

PLEČNIK'S DESIGNS FOR LJUBLJANA

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Very few artists have the chance to design large urban areas, much less an entire city. Plečnik was fortunate to. He knew how to identify opportunities and at the same time prove himself the person most competent to undertake them. Through his suggestions and, later, by realizing certain plans for individual areas of the city, particularly in early projects such as Šentjakobski Trg (St. James Square), Zoisova Cesta (Zois Street, 1926–27), and Kongresni Trg (Congress Square, 1927), he won the city authorities' trust. Later he advanced increasingly daring proposals, as evidenced by the numerous plans he could not have expected to be implemented. For the more realistic of them, after his initial successful and well received projects, commissions came quickly. All of this happened over a period which in town-building terms was little more than a fleeting moment in the history of the city. Between 1926, when he received his first commissions to design public areas of the city, and the beginning of the Second World War in Slovenia in 1941 (discounting the fact that the Market and the Sluice Gate on the Ljubljana were only finished during the war), Plečnik left such a powerful mark on Ljubljana with his high-quality buildings and arrangements of public spaces that today's city justifiably bears the name "Plečnik's Ljubljana." Critics have cited Plečnik's inventiveness, originality, and personal style in describing Ljubljana as a city that bears the artistic stamp of one master, signed by the artist.¹

Before he reached the artistic and personal maturity necessary to design a city, Plečnik underwent a long and at times difficult apprenticeship. It was while studying in Vienna that he first encountered the problem of how to design city features of large dimensions and the realization that this was the work of an architect. While attending Otto Wagner's architecture department at the Academy of Fine Art, he helped draw up the plans for the Vienna street

¹ Boris Podrecca in conversation with Darinka Kladnik: "Arhitektura - kultura na robu?" Conversation with the Viennese architect Boris Podrecca, one of the organizers of the Paris exhibition on Jože Plečnik, *Dnevnik* (Ljubljana) 86, 31 March 1986: 11; likewise in a discussion for *Naši razgledi*: "Zunaj si lahko zanimiv le, če imaš svojo lokalno identiteto"; Conversation with *Naši razgledi*, *Naši razgledi* (Ljubljana) 12, 20 June 1986, 346, 355.

railway and the regulation of the Danube Canal. In Wagner's studio he learned all the engineering and design aspects basic to such work, down to the importance of designing street fittings.

During his famous travels around Italy and France (1898–99) he was able to compare the way in which history had responded to these themes. He also became enthused about historical architecture. ("Over here everything old is beautiful, what is new there in Vienna—is all average.")² Plečnik was interested in a great many small, practical, and anonymous design solutions, particularly in Italian cities: stone pavements, curbs, pillars and posts, fountains, benches, streetlights, and railings. Even more important, while traveling around Italy Plečnik experienced a profound mental and aesthetic transformation. Most decisive of all was his realization at that time that Ljubljana was his true artistic homeland. During his travels it was the city's Mediterranean character that revealed itself to him most strongly. He resolved to dedicate his manifold artistic powers to it. Even from Italy there flowed, via his letters home, countless expressions of devotion and even direct proposals for the city's regulation and beautification. No wonder then, that when stopping in Ljubljana on his way back to Vienna, he should have promptly made two sketches for the remodeling of the area around the Church of St. Peter in Ljubljana (after June 1899). In later years, too, he took a lively interest in Ljubljana issues, taking part, among other things, in the debate over erecting a memorial to the poet France Prešeren (1905), and submitting for consideration a plan for the decoration of Mestni Trg (Town Square) with sculptures, although without notable success.

While working at the Prague arts-and-crafts school (1911–21) Plečnik included in his school programs a number of projects conceived for real locations in Prague (a bridge across the Vltava with a new building for the National Museum in Mala Strana, a fine art pavilion, a church in Vinohradi, and so on)³ In terms of teaching method, this was not particularly new. Wagner, too, gave real projects for actual locations to his students. However, this decision can be seen as an anticipation of

² Jože Plečnik to his brother Andrej, Venice, 22 November 1898, No. 3, Ljubljana Museum of Architecture, Plečnik Collection, Archive; France Stele, *Arhitekt Joe Plečnik v Italiji* (Ljubljana, 1967) 24.

³ Josef Plečnik, *Vyber Praci školy pro dekorativni architekturu v Praze z roku 1911-1921* (Prague, 1927) 13–15, 24–25, 134–36.

Plečnik's desire to undertake actual architectural and town-planning problems, which during the First World War offered few possibilities of realization. Also noteworthy in his teaching was the way in which he drew the pupils' attention to smaller architectural projects such as pavilions and market stalls, which fall into the category of small urban features.

The invitation in 1920 from the president of the Czechoslovak Republic T. G. Masaryk to remodel Prague Castle, its gardens, and courtyards, was a decisive moment in the architect's life. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, a project he simply could not turn down. On the other hand, an equally attractive invitation had arrived from the newly-founded University of Ljubljana to take up a position as professor of architecture. Plečnik was able to accept both challenges and for just over a decade (1920–33) divided his creative energy between Prague and Ljubljana. Thus his Prague oeuvre of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s came into existence at the same time as his works in Ljubljana.⁴ As a consequence, a number of ideas he developed in or for Prague found their parallels in Ljubljana, and vice versa. For instance, when Plečnik was developing plans for the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Vinohradi, one of the variants came to life in the Church of St. Francis in Ljubljana (1925–30). The idea to pave Congress Square with a geometrical network of light squares in dark frames (1927)—unfortunately only in concrete—gained in subsequent years (1928–32) its splendid realization in granite in the third courtyard of Prague Castle. The pyramid at the foot of Zois Street (1927) received its almost simultaneous double in the Rampart Garden. The remodeling of the interior of the Chamber of Trade, Crafts and Industry building in Ljubljana (1925–27) was done in exactly the same spirit as the remodeling and expensive fitting-out of the presidential apartments in Prague Castle. It was, one might say, a fragment of Prague Castle in Ljubljana. And this was not the only such instance.

With his first works in Ljubljana, which began multiplying after the mid-1920s, Plečnik's city gradually began to take shape. He rounded off the initial phase of his reflection on the urban layout of his native city with his first complete town plan, to which he added a special plan

⁴ France Stele, "Jože Plečnik na Hradčanih in v Ljubljani," *Dom in svet* (Ljubljana) 1929: 273–79.

for Bežigrad, the northern district, in 1928.⁵ The second period, the 1930s, was marked by large-scale regulation of the city according to his plans, and through a range of monumental features (Vegova Street with Congress Square, the designing of the courses of the Ljubljanica and Gradaščica, the laying out of Tivoli Park), and certain more modest projects limited to closed spatial wholes, gives sense to the term “Plečnik’s Ljubljana.” Before the maturing of the architect’s conception of his Ljubljana, a new Athens, a cultural and aesthetically exalted national capital with new palaces, colonnades, parks and monuments, a conception which more than anything else was infused with the national ideology of the Slovene Moderne, Plečnik erected in various locations some of his earlier works: the Stara Tehnika (Old Technical School) building (1921), his own house (1923–25), the Chamber of Trade, the Stadium (1925–41), the Crafts and Industry building (1925–27), the Church of St. Francis (1925–30), and the Mutual Insurance Company building (1928–30). With these, he described in a few strokes a new standard of quality and a measure of the urban extent of the future Ljubljana. He determined a new standard of execution, a new ethical level of the necessary commitment, and at the same time the cultural consciousness required of everyone dealing with public matters as important as a city and its image.

Plečnik prized Ljubljana chiefly for its predominantly Baroque, more Italian than Northern, appearance. His discovery, during his travels in Italy, of a Ljubljana that was also tied to the heritage of the Ancient World and the Mediterranean awakened in him a “Karstic nature,” as he would himself have expressed it, and it was much in his thoughts while he was in Vienna and Prague. Evidence of this is his statement in a letter to his brother Andrej that he had begun to look at Koch’s map of the city and at Fabiani’s Regulation.⁶ But real opportunities only opened themselves to him after he had settled in his native city and accepted employment there. Among the psychological

⁵ Jože Plečnik, “Studija regulacije Ljubljane in okolice”; “Studija regulacije severnega dela Ljubljane,” *Dom in svet* (Ljubljana) 4 (1929), Supplement 4 and 91.

⁶ Jože Plečnik to his brother Andrej, undated (after 1 May 1914), no. 250, Ljubljana Museum of Architecture, Plečnik Collection, Archive. Koch’s map: This is a tourist map of the city drawn up by city architect Ciril Metod Koch. Fabiani’s Regulation: Maks Fabiani, *Regulacija deželnega stolnega mesta Ljubljane* (Vienna, 1899).

circumstances surrounding the creation of Plečnik's Ljubljana, his decision to settle in Trnovo is crucial. He moved, in effect, to the edge of the city, to an insignificant suburb of market gardeners and semi-peasants, and from there observed the town and made his way into it. On these walks (naturally he was on foot, since he had no other means of transport), he did a great deal of thinking and planning. His students, who were set the task of tackling individual parts of the city, played an important role in many of his solutions. The theses of the first three and later degree candidates onwards reveal an unceasing concern for the city's appearance. His student Dušan Grabrijan posited a bold theory that seems increasingly plausible the closer we come to understanding Plečnik's personality and temperament: that Plečnik built his Ljubljana from his modest house in Trnovo.⁷ This is an idea and an action worthy of special attention: for Plečnik, impersonal and all-embracing planning that involves merely peering down at charts was a completely alien idea. For him it was important to have a story which begins somewhere and ends somewhere. His story needs clear sentences, meaningful words and even voices. His walks around the town were always more than just walks: he was constantly observing, measuring, weighing, and deciding what could be rearranged, raised to a higher level, what would be the supporting element of the future arrangement, and what features of lesser importance could be concealed, abandoned, or even pulled down. He stepped out of his house and stood in front of Trnovo church. In front of it he constructed a semicircular porphyry pavement, and on the axis arranged Trnovo Bridge (1928–30) as a widening of the square in front of the church, with four pyramids at the corners and with an alley of birches on the bridge itself. He leveled the axis of Emonska Street. He designed the corner of Križanke (a monastery complex with the church of a German chivalric order) and the environs of Trg Francoske Revolucije (Square of the French Revolution) with a monumental obelisk, a memorial to Illyria and Napoleon (1929). He went further along Vegova Street, from the Gregorčič monument (1936), which stands at the beginning of the terraces above the remains of the old city wall in front of the National and University Library, past the Musical Society, specially highlighted by a terrace supporting busts of musicians on high pedestals, and arrived

⁷ Dušan Grabrijan, "Spomenik kralja Aleksandra v Ljubljani," *Slovenec* (Ljubljana) 189, 19 August 1938: 5; Grabrijan, "Lik Plečnikove Ljubljane," *Naši razgledi* (Ljubljana) 23 February 1957: 80–82.

at Congress Square. The whole route of Emonska Street alongside Križanke and down Vegova is graced by lines of trees. He designed Congress Square as a platform, laid out in a strict network of square fields with a row of lamps along the middle ending in the dominant feature of the Holy Trinity statue in front of the monumental facade of the Ursuline Church. He surrounded nearby Zvezda Park with distinctive little posts, and around 1940 replaced the chestnut avenue with plane trees. From here he intended to proceed beyond Zvezda Park via the Propylaea—the monument to King Alexander of Yugoslavia—and enter Južni Trg (South Square) as it was called, where his land axis would end. He did not, however, succeed in realizing this part of the plan. Nonetheless, by designing staircases and crossing-points such as the Gerber staircase (1932) and the Theatre staircase (1933), he managed to connect Congress Square with the Ljubljana in a successful and refined manner.

The Ljubljana was his second longitudinal city axis or water axis, and metaphorically speaking a parallel to his land axis. The river runs from Špica in Trnovo, where it divides into the Ljubljana and Gruber's Canal, to the Sluice Gate in Poljane. Plečnik built this axis as a symphony or a beautiful tale. It begins with an overture of long horizontals, the banks and paths on both sides of the river. These are accompanied by living borders and avenues on the terraces or embankments. The first stop or break in the composition is Prule Bridge, which Plečnik marked on the left bank with a group of tall poplars. From here the design of the embankments changes: on the left, magnificent, gentle stone steps accompanied by an avenue of weeping willows, "cupolas" in Plečnik's vocabulary, and on the right, steeper steps with grassy banks. At the outflow of the Gradaščica, the left side of the composition concludes in an elegant curve of the steps and on the right with a sloping bank that allows access to the water via a stone supporting wall. From here the Ljubljana flows in a concrete channel. Beyond the transversal caesura of St James's Bridge, the work of the engineer Alois Kral but nevertheless given equal weight in the composition, the channel soon rises to the edges of the high embankment walls. Plečnik inherited the channel from the Vienna architect Alfred Keller but attempted in various ways to soften the concrete walls with troughs and narrow terraces for flowers, and of course with lines of trees on the embankment where space by the river permitted this. Alongside these elements he added his own, new

elements to the composition: the white Shoemakers' Bridge (1933), a parapeted platform with free-standing columns topped by spheres and lamps, and, further on, Tromostovje (1929–32), the Triple Bridge, undoubtedly the pinnacle of the Ljubljana composition. On either side of the original stone bridge Plečnik placed footbridges, surrounded the whole structure with richly sculpted balustrades, and placed lampstands on the sculpted balusters. The staircases on the footbridges that lead to a lower terrace are reminiscent of the bridges of Venice—Plečnik in fact saw the Ljubljana as Ljubljana's Grande Canal.

Just before the Second World War he began building the monumental feature of the Market Hall (1940–44) on the right bank, by Tromostovje. The composition is typical of his work: it begins with the little temple of the flower-shop, followed by an open foyer on pillars with a balustrade on the river side, and a semicircular balcony concealing the spiral staircase that leads down to the fishmongers' shops. The covered market hall—with a colonnade on one side and on the river side a combination of rustic work and smooth walls with windows—are a considerably higher structure that develops along the bend of the Ljubljana. In order to provide the necessary views of the river the architect interrupted it with two open columned loggias. The monumental covered Butchers' Bridge was supposed to have stood in a gap somewhere halfway along the Market Hall, but this could not be brought to realization. The Market Hall is joined to the Dragon Bridge by means of a low structure. From here, lines of trees continue along both banks as far as the Ambrožev Trg (Ambrož Square) bridge, from where it is just a step past the promenade in Vraz Square to Plečnik's true triumphal arch on the Ljubljana—the Sluice Gate (1939–44). There is no other name for this monumental composition of three towers with transverse ties which conceal the weir machinery. It is the final chord, a valediction to the Ljubljana which at this point leaves the city.

Plečnik placed a number of transversal axes on these two main axes. The first is the course of the Gradaščica, which the architect had arranged shortly before tackling the Ljubljana (1930–32). It features a symmetrical design of the banks, with avenues, two bridges, washing-places and a continuation of Eipprova Street on the right bank. The second is Zois Street, fitted with pathways, lines of trees, and at the foot of the gentle slope, a pyramid that connects optically with the spire of St. James's Church on the other side of the Ljubljana, and thus with

Plečnik's arrangement of St. James Square and, further on, with the landscaped surroundings of the Church of St. Florian and the Castle Path (1933). The third transversal axis connects the broad and monumental Jakopič Promenade, with its central row of lamps, to Tromostovje and the Castle. Ljubljana Castle was supposed to become the main vertical dominant in Plečnik's system of axes. Therefore Plečnik planned for it a new, monumental image, but did not succeed in bringing his ideas to fruition. All he did at the Castle was to rearrange the walkways and castle entrenchments (1934). But his idea for the Castle and the monumental approaches to it continued to trouble him. He worked on it intensively during the War. Even after the War he was unsuccessful with his proposal to build on the site of the medieval castle a building for the Slovene parliament in the form of an octagon (1947). Less emphasized transversal axes are the Roman wall (1938), Šubičeva Street running on to the Ljubljana via the Gerber staircase, and the area in front of the main railway station, the former Masaryk Street (today Liberation Front Square), where he arranged green areas, avenues and a tram stop. Today almost nothing remains of this feature.

Plečnik compressed this basic system into his first city plan in 1928. For the second, in 1943, he incorporated everything he had carried out over and above that which he had originally conceived, and certain new ideas for monumental complexes, such as a new town hall in Vodnik Square, an Odeon between Congress Square and the bank of the Ljubljana, and new accesses to the Castle opposite the cathedral, which would have required extensive demolition work. He was unable to put into effect his town plan for Bežigrad (1928), but he did succeed in realizing several ideas based on it. These include the extension to the old cemetery church of St. Christopher—the Church of Ss Cyril and Methodius (1933–34) (later transferred to Vodovodna Street), on the site of the cemetery itself the monumental cylindrical building of the Baraga Seminary (1937–41, unfinished), and at the end of Linhart Street, conceived on a grand scale, an extensive group of chapels of valediction with a monumental portal: Plečnik's Žale cemetery (1938–40). In the Šiška district he remodeled the facade and surroundings of the Church of St. Bartholomew (1936) and outside Ljubljana, though still in its gravitational area, the Church of St. Michael-in-the-Marsh (1936–39).

This, in brief, is Plečnik's Ljubljana, an urban network of longitudinal and transversal axes into which Plečnik placed his

constructions. The Vegova Street project, among others, shows that the architect marked off his area in advance and that sometimes it was only much later that he tackled it in more depth with his buildings and final arrangements. The monument to Illyria and Napoleon, together with the arrangement of the area in front of Križanke, dates from as early as 1929. In 1936 and 1941, on a nearby plot which in 1929 had been temporarily masked—where until the earthquake the Baroque Prince's Manor had stood—he erected the National and University Library, and through a refined designing of the terraces which stand above the remains of the Renaissance city walls by the library, incorporated it into the original plan for this feature. As regards the designing of details, one should not overlook the wreaths over the walls, the profiled concrete frames of the park benches, the pedestals for the monuments to famous linguists, and of course the patches of greenery. He did not design the Križanke complex until after the War (1952–56), but in similar fashion succeeded in working it impeccably into the overall feature of Emonska Street and Vegova Street.

But Plečnik's Ljubljana would not have existed if the architect's primary features, with their range of ordered motifs, narrative features ranging from great architecture and alterations of varying scale to existing structures to merely newly "incorporated" elements, had not been accompanied by a treatment of details in the form of arranged pavements, curbs, paths, trees, emphasized details and, above all, columns, which create an optical rhythm. Plečnik's persistent resistance to the idea that a city must primarily be adapted to fast modern traffic, and his persistence in the idea of a city for pedestrians, have in today's divided era of late modernism both gained complete recognition, since only the pedestrian is able to stop at a beautiful detail and it only makes sense to entice the pedestrian into an area by means of vistas. Precisely because of these properties, critical opinion holds Plečnik's Ljubljana to be a unique architectural and town-planning phenomenon of the first half of the twentieth century.⁸

⁸ In addition to Podrecca's views, other recent noteworthy articles are: Richard Bassett, "Plečnik in Ljubljana," *Architectural Review* 1014 (1981): 107–11; Djurdja Gržan-Butina, "Master Plan and Spatial Structure," *Jože Plečnik 1872–1957: Architecture and the City* (Headington, Oxford: Urban Design, 1983) 28–35; Richard M. Andrews, "The River Sequence," *Architecture and the City* 36–43; Richard Guy Wilson, "Jože Plečnik in

As regards a possible relationship between national ideology and Plečnik's image of the city as realized in Ljubljana, one might question whether there is Slovene specificity in the complex design. Might Plečnik himself be called a typically Slovene artist? Certainly his decision, or better his belief, which he carried inside himself his whole life, to work within the framework of Slovene art and culture even when he was living and working outside his country, and his determined desire to enrich it, are evidence for such a designation. Yet there is something that places Plečnik much deeper in the Slovene mental and physical artistic environment. Today we can claim with considerable reliability that his artistic image, particularly in Ljubljana, is in essence determined by traditional European artistic geography. It is an area, therefore, which is intended for Sloveneness, and a special period of Sloveneness—that is, its artistic Moderne. The received wisdom of traditional artistic geography is that here, especially in the central part of Slovenia-Carniola with Ljubljana at its center, the synthesis of the influences of North (Germanic) and South (Roman) are most originally expressed. The strength of the artistic currents from one or the other of these directions determines the prevailing artistic character of the center in a specific period. Plečnik combined both inspirations in himself, although he consciously inclined towards the southern, Mediterranean pole. The period of the Moderne, which coincides with the period of the growth of national self-affirmation, is the period of the first exceptional artistic maturity in Slovene history, something which grew out of great artistic personalities and the realization of their common principle: to express the atmosphere of the domestic, the Slovene, through European form. The expression "European form" meant to Plečnik above all the Mediterranean, classical, universal

Ljubljana," *Progressive Architecture* 66.10 (1985): 96–103; Lucius Burckhardt and Linde Burckhardt, "La ville promenade," *Jože Plečnik Architecte 1872–1957: ouvrage publié/ l'occasion de l'exposition "Jože Plečnik, architecte" produite par le Centre de création industrielle et présentée de mars/mai 1986 dans la Galerie du CCI au Centre national d'art et culture Georges Pompidou/Paris* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Centre de création industrielle, 1986) 179–88; Sergio Polano, *Lubiana; L'opera di Jože Plečnik* (Milan: Clup, 1988); Damjan Prelovšek, "Note sulla costruzione del lungofiume dalla sistemazione austriaca agli interventi di Plečnik," *Lotus International* 59.3 (1988): 14–33; Peter Krečič, *Plečnikova Ljubljana (Plečnik's Ljubljana; Das Ljubljana von Plečnik)* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva Založba, 1991).

form, and he was always well aware that this can only express the atmosphere of the domestic when it is of sufficiently high quality and thus truly convincing.

Arhitekturni muzej Ljubljana

POVZETEK

PLEČNIKOVA LJUBLJANA

Jože Plečnik (1872–1957) je v Ljubljani videl nove Atene, sodobno preoblikovano prestolnico Slovenstva. Takšno izhodišče mu je narekovalo, da je v njej zavestno spodbujal klasične, vendar izvirno zasnovane poteze. Od svoje hiše v Trnovem do Kongresnega trga s podaljškom v načrtovani Južni trg je oblikoval kopno os. Njej vzporedno je oblikoval vodno os Ljubljanice. Nanju je položil pravokotnice: Gradaščico, Cojzovo cesto, Jakopičevo sprehajališče v Tivoliju pa je prek Prešernovega trga in Tromostovja povezal z dominantno Ljubljanskega gradu. V nastalo mrežo je postavljajl svojo arhitekturo. Urbanistično idejo o Ljubljani je strnil v dveh načrtih leta 1928 in prenovljenem leta 1943.