

SOME PRINCIPLES OF PLEČNIK'S ARCHITECTURE¹

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One can begin consideration of Jože Plečnik's significance with the humorous speculation that had Plečnik not been a Slovene architect, he would have become Otto Wagner's successor at the Academy in Vienna. Wagner himself, along with the collegium of professors, nominated him three consecutive times for this position. However, the responsible ministry rejected Plečnik on each occasion, mainly because of his ethnic origin. This anecdote is indicative of Plečnik's reputation in the Viennese architectural community; it also illustrates an attitude towards Slovenes in Vienna at the time.

It is a challenge to identify anything typically Slovene in Plečnik's architecture for it is difficult even to discuss the existence of Slovene architecture before Plečnik. Plečnik was the pioneer or even the founder of Slovene architecture. Prior to his arrival in Ljubljana there was scant interest in architecture as an artistic discipline. Nineteenth-century architecture was fully dependent on Vienna and, partly, on Prague. For this reason one can only speak of Slovene construction in that period, with its tradition in the popular heritage. The latter is also at the core of Plečnik's interests and studies, as well as being an inspiration, as most obviously reflected in his proverbial tendency towards simplicity. It is the geometrical correctness of design, the beauty of a clean construction, and the simplicity of concept that comprise those characteristics of Plečnik's work that reflect something of the Slovene building tradition.

The beginning of Slovene architecture as a profession is really marked by the founding of a domestic school of architecture in 1918. After his return to Ljubljana in 1921, Plečnik was the school's chief figure until the end of World War II. This means that Plečnik founded Slovene architecture or, at least, that he laid the foundations of the architectural profession in the Slovene environment. In this context two projects should be mentioned: a hut, Murka Brezjanka, and the tomb of his brother Andrej. These two projects represent architecture in the

¹ This original of this essay was given as a commentary on presentations by the authors in this issue at the 1998 AAASS annual convention in Boca Raton, Florida.

Slovene environment at its best. The first project marks the setting of an architectural prototype, and the second, which has not been published in any of the monographs on his work, although there have been many, places architecture on the plane of art. Two of the most elementary archetypes are hut and grave. The one symbolizes the birth of architecture, the other puts architecture at the very beginning of all art.

With Murka Brezjanka Plečnik advanced his own hypothesis of an architectural prototype. It is a very liberal and poetic interpretation of a rustic hut with which, in a way similar to Henri Laugier's, he defined architectural beauty as a consequence of the honesty of a construction. In this way he managed to define architecture as an "autonomous" art in the Slovene environment.

The tombstone Plečnik erected for his brother Andrej is undoubtedly his intimately most binding work. He was connected to his brother Andrej by the most profound of life's bonds, and he related to him as to his confidant. But if Plečnik expressed artistic convictions through the language of classical architecture, he expressed his greatest pain through the timeless, eternal power of pure art, through a monolith almost floating in the air despite its weight. This project reminds one of the often quoted definition of architecture: "... something speaks inside of us: there's someone buried here. That's architecture."²

Plečnik's architecture is so original and exceptional it is atypical. After returning from Prague, Plečnik, as a teacher at the school of architecture, was for several decades deemed an unattainable role model. At the same time he was a completely *sui generis* artistic personality, an architectural loner whose work stands isolated from time and trends in the profession. His work was of the highest quality, unique, and unreproducible. Such also was his school with its characteristic work discipline and top quality drawings based on commitment and unconditional faith in the teacher and his formal world of architecture. This was not a systematic school of thought which could have resulted in the emergence of a typical, recognizable architectural following. The work done by students in the school's master workshop was recognizable due to the loyalty of the copiers, epigones. Plečnik's work undoubtedly became a model and a standard of quality, but as William Singer reasons elsewhere in this issue, Plečnik's architecture

² Adolf Loos, "Architektur," *Der Sturm*, 15 December 1910. (See also Loos, *Trotzdem* [Innsbruck: Brenner, 1931].)

leaves no clear, coherent theoretical body of work that can be followed and reinterpreted.

A key topic of this volume is Plečnik's urban design, which is far from today's scientific town-planning. Plečnik is first and foremost an architect who, following the example of Renaissance architects, believes a town is like a big house and a house like a small town. He does not distinguish between urban design and architecture.

Plečnik's architectural projects urbanized Ljubljana. Until then the city was a relatively inarticulate provincial town. He obviously believed that a city of the future is not one we draw or describe in urban planning documents, but one that is built with every individual building, every intervention, square, street, park, and bridge.

That is why it is difficult to distinguish Plečnik's urban designs from his architectural projects. Plečnik designs urban space with architectural elements and vice versa. Each concept in his architecture is based on the broader context of the environment, and every work of architecture has the function of designing urban space. The articles in this volume confirm that his ideas and architectural concepts stem from the very nature of the problem within his project and mainly from the characteristics of the place.

The power of concept is more interesting than the stylistic peculiarities of Plečnik's work. It is not an architecture full of creative freedom, as his uniquely formal world, perhaps, suggests. Quite the contrary, every one of his projects is a story or a tale, his own personal interpretation of the spirit of the place. It is indeed the bridges that illustratively demonstrate the power of his concepts; for example, the original concept of Tromostovje (Three Bridges), which is an old stone bridge that became too narrow for the increasing traffic. Yet Plečnik managed to preserve it by building two side bridges for pedestrians, something he saw in Prague in the Manes bridge. Another example is the Trnovo bridge, which serves both as a bridge and as a square in front of a church, and is marked with trees and pyramids on the bridge itself. As unusual as it may at first seem, the power of Plečnik's architecture lies not in stylistic peculiarities but in a work's concept, which is the case with art in general.

In his interesting interpretation of Plečnik's Ljubljana, R.G. Dyck convincingly determines that his work is based on a reinterpretation of classic architectural and spatial archetypes. Plečnik's work

is still topical and contemporary, although we are obviously witnessing an end to architectural typology. We can no longer speak of a consequential relationship between a building's concept and function, between its form and content. Today ex-warehouses become exhibition halls or shopping malls, former religious buildings become entertainment centers or housing facilities, and train stations become museums. Function no longer follows form and form no longer follows function. The never ending changes of the purpose of buildings illustrate the complexity, chaos, and unpredictability of today's world, as well as the instability and short-lived nature of architectural symbolism in our time.

Nonetheless, Plečnik's classical urban design remains very topical today because it requires an integral approach to space; it does not acknowledge a division between architecture and town planning that has caused so much damage in modern cities. Further, Plečnik's work shows that he is interested in classical architecture mainly as a discipline and to a lesser extent as a style. In this context Plečnik is in many respects close to Karl Friedrich Schinkel, just as his construction of Ljubljana often resembles Schinkel's work in Berlin.

Plečnik believed in the essentially classical nature of architecture as a discipline. His work is most eloquent proof that style is not very important to him. This can be seen in the tombstone he erected for his brother Andrej, which is archetypal without using classical language, as well as by the fact that Plečnik, like Schinkel, often changed styles, even within projects. He thus often designed projects in several stylistic variants. He often came up with several completely different stylistic solutions for a single project while keeping the same architectural concept, as seen in the example of the church of the Holy Ghost in Vienna or the church of St. Magdalena in Maribor. This further means that style is nothing but an external expression of architecture, an integument covering his anti-historicistic faith in architecture as an art of permanent rules and principles, those of a classical discipline and classical ideal. As Edvard Ravnikar has observed: "Following a classical ideal in this manner means first and foremost accepting, to the benefit of quality and less to quantity, its limitations, not so much the material ones, but rather those dictated by human thought ..."³

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³ "Razmišljanje ob Omahnovi knjigi," *Arhitektov bilten* (1976): 30–31. Ravnikar is generally acknowledged to be the foremost student of Plečnik's school.