

CHAPTER 5

JOŽE PLEČNIK, THE REGULATION OF LJUBLJANA – CLASSICAL MODERNISM 1928-1939

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The other major developments in architectural work and town and city planning in Central Europe are not to be found in the efforts of a large number of people but in the work of one man whose architectural oeuvre enriched firstly Prague and then Ljubljana. He was Jože Plečnik; Plečnik is the central figure in a forgotten chapter in the development of international modernism.

The Slovene architect Jože Plečnik has become the central personality of a so far largely ignored development taking place behind the façade of functionalist slogans of theoreticians and prominent creative personalities of international modernism including Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto.¹

Plečnik had for years remained largely unrecognised even though one of his works, Church of the Sacred Heart, first drawn in 1922 (5.1), arriving at a final design in 1927, dominates a square in Vinohrady, Prague – a robust building which can stand alone or be seen as a focus for Plečnik's work especially in the

inventiveness in the use of historical, regional and even local elements in new, original wholes, ranging from minute details, to major planning projects.²

Plečnik's return to Slovenia from the Czechoslovak Republic was by no means certain for two reasons: in 1920 Plečnik was invited by Tomáš Mašaryk, President of the new Czechoslovak Republic, to be architect in chief in the remodelling and restoration of Hradcany (Prague Castle). Mašaryk wanted the medieval and feudal edifice that Hradcany represented to be transformed into a beacon for independence and democracy in a Modern State. The President stated his aims thus:

The main aim of the renovation is to make the castle a proper seat for a democratic president. At every level the design should express simplicity, but in a noble and artistic way, symbolizing our national independence and democracy.³

In appointing a Slovenian to succeed Kotěra, the archetypal Czech patrician architect, Mašaryk resisted all complaints, because he knew that above all Plečnik would deliver a new work that observed both the value of antiquity while being imbued with empowering humanist principles. Plečnik was aided in his task by Dr Alice Mašaryk, the President's daughter who was intent on using Plečnik because of his devotion to the Slavic nations

5.1 Jože Plečnik, Church of the Sacred Heart, Prague, Vinohrady



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as a whole. The friendship between Jože Plečnik and Alice Mašaryk allowed the remodelling to take place from 1921 to 1935. Although, much later, when complaints about his appointment reached his ears (Masaryk had always protected him to this point) during a visit to Slovenia in 1933, Plečnik decided not to return to Prague. Instead he used Otto Rothmayer as his trusted student associate to complete the work by meetings and correspondence to Plečnik's wishes. When Mašaryk's health began to fail in 1935 Plečnik resigned and from that point the anti-Slovenian hostility in Czech society grew. Plečnik knew that despite working through Otto Rothmayer he would have to resign, to be replaced by Pavel Janák.

In deciding to return as Professor of Architecture to Ljubljana in 1920, Plečnik faced another problem; Ivan Vurnik as the Head of the Department of Architecture offered him a teaching post within the newly-established University of Ljubljana but at the same time Vurnik offered a post to Maks Fabiani. Because of the unexplained antagonism between them Plečnik may have decided to wait for Fabiani to make the first move. Fabiani in deciding to teach in Gorizia left the way clear for Plečnik to take up his post in Ljubljana in tandem with his post in Prague.

Before he did so he wrote from Prague to establish his views of the reorganisation of the Department of Architecture. Plečnik put this safeguard in place because at the same time Ljubljana beckoned he had two further offers – the Chairmanship of the Prague Academy of Fine Arts in December 1919, this being a most honoured appointment which would have assured his reputation, and from 1922 a Professorship at the Royal Academy of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb. All of these posts were under consideration as the future in Ljubljana was unclear. There was no certainty how youthful and enthusiastic, liberated Slovenes would react to Plečnik's conviction that to ensure 'national health' and a 'joyful soul' all his students would require dedication and hard work.

On first meeting his future students in 1921 while visiting his sister's house in Ljubljana, he made an impression through both his personality and appearance.

He was dressed in black. Instead of a collar, he wore a black silk scarf, tied around the neck and falling over his chest.⁴

This, in combination with his fierce stare behind glasses and long, trimmed beard, reinforced the idea of a Good Shepherd and his flock (5.2). But it was the almost biblical nature of his words and their delivery that stunned all equally.

5.2 Jože Plečnik, c.1930



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Each word was like a seed falling on fallow ground, which would then sprout instantly and create a bond between us and the master. We listened as though a mysterious, inherently good force bound us to him... He was so persuasive that if he had decided to play a game or cry we would have done the same.⁵

Having established his teaching strategy by following his students' assignments to final execution, Plečnik became the ultimate professor. In all of this he rarely considered notions of modernism in the way that some tried to express ideas through town planning and architecture.

Le Corbusier, for example, seems to negate architecture. For him, it is a social means, a tool he uses to help man.⁶

Plečnik countered this idea by seeing architecture as sacred:

We must re-awaken our sense of eternity.⁷

To this end Plečnik was determined to extend the work of Maks Fabiani (whom he regarded as a foreign influence, perhaps a reason for his antagonism) in the planning of 'his' beloved Ljubljana. He did not approve of much of Fabiani's re-planning as he saw this as interference from an agent of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Plečnik wanted to introduce Fabiani to his master plan – the concept of a Slovene Athens following his visit to the Acropolis in 1927. His understanding of the rhythmical flow through Ljubljana of roads and rivers allowed a very personal approach to re-planning.

Perhaps very deliberately Plečnik chose to live in a rather unobtrusive suburb in Trnovo with the idea that all the family should live under one roof. Initially lodging with his sister, but lacking space, he then moved to the empty house of his brother Andrej, second brother Janez, Professor of Medicine at the University of Ljubljana, and sister Marija who would be 'obliged' to join them living together, but separately. In fact the house at Karunova No. 4 never knew this family. Marija died in December 1929, followed by the death of Andrej in 1931 in Reprije, never having returned to Ljubljana. Janez did move in but he and Jože argued constantly and soon he went back to his old apartment leaving Jože on his own. From Trnovo Plečnik could observe all that was going on in Ljubljana from a distance. Having completed his first work in Ljubljana in 1920-21, the Old Technical Building, he was able to turn his mind to extending the house in Trnovo.

In fact from the purchase of the original house in 1915 at Karunova Street No. 4, the property was altered and extended many times. Between 1921 and 1927 there was a continuous process of improvement. He developed his idea from a ground floor rectangular extension and a free-standing construction further into the garden.

Additionally the final decision was to build a round, one-floor extension with a gently sloping pitched roof and a special entrance. From 1927 a glazed porch was added in front of this entrance. With the purchase of Karunova Street No.6 in 1928, a glazed conservatory with a row of pseudo-Ionic columns could be added (5.3). Despite being a Professor, Plečnik was a man of limited means, unlike his previous employers, the Czech State. As a consequence, some of the materials were leftovers from other projects.

The courtyard to the west of the house was paved with highly irregular stone plaques (flags), bordered by a spare column from the *Čevljarski most* (Shoemaker's Bridge) shortened for the purpose and topped by an iron cross. A shorter column with a vase on top, sits close into the wall of the circular extension. The garden at the front, planted with tall trees, bushes, flowers, a beehive and a rockery, created a relaxed yet considered informality. Garden paths of individual plaques embedded in earth flanked by half-sunk horizontal concrete pipes are all part of Plečnik's deceptive use of modern materials in a natural setting. An orchard and a vegetable garden complete the scheme with the planting of birch trees and white daffodils along the eastern edge.

The contents of the house have been preserved since the death of Jože Plečnik in 1957 by the *Arhitekturni muzej Ljubljana* (The Ljubljana Museum of Architecture). In visiting and observing this house an understanding of what made Ljubljana a modern city, while retaining a classical Mediterranean ambience becomes clearer.⁸ It can be seen how a balance between ancient and modern could be achieved from Plečnik's remodelling plan of Ljubljana in 1928. For this Plečnik did not need the utopian materials of concrete, glass and steel exclusively but was able to mix these with stone, brass and copper throughout his works.

Much of what happened in the re-planning of Ljubljana was considered as Plečnik walked along the Ljubljana River from Trnovo to his office in central Ljubljana. His view of Ljubljana was based on the 'Persistence of Place', a phrase which had resonance for many, particularly the Serb architect Nikola Dobrović and the Hungarian Modernists: Farkas Molnár, Lajos Kozma and many others in their pursuance of a national identity for the modern architecture they created. As an addition to Fabiani's rediscovery of the Roman routes which dissected the city and created a rigid harmony, Plečnik now wanted to take the most visible parts of Ljubljana: castle, squares, bridges and river, all to be used in recovery of a complete history of Emona/Ljubljana. While using these reference points a modern appreciation in the advances in town and city planning since the turn of the century emerged. Jože Plečnik's Regulatory Plan for Ljubljana, 1928,

5.3 Jože Plečnik, House in Trnovo, the Conservatory Extension 1930



© Academy/Krečič 1993

(5.4) demonstrates very clearly how he would interweave the folk traditions of Slav culture with the establishment of a new empire in the Istria/Illyrian world.

The attractions of the Modern Movement as expressed by its more extreme spokespersons seemed to increase Plečnik's hostility towards some of its more extreme proposals. As Dušan Grabrijan one of Plečnik's former students observed much later.

I would not wish Plečnik's love, his pedagogic ways, his faith and pessimism on anyone. And yet I sense genius in them. The question is, is all this necessary? If so, then I reject genius.⁹

Plečnik's students, France Tomazic, Dainto Furst, Eric Medvaščak, Edo Mihevc and Edvard Ravnikar would doubt Grabrijan, although as Plečnik's students they would endure *Antrieb in Vokominerie* (the drive for perfection) within an immensely autocratic setting. The benefit from this led to creative obedience and patient intellectual training with the aim of attaining independence.

The *Tromostovje* (The Three Bridges) encapsulates Plečnik's approach to architecture and planning being an extension of what already existed being adapted to a new modern purpose. When Plečnik first came to Ljubljana from Prague he had a mind to cover over the River Ljubljana, as in the River Wien in Vienna, and build a wide sun-lit avenue where the river runs through the old city.

If this had happened we would have lost the Mediterranean look which Ljubljana then acquired through Plečnik's work; it was 'his Ljubljana'. In trying to understand Plečnik's work it is necessary to consider the place of his birth,

Plečnik wanted to introduce into his master plan the concept of a Slovene Athens.¹⁰

So it is that a bridge like *Čevljarški most* (Shoemaker's Bridge) sits under the castle and wooded hillside providing a classically modern yet understated triumphal way (5.5). The modelling of the Roman-inspired Stoia (5.6) is the high point of the completion of proposals for monuments, market halls, parks and municipal fittings. Equally, the re-planning of the Ljubljana returned these beautiful walks to the town's people with the *Tromostovje* (The Three Bridges) (5.7) acting as a crossing point and focus to The Square of the Virgin.

Plečnik never knew that his own family home stood very close to the forum¹¹, though the southern walls of Emona at Mirje were a short walk away and well known to him.

5.4 Jože Plečnik, Plan for the Regulation of Ljubljana 1928-29



Academy/Krečič 1993

5.5 Jože Plečnik, Shoemakers Bridge, Ljubljana 1931-32



© Academy/Krečič 1993

5.6 Jože Plečnik, the Stoia, Ljubljana 1940-44



© B W Davies 2005

5.7 Jože Plečnik, *Tromostovje* (Three Bridges) 1929-32



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The start of recovering the Mediterranean ambience in Ljubljana began with Plečnik's remodelling of the river and embankments, undoing much of the hard, engineered character of Austrian/Wagnerian conservatism from the proposals of Alfred Keller in 1913. This austere notion was countered by the nature of the inhabitants of the Slovene Karst where the Latin was in combination with the Istrian, Dalmatian and Greek. Although Slovenian politicians could not at first see Plečnik's vision he did find allies in Matko Prelovšek, city engineer, and historian France Stele.

The beginning of this redevelopment was in 1931 with imaginative treatments of the Ljubljana embankments culminating in the lock gates 1939-44. In 'Plečnik, The Complete Works', Peter Krečič identified rivers and waterways as being seminal to the future development of Ljubljana. It was along the Ljubljanica and the Gradaščica rivers, allied to four or five other axis that Plečnik explored from his childhood to maturity as an involved pedestrian. From the dredging of the Ljubljanica in the 19th century the spoil was merely dropped on bank, raising the sides and deepening the cut. Following the removal of the town's fortifications and the filling in of the ramparts, the river became considerably faster flowing requiring a number of new bridges. It was inevitable that the river channel would be lined with concrete thereby establishing a rigid flow within a rather grey concrete setting. To combat this greyness, in extension of Cerdà's and Sitte's 'parks and gardens as Lungs of the City', Plečnik established a linear form of greenery as an architectural setting:

Plečnik stepped the embankment to produce a long stretch of shallow terraces with a hedge sometimes running along the water's edge – willow trees with their cupolas, poplar trees as columns, hedges as framing devices or cornices or lawns as an equivalent to paving or flooring.¹²

This natural landscaping gives way to a taming of greenery in drifts either side of the embankment from the progression of the Ljubljanica to the mouth of the Gradaščica where the river moves into the city. At this point the embankments are replaced by a low wall from *Sentjakovski Most* (St James' Bridge) to *Zmajski Most* (Dragons' Bridge); there the embankment becomes high only lowering at the lock after *Šempetrski Most* (St Peter's Bridge). From this point on the Classical modernism builds, as evidenced in the *Čevljarski Most* (Shoemaker's Bridge) which, because of its placement, size and impact make, the space of the river every bit as powerful as the space of the city.¹³

Nowhere is this more evident than in the *Tromostovje* (Three Bridges) where one of the oldest medieval routes crossed the river into the city. The original road bridge being flanked by two new footbridges, fanning out towards the Square of the Virgin on either

side. From the roadside, staircases descend to the lower embankment terraces of the river in the Venetian tradition of the Canal Grande. As the river flows on from the Three Bridges it passes alongside the modern classical market place which winds with easy elegance along the embankment, the start being marked by two classical pavilions serving as a florist and tobacconist on either bank. Past the Dragons' Bridge and onto the lock gates which herald water passing through the city and flowing out to enrich the landscape.

Although there was 'little love lost' between Fabiani and Plečnik it is vital to remember that Fabiani solved many of the problems of traffic flow through the city which then allowed Plečnik to concentrate on individual architectural works and axis within the city. The most commanding of all these works is the National and University Library in Ljubljana 1936-41 (5.8). Located on one of Plečnik's 'axis', with a north-south parallel from the river between the embankment and the Križanke monastery of the Teutonic Order. The library stands sentinel over The Square of the French Revolution, the Illyrian monument 1929, and, under the columned canopy, the Simon Gregorčič memorial 1937. The photograph (5.9) shows a later version (1950s) where the original timbers of the vine-covered pergola had to be replaced with concrete arches. Plečnik also added a vase as a visual symbol of the imprisoned heart of his favourite poet Simon Gregorčič who came from the Soca river valley which was ceded to the Italians after the First World War, the vase representing the fate of the poet bedevilled by the

small-mindedness of his people; it was a fate which Plečnik believed he shared.¹⁴

In Plečnik's case this 'fate' was hard felt, particularly resulting from the publication of his regulation plans in *Dom in svet* (Home and World) when he had met resistance from the Modern Functionalists. Unlike the dictates of CIAM which addressed large urban plans Plečnik was faced with giving an appropriate look to Slovenia's independent new capital. It was a matter of course that an essential knowledge and acceptance of traditions was part of all of Plečnik's work in Ljubljana and especially so in the University Library Ljubljana. Few of Plečnik's works offered the Functionalists so much scope for criticising his architecture as the building now known as the National and University Library in Ljubljana.

As critics have sought in vain – in this building for what Plečnik deliberately refrained from putting into it they [the critics and the Functionalists] were bound to overlook what makes it one of the classic works of the modern age in a formal respect, and from the standpoint of today.¹⁵

5.8 Jože Plečnik, University Library, Ljubljana 1936-41



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5.9 Jože Plečnik, Memorial to the Poet Simon Gregorčič, 1936



© Academy/Krečič 1993

The site with which Plečnik was presented for the University Library had no space for an approach or court or forum. Indeed the trapezoid site bordered by *Vergova Ulica* (Vega Street) on the west façade is the only semi-open vista, the front door of the Library opening onto the pavement of Turjaska Street and to the side *Gospoka Ulica* (Gentleman's Street) forms the other boundary. The rear of the building is so close to the houses it was merely rendered in concrete which is in complete contrast to the handling of the extensive mix of materials in every other elevation (5.10). As with the Church of the Sacred Heart, Prague, the University Library occupies space with an obdurate presence that accommodates changes in scale, rise and fall in land levels and complements the bulk of the adjoining buildings. The section and axonometric projection (5.11) reveal the massive qualities of the whole plan, tightly filled within the trapezoidal plot around a central interconnecting courtyard.

Although the interior may appear as being a lavish reworking of classical motifs in the landing hypostyle with their paired Podpec marble columns, looking towards the Exhibition Room doors this is clearly a modern re-interpretation of a classical theme. The east colonnade (5.12) reveals Plečnik's standard lantern resting on squares of Hotavlje marble possibly leading one to believe that Plečnik was using a vast amount of expensive materials but, as in the use of concrete pipes as path edging in the Trnovo House, a similar economy was used ingeniously in the library. The 'marble columns' are a deception as they are in fact large-bore concrete drainage pipes, used for their cheapness. A practical application of inexpensive materials typical of Plečnik, whose high mindedness and love of traditional materials, stone and wood, never limited the use of the near-at-hand, as seen in his employment of gas pipe, brass and ironwork industrial fittings in the Reading Room, staircase and elsewhere in the Library in a drive for thrift. (5.13)

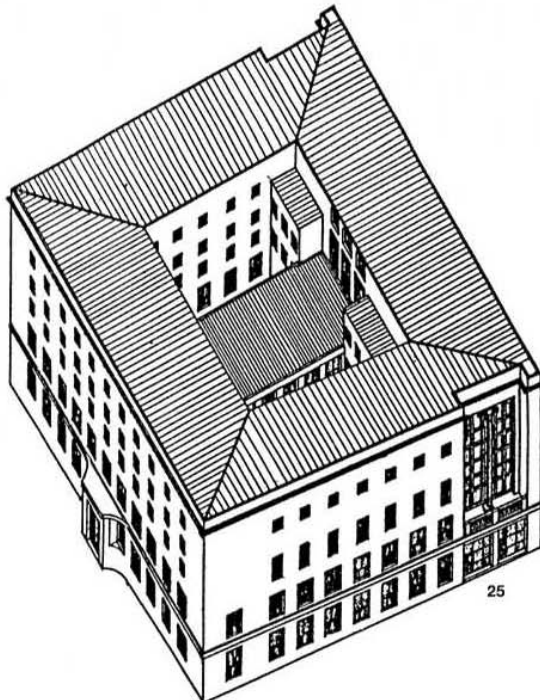
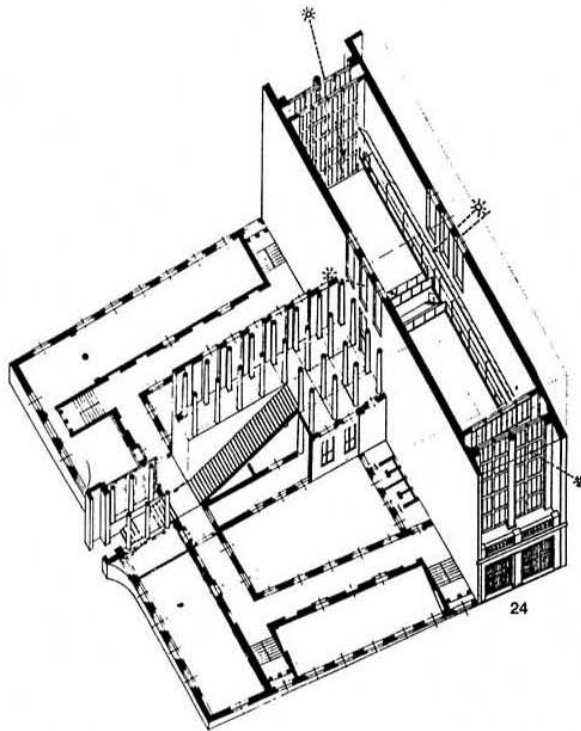
This economy of materials also has external references in the courses above the first floor rustication and grilled cellar windows. The massive reading room window with its pseudo-ionic column is flanked by English windows in an oriole arrangement within brickwork embellished with stone and marble taken from the cleared library site, where prior to the earthquake of 1895 stood the Prince's Mansion, an extremely fine baroque palace of 1660. To counterbalance these historical references slabs of flush-rendered concrete are also included. Peter Krečič concludes in his volume on Plečnik that this was his most important singular work in his native Slovenia and his beloved Ljubljana.

5.10 Jože Plečnik, National and University Library, Ljubljana 1936-41



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5.11 Jože Plečnik, National and University Library, Ljubljana 1936-41



Section through and axonometric projection

© Phaidon/Gooding 1997

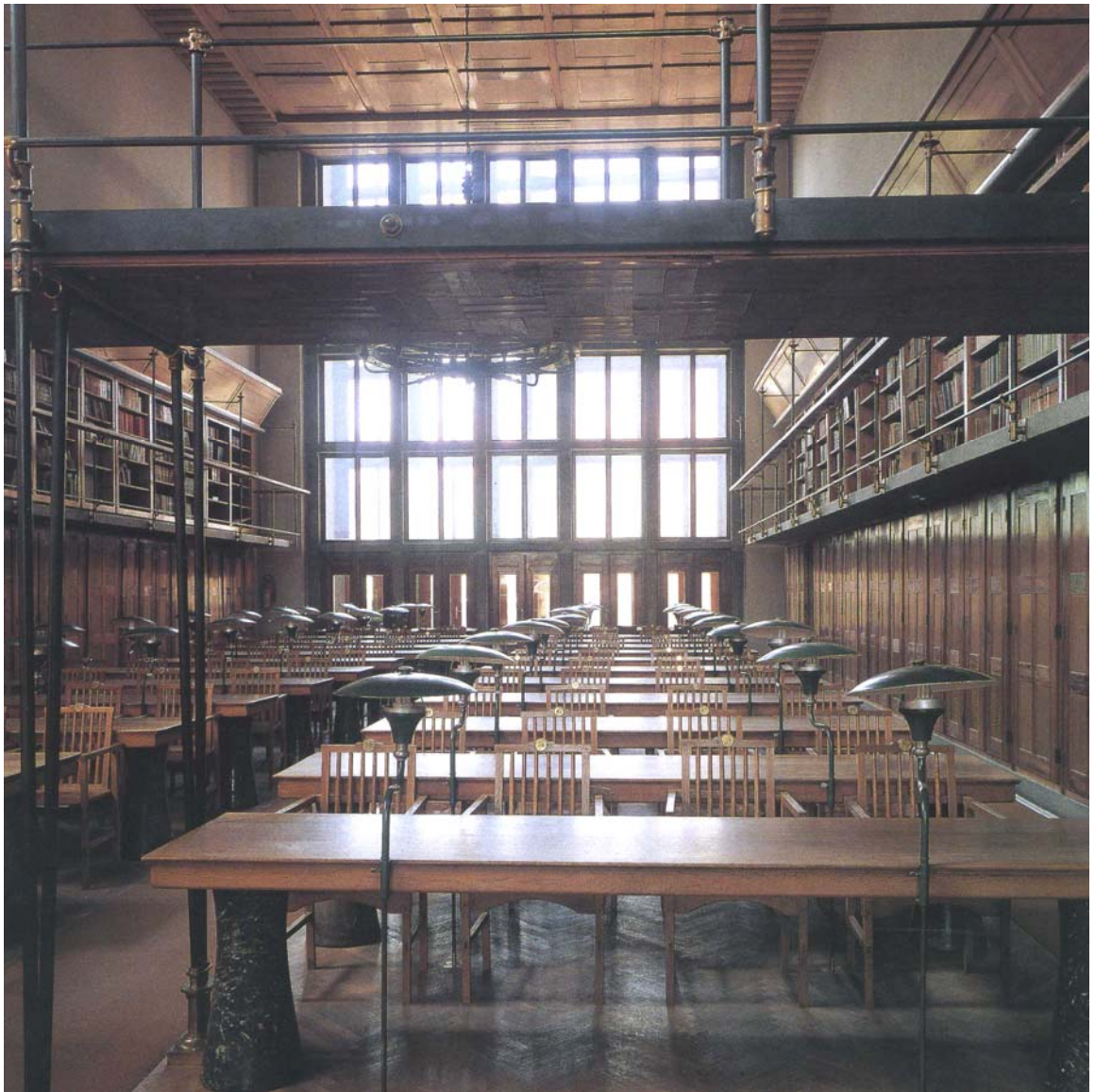
5.12 Jože Plečnik, National and University Library, Ljubljana 1936-41

Looking towards the staircase from the east colonnade



© Academy/Krečič 1993

5.13 Jože Plečnik, National and University Library, Ljubljana 1936-41



Use of gas piping as handrails and other fittings

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Although the University Library is a tour-de-force, Plečnik's mastery of his own form of modernism was far removed from the dogma and controls of Functionalist Modernism; but in no way less modern was the development of the old *St Križ* (Holy Cross) Cemetery on the edge of Bežigrad as identified in Plečnik's plan of 1929. The complex of buildings, 1938–40, later to become known as Plečnik's *Žale* Cemetery, demonstrates how a modern function can be given to classical orders. This modernism becomes apparent, not in examination of the whole as revealed in the totality of the site plan but in the placing of individual elements and their specific decoration as in the walls of the workshop. Below the Byzantine-inspired, iconic entablature is a frame of blue-glazed engineering bricks within which are arranged twelve canted squares of indigo blue tiles of two sizes, framed and punctuated with round pebbles. Situated either side of a window, with an extremely plain granite surround, sits a standard six panel window. Two further brick, tile and pebble panels sit either side of the second set of windows (5.14) with a half panel of brick and tile leading to a small, recessed window flanked by a rough-set pebble wall. Beyond this is a pebble-set column holding up a dramatically flat roof. Below the level of granite band which incorporates the window sills is a layer of pebble walling above a smooth concrete base.

From the 1920s Plečnik was commissioned to produce funeral monuments for the Jesuits and Franciscans as well as graves for Ljubljana's greats such as the wrought-iron cross made for Perić the late mayor. These monuments and markers were developed further as simple yet commanding and elegant tombs. The Vodnik tomb of 1939–40 is the simplest of marble forms, a rectangular stepped platform surmounted by a bi-prism-shaped house with a small door acting as a symbol for the final dwelling. The forms for this are derived from Vodnik's occupation as Plečnik's stonecutter. The two intersecting prisms of the monolithic tombstone formed as a cross are representative of Plečnik's care for those he valued even in death.

These simple tombs were contrasted by elaborately modern baldacchino as seen in the tomb of Dr Ivan Sušteršič, a respected politician. Here Plečnik's detailing is seen in the vase-like capitals, all of unique form, and in the entrance to the Tivoli Park. Examples of Jože Plečnik's other work are worth cataloguing as they led to Plečnik's mature modern style: Church of St Francis, Šiška, Ljubljana 1925–27; Central Stadium, Ljubljana 1925–35; Public Savings Bank, Celje 1928–31; Mutual Insurance Building, Ljubljana 1928–39; Church of St Anthony of Padua, Belgrade 1929–32; The Prelovšek Residence, Ljubljana 1932–33; New City Hall, Ljubljana 1939–40 and finally one of the most evocative marriages of folk tradition within a Modern idiom, the Church of St Michael in the March,

5.14 Jože Plečnik, Workshop Buildings, Žale Cemetery 1939-40

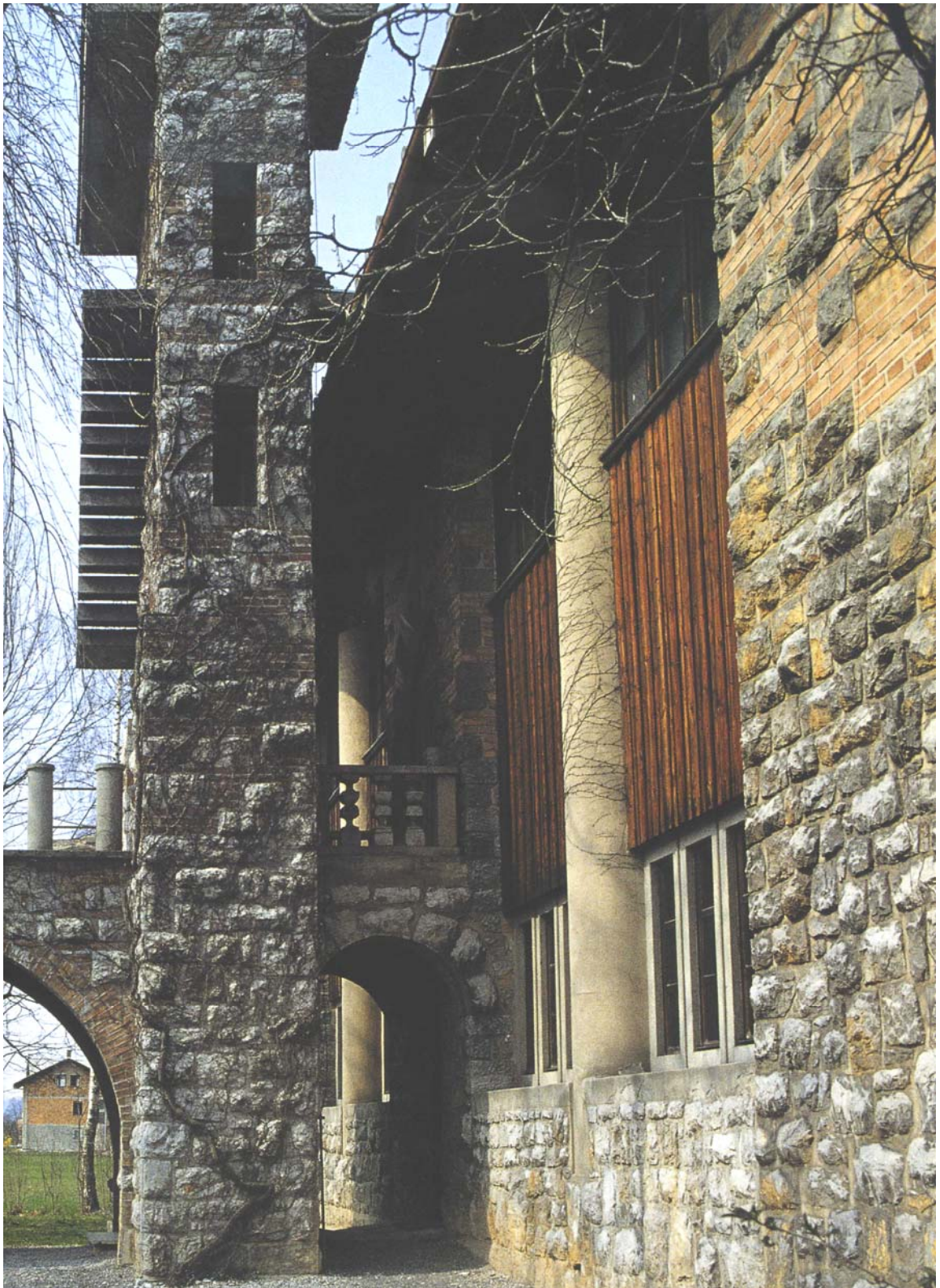


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Barje, Črna Vas 1937-39 (5.15) which vividly illustrates what can be achieved through modern understanding.

Perhaps the most moving icon of all that Plečnik had achieved can be seen in his own gravestone, a simple polygonal stone set on the edge of the family plot. Simply inscribed *Arh Jože Plečnik*; the headstone is an appropriate sign of the modern. Despite its reserved simplicity, it stands out against all the surrounding elaborate, embellished graves with all their vases and ornate carvings much as does his architecture and planning against the welter of historicist forms that surround it. This simplicity of style was to form the underpinning for the Constructivist and Functionalist building forms which would follow soon after.

5.15 Jože Plečnik, Church of St. Michael, Barje, Črna Vas 1937-39



Detail of Entrance Front and Bell Tower

© Academy/Krečič 1993

Notes to Chapter 6

¹ Podrecca B.(ed.), *Jože Plečnik The Architect And His Ljubljana*, Architecture Museum Ljubljana, 1993, p.12

A catalogue to accompany an exhibition in Graz in a reappraisal of Plečnik's work by Central European and Western scholars.

² Ibid., p.12

³ Krečič P., *Plečnik The Complete Works*, Academy Editions, London, 1993, p.55

See also pages 53-69 for a fuller explanation of the partnership between Plečnik and Masaryk in the remodelling of Prague Castle.

⁴ Ibid., p.72

⁵ Ibid., p.72

⁶ Ibid., p.90

⁷ Ibid., p.90

⁸ As mentioned in the notes on Chapter 3, I was aided in this search by having as my guide Dr. Peter Krečič, the Director of the *Arhitekturni muzej Ljubljana* (Museum of Architecture, Ljubljana), a world-renowned expert on Plečnik.

⁹ Op.cit., p.89

¹⁰ Bentley I and Gržan-Butina D., *Jože Plečnik 1872-1957*, Oxford Polytechnic, 1983, p.59

¹¹ Op.cit., Podrecca B.(ed.), see R. Gilkey Dyck, *Classical Urban Design Revisited*, p.51-73

¹² Op.cit., Krečič, 1993, p.114

¹³ Ibid., p.115

¹⁴ Prelovšek D., *Jože Plečnik 1872-1957*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1977, p.276

¹⁵ Ibid., p.253