

Josef Plečnik Architect in Ljubljana, Vienna and Prague (1872 – 1957)

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Realization: Eva Prelovšek

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Exhibition venue:

WIENER STÄDTISCHE Versicherung AG

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Opening hours:

Monday to Friday: 9.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m., admission free
(closed on public holidays)

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In his three main places of activity, Vienna, Prague and Ljubljana, Josef Plečnik realized his still outstanding body of work, which for the most part followed classical examples from antiquity, in his idiosyncratic architectural language. ARCHITECTURE IN THE RINGTURM presents the work of this internationally highly renowned Slovenian architect, which, with regard to its style, eludes traditional pigeonholing into the development of twentieth-century architecture.

His assignment in the Müller furniture factory, where he worked as a designer and foreman upon the recommendation of his teacher Theyer in Graz, was Josef (Jože) Plečnik's (1872 – 1957) first contact with **Vienna**. In that period, he often drafted quite independent designs in the style of Historicism. With his exceptional drawings, he called on Otto Wagner and applied for a course of studies in architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts which he concluded with the Rome Prize 1888 (a one-year travelling state scholarship).

After his return, he worked in Otto Wagner's studio for almost one year. During that time, the distinctively designed décors and stations for the "*Stadtbahn*" (Gumpendorferstraße, Rossauerlände, among others) were created. Among Plečnik's internationally best known works originating from his first freelance period in Vienna between 1900 and 1911, there are **Zacherl House**, a company building with very elegant forms executed in marble and with steel pins (1903–05, Bauernmarkt, First District) and the **Church of the Holy Spirit** with its famous crypt (1910–13, Herbststraße, Vienna-Ottakring).

Conceived as a combined office and residential building, and intriguing with its terrific details of realization, which have been preserved without any substantial renovation work to the present day, Zacherl House was the biggest construction project of the factory owner Zacherl (beside his own villa and buildings for other family members). With its sculptural granite façade and the unique bronze figures (created by the sculptor Engelhardt), it is also one of very few large-size buildings of late Art Nouveau in downtown Vienna.

Carried out in reinforced concrete and with a high-quality manual finish that purposely left the material visible, the Church of the Holy Spirit represents one of the earliest examples of the then new building material. The crypt, which Plečnik designed with a sophisticated precast concrete skeleton, is famous. Moreover, the **Karl-Borromäus Fountain** in Vienna-Landstraße (1906–09), the **Langer Apartment House** at the Rechte Wienzeile (1901–02), the **Villa Langer** with its Art-Nouveau plaster façade (1900–01) and **Weidmann House** in Vienna-Hietzing (1902) are of importance. Another very early work, the **Villa for the Notary Loos**, is located in Melk on the Danube (1901).

With recommendations by his friend Jan Kotěra – another disciple of Wagner – Plečnik came to **Prague** in 1911 where he taught at the School of Arts and Crafts. In 1920 the Czechoslovakian President Tomáš Masaryk assigned him to redesign the Prague Castle and make it the symbol for the newborn state. This task – his *opus magnum* in Prague – occupied Plečnik for fifteen years.

There was probably nobody else in the Central European area who understood as clearly the symbolism of the mythological significance of renaissance and history; who due to his technical skills was able to integrate the new materials perfectly into the ancient structure and who could respond to the aura of the Castle District and the Lesser Side (Malá Strana) – designed to a large extent by Italian architects – with Mediterranean contemplativeness.

Plečnik is the only non-Czech architect who was assigned a nationally sensitive building project after 1918, and with the **Church of the Sacred Heart** in the Vinohrady district of Prague (1928-32), he created one of Central Europe's most important religious buildings of the twentieth century. Inside the church, Plečnik's modern spirit reveals itself to the visitor: One can climb the church tower over a ramp that is congenial with Le Corbusier's oeuvre and look at the Castle and Plečnik's work through the glass clock-face and across Prague's Old Town.

From 1921 to 1956, Plečnik worked at the university of his hometown of **Ljubljana (Laibach)** where he taught Architectural Design. During that same period he also expanded his position as a major architect in the country. Together with Prelovšek, Ljubljana's urban planner of that time, he realized many important projects that shape the Ljubljana cityscape to the present day.

Among Plečnik's best known projects in Ljubljana are the **National and University Library** with its impressive façade and a reading room full of atmosphere (1936–41), the market halls and the redesigned waterfront along the River Ljubljanica (1940–42), **Tromostovje** (The Three Bridges) (1930–32), balustrades and bridges (Shoemaker's Bridge, 1931–32), the "**Peglezen**" ("flat iron building") (1932–34), **Prelovšek House** (1931–33), design or regulation projects for natural spaces and parks (Congress Square, course of the River Ljubljanica, Tivoli Park, the "Šance" rampart on the Castle hill) as well as the **Zale Cemetery** with its many chapels and the administrative building (1938–40).

Yet Plečnik's works in the sacral realm are even more important: the **Church of St. Francis** in Ljubljana (1925–28), the **Church of the Ascension** in Bogojina, the **Church of St Anthony** in Belgrade (1929–32) – they all have a unique atmosphere, which is, among other things, strongly marked by Plečnik's own profound religiosity. The Church of St Michael in Barje near Ljubljana ranks among his most interesting sacral works. In this construction of wood and stone, Plečnik ingeniously combines the classical sacral and the local building tradition. From outside, the church resembles the local functional farm buildings and the interiors remind of traditional Slovenian architecture with regard to the colours used as well as the choice of materials and the details.

Today Plečnik's work is highly appreciated all over the world, yet until the first large retrospective exhibition of his works (Centre Georges Pompidou, 1986) he had been only little or not at all known to an international audience. This is probably due to his architectural language which is hard to classify and eludes every attempt at stylistic pigeonholing. Yet exactly this makes up its charm for connoisseurs.

Short Biography: Josef Plečnik was born in Gradisce, a suburb of Ljubljana in 1872; From 1888-92 he trained as a joiner at the School of Applied Arts in Graz/Prof. Leopold Theyer; 1895-98 studies of architecture in Otto Wagner's master class at the Academy of Fine Art Vienna, the elite school of architecture in the Hapsburg Monarchy; from 1896 collaboration with Wagner's studio; 1898-99 trips to Italy and France; 1899-1900 employed in Wagner's studio, office manager; 1901-11 freelance architect in Vienna; 1901 joined the Vienna Secession; 1904 gold medal for an interior design project, World Exposition in St. Louis; 1911-21 Professor at the School of Arts and Crafts in Prague upon recommendation by Jan Kotěra; from 1921 Professor for Architectural Design at the University of Ljubljana; In 1920, President Tomáš Masaryk assigned him to redesign the Prague Castle; very busy as an architect in Prague as well as in Ljubljana and its surroundings, where – until his death in 1957 in his house in Ljubljana – he put a lasting mark especially on his hometown with his architectural projects and his teaching.

Exhibition: Plečnik's works are presented on image panels, which are structured according to his three main places of activity, Vienna, Prague and Ljubljana, with numerous illustrations (more than 250). Original drawings, blueprints, publications and a range of original pieces of furniture round off the picture of his multifaceted work.

Catalogue: *Josef Plečnik. Architekt in Wien, Prag und Laibach. 1872–1957.* Contributions by Friedrich Achleitner, Damjan Prelovšek, Adolph Stiller and Stephan Templ. Approx. 80 pages. Architecture in the Ringturm XII, June 2006. Price: EUR 22,00