

PLEČNIK'S LJUBLJANA: CLASSICAL URBAN DESIGN REVISITED

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Although much has been written about the influence of classical ideas and forms on Jože Plečnik's architectural designs, little has emerged that puts his masterful urban design for central Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, into classical context. This article takes some first steps in that direction by comparing his completed and unbuilt urban plans with classical ideals and archetypes of urban organization and form. Contemporary application of the key ideas has significance for the creation of more humane, livable, and sustainable cities.

Plečnik's professional career in Ljubljana spanned the period from 1920 to 1959. During this time, he served both as city architect and professor of architecture at the University of Ljubljana, although his influence on urban planning and design waned after the end of World War II. He had commissions in Prague, including the Prague castle complex, from 1920 until 1932. Prior to Prague, from 1903 to 1913, Plečnik completed major commissions in Vienna.

Plečnik was one of the most important architects of the *Wagnerschule*, but his work was always controversial, and he considered himself to be necessarily both an eclectic and a classicist, if not a modernist. His Rome Scholarship for study in Italy and France during 1898–99, awarded to him on the basis of his thesis project at the *Wagnerschule*, had opened his eyes to classical, Renaissance, and baroque themes. He was particularly impressed by Michelangelo, Palladio, and Peruzzi. Peter Krečič has observed that both Plečnik and Palladio were simultaneously classical and modern in their inventive and unique application of classical forms.¹

CLASSICAL CONCEPTIONS OF THE CITY

It was the classical Greeks who first recognized the city as polity, an Aristotelian form of political organization in which the whole body of citizens governs for the good of all, not merely as a market

¹ Peter Krečič, *Plečnik: The Complete Works* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1993) 19, 234.

settlement. This distinction placed civic political life above the life of the market, and anointed the *polis*, a small self-governing political unit consisting of a town or city and its surrounding hinterland, as the primary setting of political activity, with citizens speaking and acting together about issues of common concern, in public rather than in private discourse. Aristotle thought of this discourse as necessary to the attainment of individual human potential and the good life, and reasoned that the *polis* should be small enough to facilitate discourse but large enough to be economically self-sufficient.²

Emilios Bouratinos comments that "...for the Greeks the *polis* had meaning and there was no meaning apart from the *polis*."³ Robert Jan van Pelt helps us to understand that meaning for the Greeks was equivalent to a collective sense of immortality, achievable only through participation in the public realm. Of course, the *polis* did have its private realm, expressed architecturally by the house (dwelling) and partly by the emporium (place of exchange), which linked the private and public realms as well as the countryside with the *polis*. The public realm was expressed architecturally by the agora (gathering place and political center, one form of which is the *regia* or *stoa*), the acropolis (shrine), the necropolis (cemetery), and the theater (public stage for civic drama). These classical architectural types provided a matrix for the unfolding of public time, which is the structuring context of political life, analogous to space as the structuring context of the settlement.⁴

Thus, according to Bouratinos, the Greeks understood the relationships between civil society, its government, and its physical setting to be something of a seamless "homeopathic" web, so that "... in ancient times you made politics through architecture, and architecture through politics."⁵ This sense of the interrelatedness of the polity and its governmental, spatial, and architectural expression lies at the heart of Plečnik's contribution to Ljubljana's urban design.

² E. Barbara Phillips, *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 120.

³ Emilios Bouratinos, letter to the author, 23 January 1996.

⁴ Robert Jan van Pelt, "Athenian Assurance," chapter 5 in van Pelt and Carroll William Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991) 170–214.

⁵ Bouratinos, 23 January 1996.

Ljubljana was originally an ordered, Roman colonial town named Emona. Traces of the old Roman wall still exist, as do remnants of medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and nineteenth-century Ljubljana. Ljubljana's first important town planner during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was Maks Fabiani. Plečnik built on some of Fabiani's ideas for a radial street pattern, but his own plans of 1928 and 1943 were even more influential. According to Šumi, "... Plečnik wanted to introduce into his master plan ... the concept of a Slovene Athens."⁶ Plečnik visited the Acropolis in 1927 (figure 1).⁷

Plečnik's designs for both the city and private clients, constructed in a flurry of activity that ended with the onset of World War II, had such a major influence on the shape and character of the city that it has justifiably been dubbed "Plečnik's Ljubljana."⁸ Plečnik thought of the city as a work of art in progress, as did other leading designers of the period, and at least parts of Plečnik's plan for Ljubljana likely derived from his daily walks to and from his residence in the modest Trnovo precinct, not far from the old town center.⁹ Perhaps Plečnik's decision to make his home in the outskirts of this relatively insignificant area was in itself an expression of his interest in establishing public architectural discourse involving all levels of the polity. Much of the charm of his plan is associated with the human scale with which he defines this area. He uses pedestrian ways and streets which parallel important waterways, as well as the old Roman wall, to connect important squares and other landmarks. The walkways are punctuated by individual buildings, plantings, benches, streetlamps, pavings and bollards, differences in level, monuments, and baroque architectural details.

It is also clear that at the root of Plečnik's design philosophy was his desire to celebrate the importance of Ljubljana as a distinctive center of national political, religious, intellectual, and artistic culture. Political and religious identities were treated as the starting points, and

⁶ Nace Šumi, "Plečnik and Absolute Architecture," in *Jože Plečnik 1872-1957: Architecture and the City* (Oxford: Urban Design, 1983) 59. Unfortunately, Šumi does not develop the idea with sufficient detail to convey the actual impact of Plečnik's thinking.

⁷ This image was provided by Peter Krečič from the collection of the Architecture Museum of Ljubljana.

⁸ Peter Krečič, *Plečnik's Ljubljana* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1991) 3-5.

⁹ Krečič 1993, 111.

these factors were the basis for a spatial interpretation of “sacredness” that was completely different from secularized designs that emphasize the merely practical or the commercial, estranging man from his living space.¹⁰ Plečnik often spoke of his need to achieve the “absolute” in his art and architecture, by which he evidently meant the symbolization of eternal values.¹¹

Plečnik accomplished his objective by several means, not least of which was his use of architectural forms, details, and spaces with classical content. His idea was to improve the “legibility” of the city by appealing to the ability of people to read and identify with traditional forms, in this way linking the city enduringly with its Mediterranean origins. Plečnik was also interested in combining vernacular Slovene and northern European mystical as well as classical traditions in his designs in order to produce a truly universal architectural approach, not one that was merely nationalistic.

Now, using van Pelt’s typology of the six classical building types symbolically associated with the public realm, as outlined above, we will examine how these ideal types are manifested in Plečnik’s Ljubljana.

EMPORIUM, AGORA, AND REGIA

The emporium and agora of classical Athens were closely juxtaposed and provided overlapping market and political functions, just as they do in Ljubljana. As a gathering place for the populace, the Greeks considered the agora as embodying the polity.¹² The Athenian agora can be seen as a regia or stoa, a kind of “square doughnut” with a central open space bounded by porticoed buildings that housed the most important civic functions.¹³ Ljubljana has both an agora, defined in part by its stoa, and a regia without a stoa (see figure 2 for location of these classical building types at the City Market and Congress Square, respectively, as well as locations of the other types identified in the text to follow).¹⁴

¹⁰ Bouratinos, letter to the author, 30 November 1995.

¹¹ Robert Gilkey Dyck, “The Universality of Jože Plečnik,” *Design Book Review* 34/35 (Winter 1994): 55.

¹² Bouratinos 1996.

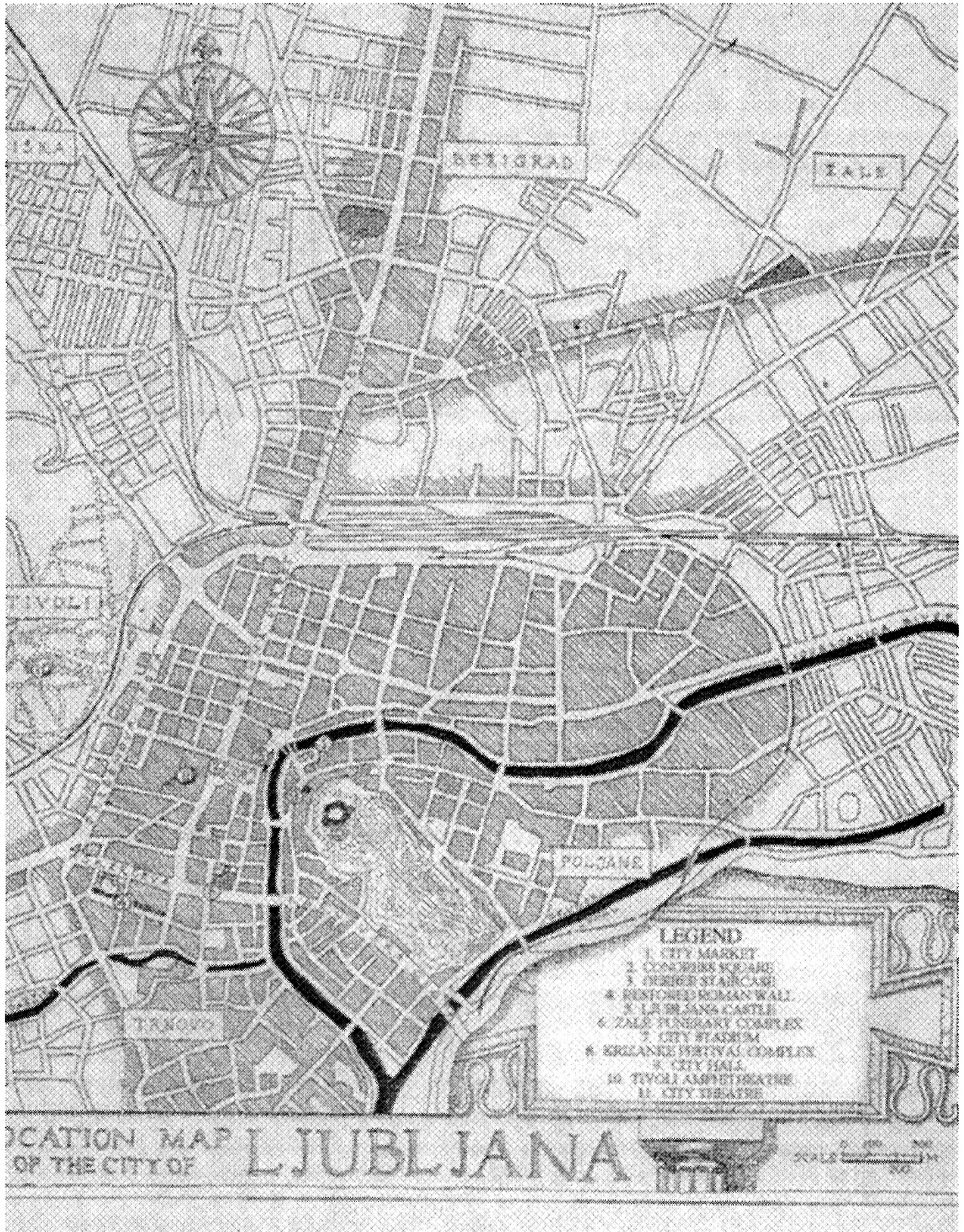
¹³ van Pelt 205–10.

¹⁴ This drawing was prepared by Andy Taylor and subsequently slightly modified by R.G. Dyck.

Fig. 1. Plečnik at the Acropolis.



Fig. 2. Ljubljana city plan.



Plečnik's riverbank design for the City Market, combined with his Three Bridges design which links the market, the city hall, and the old medieval city with Prešeren Square (formerly St. Mary's Square) and the nineteenth-century downtown commercial sector of the city, provides a spectacularly successful juxtaposition of emporium and agora. The area is literally the center of the "city of the living,"¹⁵ always full of pedestrians, with an active street life composed of shoppers, office workers, students, musicians and other entertainers, food vendors, flower vendors, and the like. Although there is some automobile traffic, it is strictly limited by the narrow access streets and the overall congestion, and the Ljubljanica River offers pedestrians welcome open space and sweeping vistas. The city hall marks the area as the city's political center.

The part of this complex that most closely resembles the classical agora is the City Market (figure 3), on one side bounded by a long curving structure with shops behind a colonnade (a stoa), which leads in an easterly direction to the secessionist Bridge of the Dragons, and on the other side bounded irregularly by the cathedral complex. The stoa parallels the Ljubljanica and its two-story waterside elevation consists of a rusticated basement below a smooth stucco story with arched windows, which is broken in the middle by an open loggia originally intended to provide access to a covered Butcher's Bridge (never constructed). The end of the stoa near Three Bridges is marked by a monumental flower shop with a classical open porch and a double pediment. Across the river, on the other side of Three Bridges, is its twin, a tobacco shop. Three Bridges derives its name from the new footbridges that were added to the single original span by Plečnik in the period 1930–32. The market complex was completed during 1940–44.

The market design was based in part on Plečnik's earlier design for a new city hall, the bulk of which was to be supported on a row of arcades that would have provided a covered market at ground level. But the mayor decided, based on public health concerns, that the construction of a new meat market was the city's more urgent priority, and this led to the design and construction of the market as it stands today. The new city hall would have been adjacent to today's market.¹⁶

¹⁵ van Pelt 185.

¹⁶ Krečič 1993, 130–31.

From Three Bridges to the south there are pedestrian ways on both sides of the river, extending as far as St. Jacob's Bridge at Zois Street. The riverbanks are lined with vine-covered concrete walls and terraces, partially completed to plans of the Viennese architect Alfred Keller prior to Plečnik's intervention. In accordance with Plečnik's design, the banks contain strategically placed plantings of willow and poplar trees, hedges, flower beds, and lawns, all of which are treated as architectural elements. Plečnik's Shoemaker's Bridge (1932–33) serves as a subsidiary public forum for the area. Its plan takes the form of a double square, providing a gathering and viewing place for pedestrians as well as a crossing point midway between the other two bridges.¹⁷

On axis with Three Bridges to the northwest, some five or six city blocks away, is the broad, lamp-lined pedestrian entrance to Tivoli Park, redesigned and renovated by Plečnik in 1931. Plečnik's promenade emphasized the visual line extending all the way from Tivoli Castle to Ljubljana Castle, which is located on the promontory behind Three Bridges, atop the medieval city. Like the Three Bridges area, Tivoli Park is also an extremely popular public gathering place, for both sedentary and active recreational pursuits. In this sense it constitutes a kind of agora in nature, bounded by the central city and subsequent suburban developments, including the Šiška district. Tivoli Park provides walking paths between these parts of the city, hiking trails on its Rose Hill elevation, a swimming pool, skating rinks, tennis courts, and (now) several large indoor sport and recreation complexes.

Plečnik himself developed plans (1927–28) for a new Ljubljana University to be located in the park, at right angles to the entrance promenade, and in 1940 he proposed another grand plan, a reception center for the new Slovene government (the *banate*), in the same location. In 1947, after his proposal for a new Slovene parliament building on the hillside leading up to Ljubljana Castle had been rejected in favor of a site on the edge of Tivoli Park, Plečnik drew another plan for a truly monumental parliament building, which was to be surmounted by an enormous cone some 360 feet high. None of these proposals was sufficiently practicable to be realized.¹⁸

¹⁷ Richard M. Andrews, "Ljubljana: The River Sequence," *Jože Plečnik 1972–1957* (Oxford: Urban Design, 1983) 40.

¹⁸ Krečič 1993, 121 and 176–78.

Fig. 3. City Market.

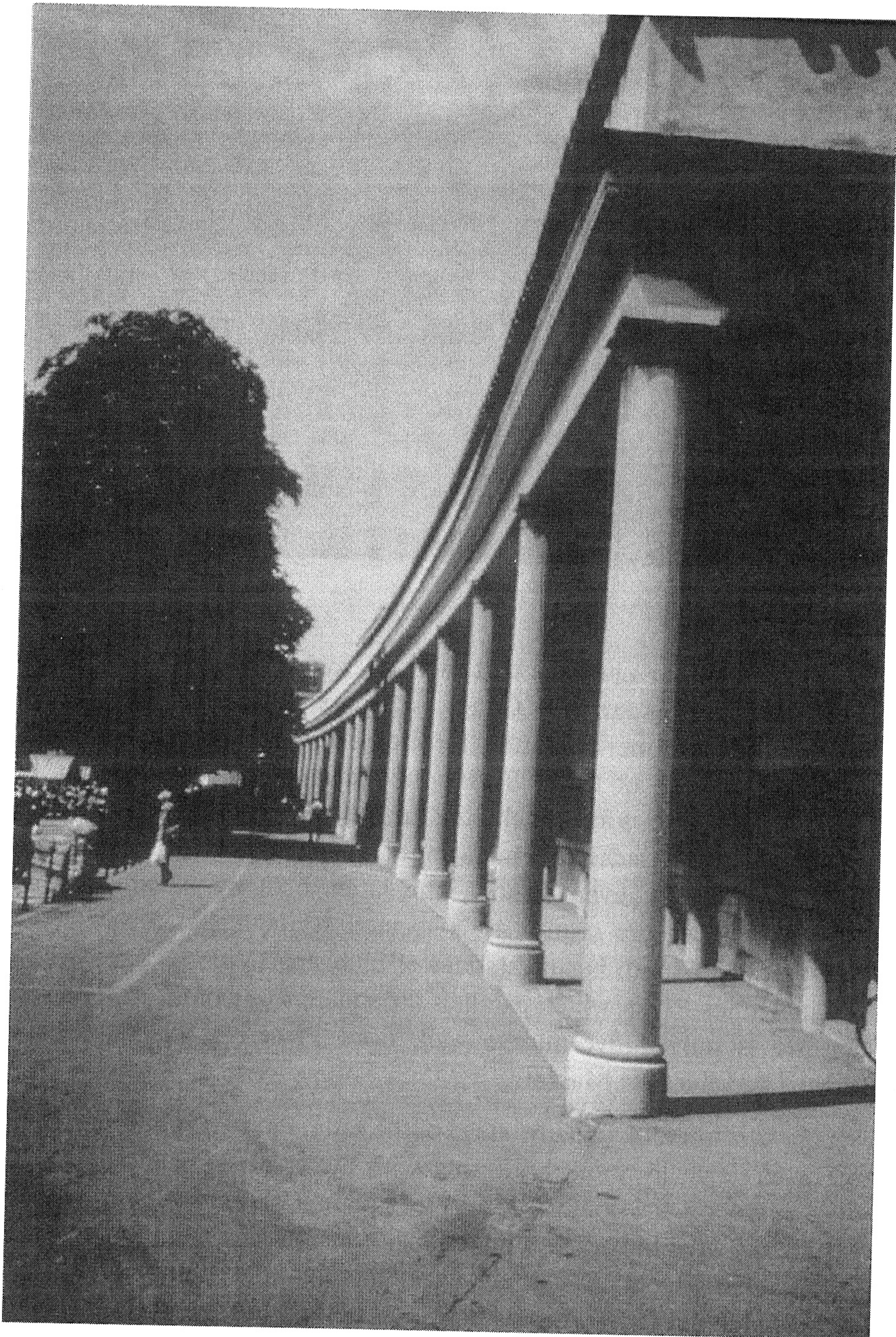
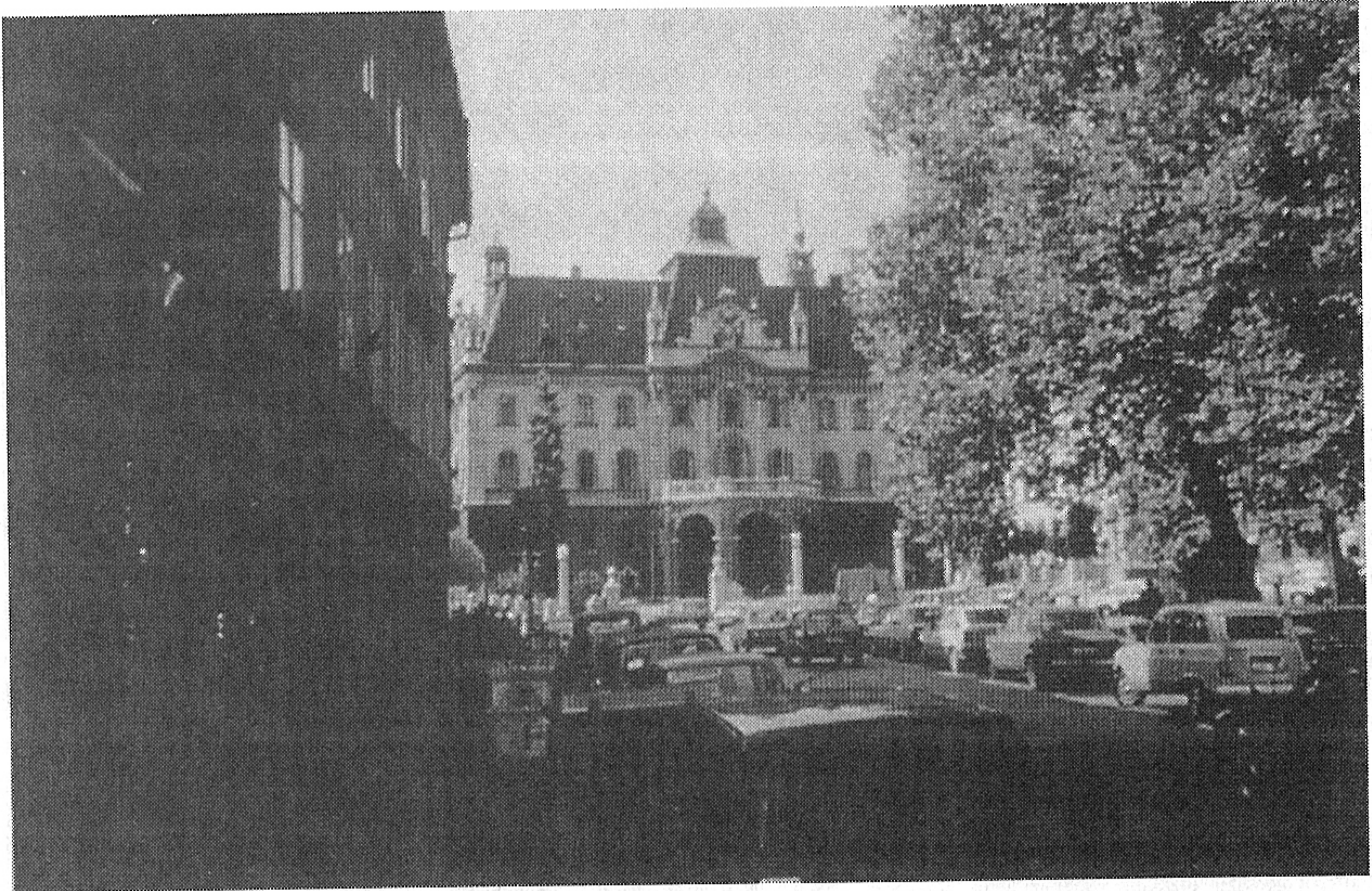


Fig. 4. Congress Square.



The site in Ljubljana that most resembles the *regia* in historic purpose and form is formerly Congress Square, which was laid out on the grounds of a former monastery for the needs of the post-Napoleonic Ljubljana Congress of 1821.¹⁹ Today the square is still the location of prominent city institutions, including the Law Faculty of the University of Ljubljana, the Academia Philharmonica, and the Ursuline Church with its affiliated convent school, the latter built by Plečnik during 1939–41. The square (figure 4) is located strategically between the principal north-south business street of Ljubljana (Vienna Street) and the Ljubljanica River, which parallels the square a city block to the east. The site is only a five-minute walk from Prešeren Square, Three Bridges, and the City Market.

Plečnik took full advantage of the square's symbolic importance and its strategic location, beginning with the creation of a major new paved plaza on the south side of the square (1927), which provided visual and spatial linkage among the major institutions mentioned in the previous paragraph. Other changes in plantings and furnishings followed, including staircases (1932–33) that connected this large and

¹⁹ Krečič 1991, 41.

commodious public gathering place, at each of its two easterly corners, directly to the walkway paralleling the Ljubljanica River.²⁰ The stylized classical detailing of the lamppost lighting the Gerber staircase is quite extraordinary (figure 5).

The square serves as the entrance to the superbly designed Vegova Street, with wonderfully detailed furnishings by Plečnik, which leads southward to Plečnik's National and University Library (1936–45) and French Revolution Square. That square contains the Illyrian Monument and a pergola containing a bust of the poet Simon Gregorčič, designed by Plečnik in 1929 and 1937, respectively.²¹ Adjacent to the square is Plečnik's last major urban commission, the Križanke Cultural Center, constructed in the period 1952–56 (see below). Located two blocks away was the old Roman Wall, which Plečnik had restored during 1935–38²² (figure 6). All of these architectural features serve to draw attention to the sociopolitical history of the city as well as serving to interlink the regia with other parts of the city.

The square also was to have been the location of two monumental buildings proposed by Plečnik during the war years, but they were never built. The first was his Odeon Music Hall, proposed in 1944 as a part of his revised city plan. Then in 1945 Plečnik proposed a new concert hall, combined with an academy of music, in a classical composition surmounted by a hollow cone of columns leaning inward. This second design represented either a reworking of the Odeon design or perhaps an alternative to it.²³

ACROPOLIS

As the city's shrine, the Acropolis of classical Athens celebrated the enduring future of the city, the ideal of the city as opposed to its actuality, the city that ought to be. In this sense, as suggested by van Pelt, the Acropolis served as that city's constitution.²⁴

²⁰ Krečič 1993, 113, 116.

²¹ Krečič 1991, 36–37.

²² Krečič 1991, 31–35

²³ Krečič 1993, 164–68.

²⁴ van Pelt 1991, 190–91.

Ljubljana Castle (figure 7) always figured prominently in Plečnik's plans for Ljubljana. Built mainly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the castle was seen by both Fabiani and Plečnik as the most important visual landmark in the city. In Plečnik's vision of Ljubljana as the Athens of Slovenia, the medieval castle became Ljubljana's acropolis. Plečnik's earliest plans for renovation of the castle ruins dated from 1930–31. His most radical plan for the site was his 1947 proposal for a completely new, octagonally shaped castle to house the new Slovene parliament, with a monumental staircase eight floors in height linking the parliament to the city hall below. During the early 1940s he produced several other proposals which were designed to improve access between the castle and the medieval city.²⁵

The only plan Plečnik was able to realize, however, was his 1932–35 renovation of the outer fortifications of the castle. This design is notable, as are many of his others, for its skillful juxtaposition of nature and architecture, establishing a unity that supports the central classical idea of the acropolis as a sacred place. None of Plečnik's designs for the castle focused on religious buildings, as such, but the symbolic purposes of the buildings meant they belonged to all Slovenes in the same way the Athenian acropolis belonged to all Greeks.²⁶

NECROPOLIS

As van Pelt points out, the *stèle* or vertical marker on a grave is the public counterpart of the essentially private transfer point between city and surrounding natural environment, which is marked by the notion of emporium (based on exchanges carried out by the polity within the city's walls with those outside). The Athenian necropolis (city of the dead) literally marked the boundary between the city and the countryside and symbolized the public time of the immutable past, just as the agora represented the public time of the present and the acropolis the public time of the enduring future. Without all three conceptions of time, the classical meaning of "city" is incomplete; without architectural expression of these three conceptions, the viability of the city is at risk.²⁷

²⁵ Krečič 1993, 123.

²⁶ Carroll William Westfall, "Cities," chapter 8 in van Pelt and Westfall, *Architectural Principles* 280.

²⁷ van Pelt 1991, 183–90.

Fig. 5. The Gerber staircase from Congress Square to the Ljubljanica.



Fig. 6. Roman wall restored by Plečnik.

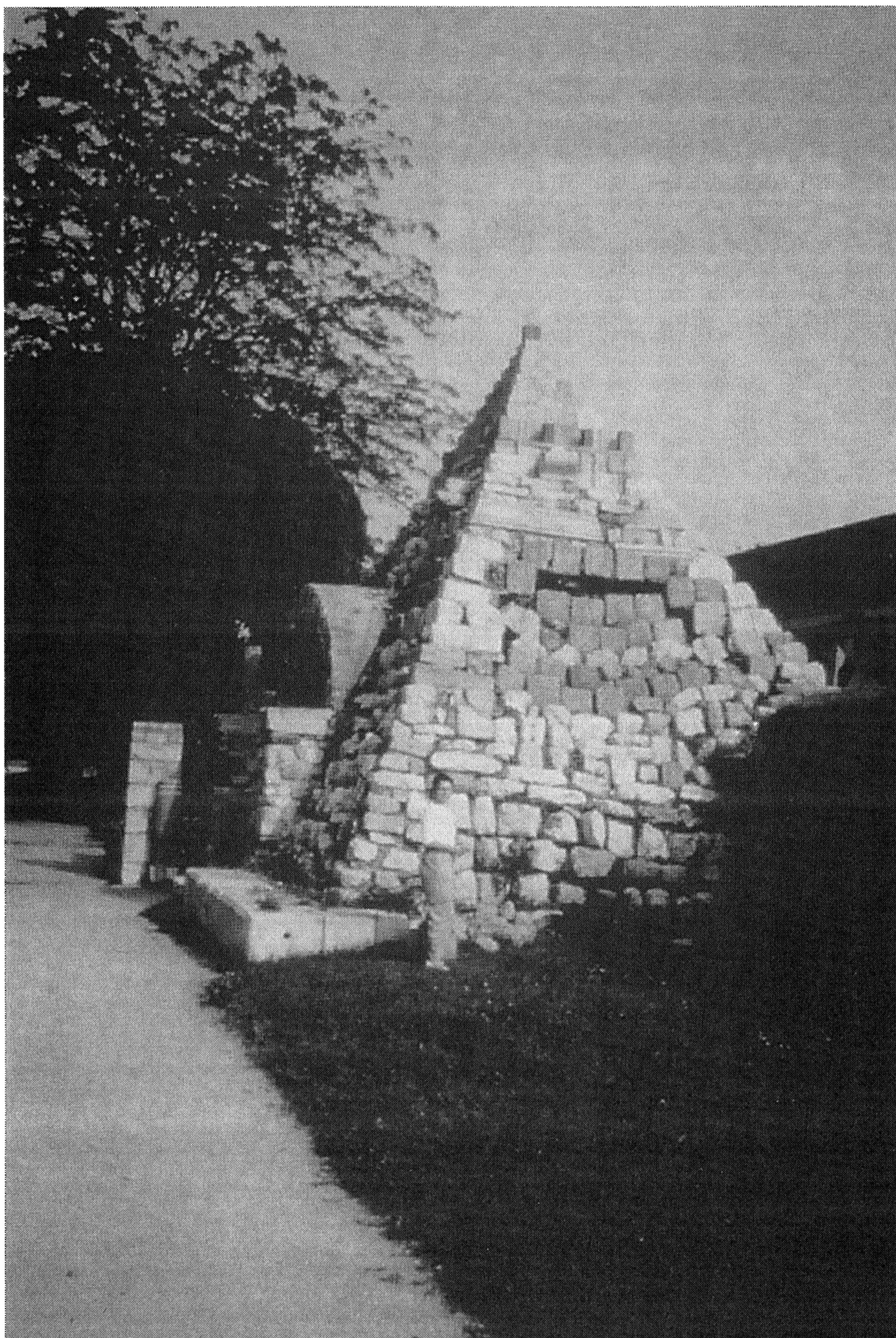


Fig. 7. Ljubljana Castle.



Seen in this context, Plečnik's design for the Žale Funerary Complex (1938–40) is not only an architectural masterpiece but a classically necessary component of his plan for the outskirts of the city, then in Bežigrad. The monumental entrance to this complex (figure 8)

Fig. 8. Entrance to the Žale Funerary Complex.



is designed to separate metaphorically the world of the dead from the world of the living. This is accomplished by a tall triumphal arch flanked by double stories of columns, with concavities in plan and elevation, surmounted by sculpted figures facing both in and out. Inside, there are a number of funerary chapels arranged radially with respect to a center point located outside the entrance. The chapels express Plečnik's dream of a garden of shrines and, through their variety in architectural form and detail, represent the different religious faiths practiced by Ljubljana's citizens. Plečnik also built a chapel designed for nonbelievers.²⁸

THEATER

Van Pelt identifies the open-air theater as the sixth and last architectural type of classical Greece. He asserts that it "... explicitly and purposely recapitulated the emporium, the house, and most importantly, the three architectural types that gave form to the public realm: the stela, the shrine, and the agora."²⁹ Plečnik designed and constructed three open-air theaters in Ljubljana, one relatively early in his career there, another in the 1930s, and the last at the very end of his career in the 1950s.

Plečnik's design for the city stadium, located on Vienna Street in the Bežigrad district just north of the central city, evolved during 1925–35 from a commission from a Catholic gymnastic association called Orli (The Eagles).³⁰ It was used both for sporting and other events requiring a large outdoor arena, including a Eucharistic Congress that was convened there in 1933.³¹ A multi-columned pavilion (a gloriotta) which originally housed the high altar for the Eucharistic Congress was constructed at the western end of the stadium (figure 9), and the

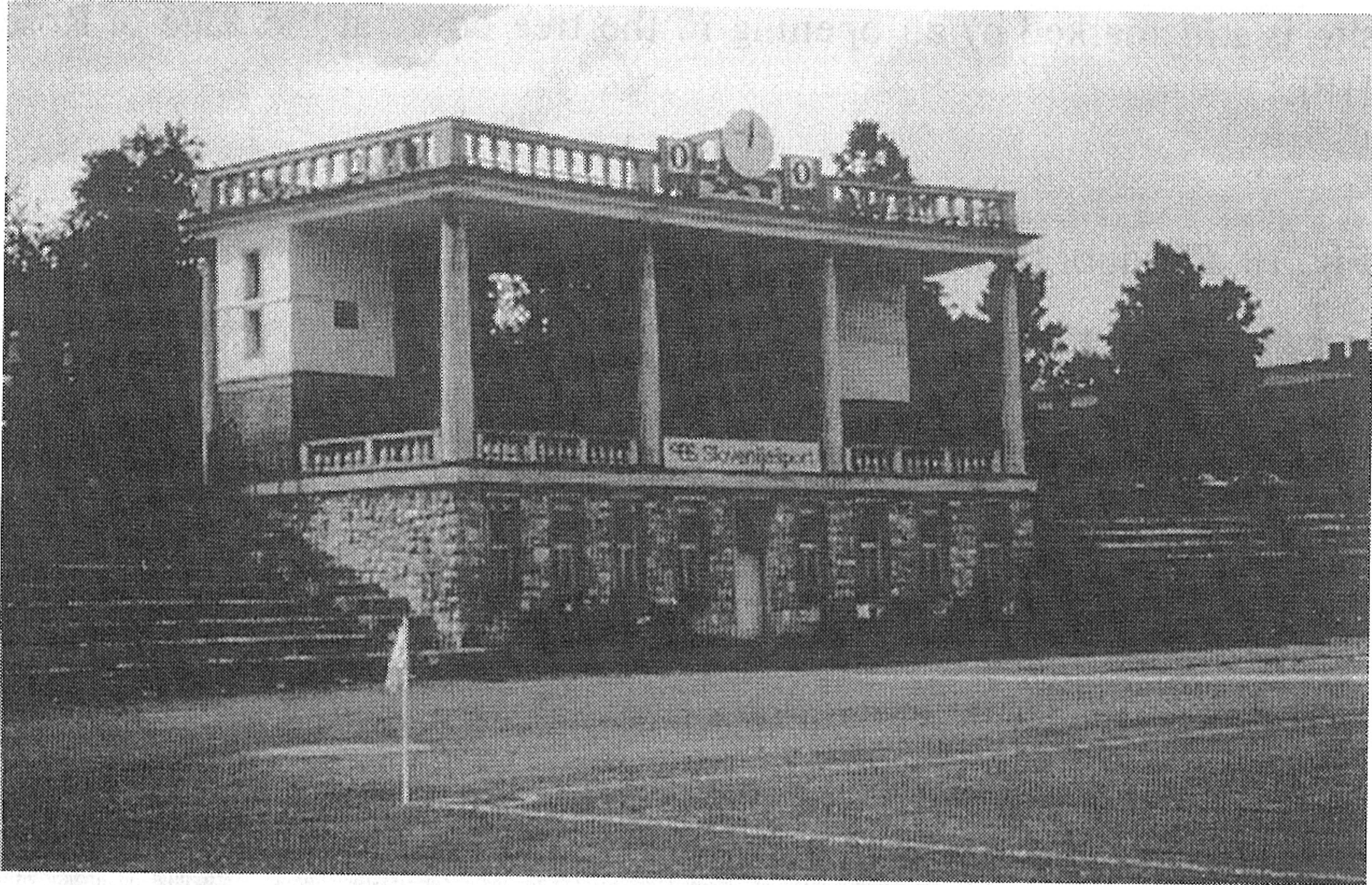
²⁸ Krečič 1993, 140–44.

²⁹ van Pelt 1991, 214. Perhaps not incidentally, Plečnik's usage of doubled and stacked colonnades to articulate the entrance to his necropolis could be a reference to the stoa, employed to mark the city of the dead in a way that is analogous to the way it marks the agora as the city of the living, since the agora (as emporium) and the necropolis represent transfer points in both time and space.

³⁰ Krečič 1993, 104.

³¹ Krečič 1991, 23–24.

Fig. 9. Pavilion in the city stadium in Bežigrad.



opposite end was given a monumental entrance portico that faces Vienna Street. Krečič observes that Plečnik's interest in sport as a way of uniting young people from a variety of backgrounds was informed in part by his interest in classical Greek values, and that his use of classical forms helped to engender solemnity and even a "sacred" quality in this civic design.³²

The second outdoor theater, located just south of Tivoli Castle (now a museum for graphic arts), was in the classical form of an amphitheater except that the stage, flanked by Doric columns, was located at a higher elevation than the surrounding seats (figure 10).³³

³² Krečič 1993, 104–5.

³³ This image was provided by Peter Krečič from the collection of the Architecture Museum of Ljubljana.

The amphitheater was constructed in the early 1930s but was destroyed during or after the end of World War II. Now, only a stone staircase and a few other stone remnants of the original construction remain, but the site is still marked by an opening in the tree cover at the edge of Rose Hill.³⁴

Fig. 10. Outdoor theater south of Tivoli Castle.



The Križanke Festival Complex, much of which was constructed from 1951 to 1956, serves as a civic and cultural center for the Ljubljana Festival, with an outdoor summer theater, open courtyards, and restaurant facilities associated with the restoration of a former monastery and its Baroque church. The outdoor theater was completed after Plečnik's death in 1957, under the direction of one of his students, Anton Bitenc.³⁵ It is equipped with a retractable roof (figure 11).

³⁴ The information contained in this paragraph is based on a visit to the site with Peter Krečič on 12 July 1998.

³⁵ Krečič 1993, 180–83.

Fig. 11. Križanke Festival Complex.



CONCLUSIONS

This review of classical influences on Plečnik's urban design for what is now central Ljubljana leads to several concluding observations. The first is that Plečnik was influenced by classical thinking concerning the meaning of "city" in political and social terms, and this was in fact the basis of his deep commitment to a kind of spatial planning and architectural design that supported the ideals of polity. His designs capture a sense of Ljubljana's heritage and show appreciation both for the leaders of previous generations and for the importance of the city's central institutions. They also recognize the unity that should characterize man's relationship with nature, capture the uniqueness of the place in symbolic terms, and create a setting where the life of the community is not only possible but desirable and fulfilling. Plečnik's designs thus reflect classical ideas both about spatial organization and formal detail, though they are stylized in his own inimitable manner. The expression "God is in the details" captures much that is characteristic about Plečnik's method of working and his accomplishments; both are marked by his spatial interpretation of sacredness.

Secondly, the classical tradition reminded Plečnik that it was the sphere of public and community life that required architectural articulation, in order to maximize benefits to all citizens. For this reason, almost certainly, Plečnik was drawn to civic and religious architecture as the most important venues for his work. He could have done more commercial work, more residential work, or more work for private clients, but his choice was clear. Not incidentally, all of the civic sites we have examined in Ljubljana, with the exception of its acropolis, have prominent Catholic as well as classical linkages. That Plečnik was a devout Catholic may have been contributory, but the fact that Catholicism was an important dimension of public and community life in Ljubljana was probably even more significant.

The third conclusion is that, probably for similar community-based reasons, Plečnik was drawn to the public classical architectural and spatial archetypes of emporium, agora (including regia or stoa), acropolis, necropolis, and theater. His completed designs for the market and the river complex, Congress Square, castle hill, Žale Funerary Complex, the city stadium, the Tivoli amphitheater, and the Križanke open-air theater, respectively, reflect these classical archetypes. But

perhaps equally important, Plečnik's unbuilt designs for the city hall, the university, the Slovene parliament, the Odeon, and the philharmonic hall were all intended to build upon and enhance the different expressions of civic life already manifested in those classically special places where they were to have been constructed.

Accomplishing similar results in cities today requires rediscovering the lost sense of polity, which today we might more likely call civil society, as the fundamental basis for successful cities, with economies, governments, and physical designs that really work both functionally and symbolically, because they are based in polity.

It is simplistic to think that architects or planners can do this by themselves. Appropriate education, professional commitment, and institutional frameworks are all important to their success as contributing designers of the new urban polity, but resurgence of broad democratic participation in the common life of the community is even more crucial. For this, Plečnik's Ljubljana, like classical Athens, provides an idealized architectural context.

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POVZETEK**PLEČNIKOVA LJUBLJANA: POPRAVLJENI KLASIČNI
URBANISTIČNI NAČRTI**

Članek razlaga, da Plečnikov načrt Ljubljane izhaja iz štirih klasičnih grških arhitekturnih arhetipov: emporija (trgovine), agore (trga), regie (dvora), akropole (trdnjave), nekropole (grobišča) in teatra (gledališča). Plečnikova Ljubljana tako odseva klasični politični in socialni pomen polisa in prinaša idealizirano arhitekturno ogrodje za obuditev države (civilnega segmenta) kot osnovnega temelja lokalnega gospodarstva, vlade in urbanističnih načrtov, ki v sodobni družbi zares delujejo obenem funkcionalno in simbolično.