoccupations of the house's owner, Josef Weidmann, who was a collector of Italian art and procurer of rare objects for the imperial court; and the neo-Baroque idiom also certainly corresponded to the image of Plečnik's Ljubljana, with its decidedly Baroque-clad inner city. But neither the Mediterranean-style pergola on the rear terraces nor the traditional courtyard arrangement of the house yielded an impression that distinguished it in any way from the Austrian norm.

It is instructive here to compare schemes Plečnik designed for a shrine to the Virgin Mary in Tacen, just outside Ljubljana. Produced at about the same time as Weidmann House, they combined the typical features of roadside chapels of the region with the pylon forms and geometric shapes Plečnik was then investigating in his sketchbooks. What stands out in the renderings, however, are the Slovene inscriptions and the polychromatic striations in the walls, the latter drawn from Mediterranean vernacular traditions. In contrast to the Weidmann House, which may be said to be generic in its expression of Central European tradition, the Tacen schemes speak of a particular place and

⁵ Kotěra 98.

disposition—traditional, Slovene and devoutly Catholic, while at the same time casting an eye on the art of the present.

With his design for the Zacherl House (1903–5), Plečnik pursued a markedly different strategy, a radical paring-down of the building's exterior cladding. Designed after a short hiatus in his built work, the façade solution suggests a new approach on Plečnik's part to the problem of making a distinctive and characteristic statement. In an early competition design for the building, Plečnik examined the use of a florid, *Jugendstil* surface treatment reminiscent of Wagner's 1898 Majolikahaus; later, he proposed a ceramic tile skin with geometric patterns, not unlike Max Fabiani's 1901 Portois & Fix Building. Soon, however, he abandoned this for a more monumental solution using thin polished granite slabs held between vertical stone ribs.

The question of what to do with the cornice, however, continued to trouble Plečnik right up to the end. With construction well underway, he churned out a series of ideas for the handling of the uppermost floor and roof. Initially, he looked at a rather conventional solution with large, classically-inspired brackets. This he followed with an arrangement of grotesque heads surmounting a repeated zigzag motif. Plečnik also briefly considered a scheme with thin pilasters terminating in variegated L-shaped capitals, before finally settling on a series of caryatids—inspired by a group of Atlantes designed by sculptor Franz Metzner⁶—positioned between the windows.

With its brilliant realization of Semper's notion of *Bekleidung* and the dynamic plasticism expressed in its cornice, the Zacherl House was a stunning departure from Viennese trends. But aside from its explicit modernism, for Plečnik it was also a nationalistic statement—a demonstration of the power of a Slovene architect working in the heart of the Austrian capital. Writing to his brother Andrej while the building was still under construction, Plečnik revealed his hope that the Zacherl House would be a beacon for Slovene aspirations:

When my building is finished, you absolutely must see it. There will be nothing like it, whatever people will say about it. I would like you to see it and judge for yourself, so that all this effort for the sake of Slovenia will not be in vain. The building is a testimony of my background. If it meets with criticism, I want

⁶ Peter Krečič, *Plečnik: The Complete Works* (New York: Whitney, 1993) 37.

my country to know that it is entirely my conception, born out of difficult times when artists frequently find it impossible to work.⁷

Plečnik's defiant declaration not only captures his determination to succeed against the barriers stacked against him, but it also shows his burning desire to demonstrate that a Slovene could take the lead in pursuing a new architecture. Modernism thus for Plečnik was put at the service of nationalist ambitions. Rather than articulating Slovene symbols directly, he sought to exhibit the energy and imagination of the *Slovenska Moderna* through his own creative ability.

What was missing for Plečnik in such a stratagem was an outlet for his own deep-seated Catholicism. Through his patron Johann Zacherl, who was a leading member of the Christian Socialist Leo Society, Plečnik came into close contact with the Catholic reform movement, which sought to update and democratize the liturgy. Zacherl's notion that the creative artist was merely the unconscious agent of divine will also had a powerful resonance for Plečnik, who more and more came to view his work as a sacred quest.⁸

In the years after the completion of the Zacherl House, Plečnik increasingly recast his sights toward church-related commissions. In 1905, he designed a richly detailed altar wall for the Twenty-fourth exhibition of the Secession, which was devoted to religious art, and in 1909 he undertook an extensive renovation of the Franciscan monastery in Trsat near Rijeka. The most important of these commissions, however, both in terms of Plečnik's Catholic reform efforts and his development of a formal language, was the Church of the Holy Spirit in the Vienna working-class district of Ottakring (1910–13).

Conceived as a missionary center for Christian Socialist projects, the church for Plečnik also represented an opportunity to realize his hopes for introducing a new type that could fulfill modern functional and liturgical requirements. As Prelovšek has documented, Plečnik had been thinking about the planning of a modern church since his days at the Academy.⁹ He eventually adopted a simple basilican arrangement, with

⁷ Quoted in Krečič 38.

⁸ Prelovšek, *Josef Plečnik, Wiener Arbeiten* 81.

⁹ See Prelovšek, *Josef Plečnik, 1872-1957: Architectura Perennis* 72–78; and *Josef Plečnik, Wiener Arbeiten*, 131–44.

the columns separating the nave and the side aisles removed to create a single large space.

Yet the problem of finding an appropriate language remained. During the prolonged design phase of the project, Plečnik proposed a number of different variations, ranging from an expressive—indeed, almost cubist—scheme with a series of dormers arrayed along the sloping roof line to a more traditional Christian basilican form with a wooden roof. In the end, he elected to use a mixed vocabulary, which combined elements of later classical antiquity with resolutely modern forms.

This *mélange* of old and new, which became characteristic of Plečnik's mature work, may in part be understood as a symptom of a broader trend in Central European architecture toward a new historic eclecticism that emerged in the period after 1905. The same attempt to reconcile tradition with modernist precepts appears in the works of many of Plečnik's fellow *Wagnerschüler*,¹⁰ as well as graduates from the *Technischen Hochschulen*, such as Oskar Strnad and Josef Frank. What distinguished Plečnik's architecture in this period is not his willingness to incorporate historical elements, but the way in which he selected from the architectural past. And it is here that we come closer to understanding Plečnik's attempts to forge a distinctive architectural and cultural identity.

Unfortunately, Plečnik left few specific clues about his creative "sorting" process. But a letter he sent to the editor of the Czech journal *Styl* in 1909 (which had recently featured an extensive piece on Wagner's Am Steinhof church), provides some insight into his ideas about ecclesiastical architecture, and, at the same time, illuminates his choices in the Church of the Holy Spirit. In an uncharacteristically harsh assessment of his master's work, Plečnik complained that Wagner's design for the Steinhof church was not only willful and arbitrary, but that it had not addressed the functional requirements of the liturgy. Most revealing, however, are his comments at the end:

Better no art than one such as this! I understand why those in former times built so slowly—because they had a conscience, everything was holy to them. This is best conveyed by the

¹⁰ See, for example, Iain Boyd Whyte, *Three Architects from the Master Class of Otto Wagner: Emil Hoppe, Marcel Kammerer, Otto Schönthal* (Cambridge: MIT, 1989) 68–85.

mystical customs which have been preserved right up to the present day and which we find so admirable. The modernists work without conscience; certainly we build faster, but I doubt whether our future offspring will remember our [churches] with the same respect that we, thank God, must pay to those of our ancestors.¹¹

Plečnik's extraordinary sense of reverence and piety stands out here; yet he also speaks of other ideas central to his conception of architecture: the importance of the mystical, of quality, and of communicating enduring values. And it was these that became for Plečnik a test for determining which elements he will select from the treasure chest of history. Lacking modern forms that could relate his values, he adopted past forms for their legibility and their capacity to express permanence, religious devotion, and the mystical nature of God. In the case of the Church of the Holy Spirit, those forms came predominantly from the early Western Christian basilica. Not only did these provide readily understandable Christian symbols, but—which was also decisive for Plečnik—they came from a period in the church's history when the relationship between the priest and worshippers were uncomplicated by later liturgical and social changes—a time when simplicity, democracy, and openness reigned. The early Christian basilica, however, also conveyed another important advantage, one closely tied to Plečnik's idea of the Slovene nationalist heritage: it was both a type and an architectural language also associated with the ancient Roman province of Illyria and thus an integral element of Slovene patrimony.

Plečnik's specific historical choices, thus, were dictated not by their formal qualities, but by their ability to serve as conveyors of national and religious meaning. This recourse to older forms had been central to historicist architecture throughout the Habsburg monarchy, and it was put to service to express a wide range of different political, national, and religious messages.¹² What distinguished Plečnik's adaptation of such forms, however, was his remarkable facility for altering—and thereby also modernizing the forms—while retaining their clarity and expressive

¹¹ Plečnik, Letter to the editor in *Styl* 1 (1909) 115–16.

¹² See, for example, Carl E. Schorske's essay, "Museum in Contested Space: The Sword, the Scepter, and the Ring," *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism*, ed. Carl E. Schorske (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998) 105–22.

power. Plečnik's designs for the church's crypt, with its remarkable concrete columns and capitals, perhaps most forcefully demonstrates this ability to freely manipulate the forms without losing their architectonic and linguistic content. Both the mystical impact of the space and its conspicuous connection with the past are maintained, yet it remains a manifestly a modern conception, not a work of mere revivalism.

PRAGUE, 1911–21

Plečnik continued to put the finishing touches on the Church of the Holy Spirit after his departure for Prague in 1911. But for the next decade, until the early 1920s when he began work on the renovation of Prague Castle, he found no opportunities to build. During this period, however, he continued to ponder the problems of a new language. Among the most revealing of these investigations is one of the series sketches he made for a monument to the Czech hero Jan Žižka in 1913.

The imposing design, with its huge open bowl and cascading staircases is immediately reminiscent of many of the Wagner school's final monumental projects. Here Plečnik is still attempting to develop a modernist form-language which is not intimately dependent upon historical models. Yet the dilemma posed by such an approach—its inability to proclaim the values he held most dear—was also no doubt clear to him, for he very soon abandoned such experiments. Instead in the 1920s—and, indeed, for the rest of his life—he pursued the same tactic he had employed for the Church of the Holy Spirit: the use of carefully-selected, recognizable historical elements, which could be modified to articulate his own particular views.

What for Plečnik began as a problem of how to convey his own particular nationalist and religious aspirations ultimately became his personal signature, and even in those works which are not intended to be specifically "Slovene" or "Catholic"—such as Prague Castle—these linguistic traces remain. Plečnik's fervent desire to express his own personal values and background became a lasting and fixed part of his speech.

POVZETEK**JOŽE PLEČNIK NA DUNAJU IN V PRAGI, 1900–1921: ISKANJE
ARHITEKTURNE IN KULTURNE IDENTITE**

Razprava preiskuje nacionalne in religiozne razsežnosti arhitekture Jožeta Plečnika in njegovih idej pred vrnitvijo v Ljubljano 1921. Dve glavni skrbi sta vodili Plečnikovo raziskovanje v tej oblikovni fazi: poskus zagovarjati svojo slovensko identiteto in temu sorodno hotenje raziskati reformne ideje katoliške cerkve na pristen in bolj demokratičen način. Vendar Plečnik v nobenem primeru ni privzel konvencionalnih rešitev: po eni strani je razločno zavrnil uporabo standardnih folklornih motivov kot sredstva za potrjevanja lastne slovanske identitete; in bil je ostro kritičen do “sloga brez veroizpovedi” (konfessionsloser Stil), ki si ga je v cerkvi in pri drugih sakralnih načrtih prilastila večina njegovih modernističnih sodobnikov, vključno z mentorjem Ottom Wagnerjem. Namesto tega je Plečnik želel oblikovati nov arhitekturni jezik, takega, ki bi na precej inovativen način združeval zgodovinske in moderne forme. Mešanica, ki je nastala iz tega, je postala znamenje njegovega zrelega dela, celo tistih načrtov, ki niso bili manifestativno “katoliški” ali “slovenski”.