

## PRAGUE CASTLE - SOUTHERN GARDENS

JOSIP PLEČNIK'S CONCEPTION  
PRAŠKI GRAD – JUŽNI VRTOVI  
ZASNOVA JOŽETA PLEČNIKA

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## izvleček

Na podlagi arheoloških raziskav in najstarejših pisnih virov vemo, da je Praški grad leta 880 osnoval princ Borivoj iz rodbine Přemysl. Skozi ves srednji vek so bila južno od Gradu le polja. Gradu so služila kot primerno odlagališče odpadkov. Ko je po razglasitvi češkoslovaške neodvisnosti na Grad prišel predsednik T.G. Masaryk, je bilo celotno področje precej zanemarjeno. 20. januarja 1920 je bil objavljen javni razpis za projekt prenove Rajskega vrta in Vrta na okopih. Žirijo so sestavljali Jan Kotěra, Antonín Balšánek, Jože Plečnik in Zdeněk Wirth. Marca se je žirija odločila in prvo nagrado podelila arhitektoma Schmiedlu in Fikru, drugo nagrado pa je prejel krajinski arhitekt Kumpán. Vendar pa je končni rezultat razpisa zbuja dvome. Zato je predsednik Masaryk zaprosil profesorja in arhitekta Jožeta Plečnika naj izdela načrt za prenovo vrtov. Plečnik se je zahtevne naloge lotil spoštljivo, vendar ne brez drznosti. Ni skušal ustvariti privida starih vrtov, ampak se je raje odločil za širokogruden, moderen pristop, pri čemer se je oziral na stoletja stara drevesa in poudarjal povezave z zgodovino Gradu.

## ključne besede

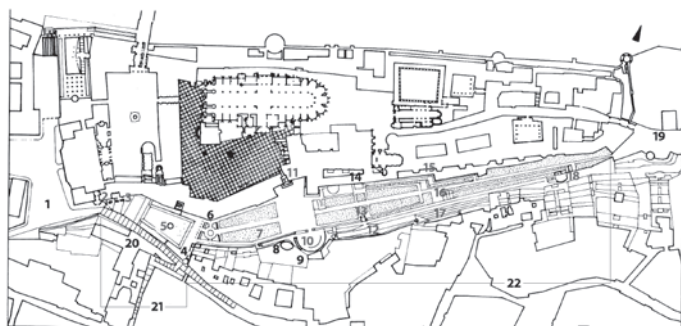
Praški grad, Rajskega vrt, Vrt na okopih, Plečnikova projektna zasnova.

## abstract

On the basis of archaeological research and the oldest written sources, we know that Prague Castle was founded around the year 880 by Prince Borivoj of the house of Premyslides. The area south of the Castle was originally open fields throughout the Middle Ages. It served as a convenient rubbish dump for the Castle. When President T. G. Masaryk arrived at Prague Castle following Czechoslovakian independence, the whole area was rather dilapidated. On 27th January 1920, an open competition for designs for the Paradise and Rampart Gardens was announced. The jury consisted of Jan Kotěra, Antonín Balšánek, Josip Plečnik and Zdeněk Wirth. In March, the jury came to a decision, awarding first prize to the architects Schmiedl and Fika; and second prize to the landscape architect, Kumpán. However, the whole result of the competition was dubious. So, teacher and architect Josip Plečnik was asked by President Masaryk to design the reconstruction of the gardens. Plečnik tackled the demanding task with respect, yet with some boldness. He did not try to create an illusion of old gardens, but was rather concerned with a broadminded modern approach, fully respecting the centuries-old trees, and accentuating important links with the history of the Castle.

## key words

Prague Castle, Paradise Garden, Rampart Garden, Plečnik's design conception.



Slika 1: Načrt Praškega gradu s simboli glavnih elementov v Južnih vrtovih. (Vir: Krečič, 1997:56)

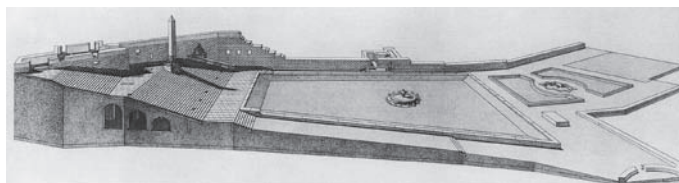
Figure 1: Plan of Prague Castle with signs of principal elements in the Southern gardens. (Source: Krečič, 1997:56)

## History of Prague Castle – in general

The early medieval castle site was fortified with a moat and a rampart of clay and stones. The first walled building was the Church of Virgin Mary. Other churches, dedicated to St. George and St. Vitus, were founded in the first half of the 10th century.

From the 10th century Prague Castle was not only the seat of the princes and later kings, but also of the highest representative of church, the Prague bishop. The first convent in Bohemia was also founded in the grounds of Prague Castle, a convent next to the church of St. George for the order of Benedictine nuns.

The basilica of St. Vitus, built on the site of the original rotunda, was the main castle church since the 11th century, where the relics



Slika 2: Rajskega vrta: načrt Jožeta Plečnika – 1920. (Vir: Krečič, 1997:58)

Figure 2: The Paradise garden: Josip Plečnik's project - 1920. (Source: Krečič, 1997:58)

of the patron saints of the land were kept: SS. Vitus, Wenceslas and Adalbert. The period of the rule of King and later Emperor Charles IV (the middle of the 14th century) was a time of prosperity for Prague Castle, for then it first became an imperial residence, the seat of the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire. The royal palace was rebuilt and the fortifications strengthened. Building began on the Gothic church of St. Vitus on the model of French cathedrals. Building continued on the Castle during the reign of Charles's son, Wenceslas IV. The Hussite wars and the following decades, when the Castle was not inhabited, caused the dilapidation of its buildings and fortifications. The next favorable time came after 1483, when a king of the new dynasty of Jagellons again made the Castle his seat. New fortifications were built and, together with them, defence towers on the northern side (the Powder Tower, the New White Tower and Daliborka). The architect of the fortifications, Benedikt Ried, also rebuilt and enlarged the royal palace: the splendid Vladislav Hall was the biggest secular vaulted hall in the Europe of that day.

The kings of a further dynasty, the Habsburgs, started rebuilding the



Slika 3: Simbolične povezave – ‘Mali Belvedere’ in cerkev Sv. Nikolaja. Foto: Kateřina Nesládková.

Figure 3: Symbolic links – “Small Belvedere” and St. Nicolas Church. Photo: Kateřina Nesládková.

Castle into a renaissance seat. In accordance with the taste of the time the Royal Garden was founded first, and in the course of the 16th century buildings serving for entertainment were put up in it: a summer palace, a ball games hall, a shooting range and a lion's court. Afterwards the cathedral and the royal palace were adapted. New dwelling houses began to be built to the west of the Old Royal Palace, along the southern ramparts. The adaptation of the Castle came to its height in the second half of the 16th century, during the rule of Rudolph II. The emperor settled permanently in Prague Castle and began to turn it into a grand and dignified centre of the empire. And he founded the northern wing of the palace, with today's Spanish Hall, to house his precious artistic and scientific collections.

The Prague defenestration in 1618 started a long period of wars, during which Prague Castle was damaged and robbed. It was used by the country's ruler only exceptionally and temporarily.

In the second half of the 18th century the last great rebuilding of the Castle was carried out, making it a prestigious castle-type seat. But at that time the capital or the empire was Vienna, and Prague was just a provincial town. The Castle gradually became dilapidated and its art treasures were impoverished by the sale of the remains of the Emperor Rudolph's collections. Emperor Ferdinand V, after abdicating in 1848, chose Prague Castle as his home. On this occasion the Chapel of the Holy Cross on the Second Courtyard was rebuilt. The Spanish Hall and the Rudolph Gallery were done up in preparation for the coronation of Francis Joseph I which, however, did not take place [Vítejte na Pražském Hrade, 2008].

There was a big movement to complete the building of the cathedral, but this was not inspired by the ruler but by the patriotic Union for Completing the Cathedral of St. Vitus. It was in fact completed in 1929. After the foundation of the independent Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 Prague Castle again became the seat of the head of state. The Slovene architect Josip Plečnik was entrusted with the necessary alterations in 1920 [Dejiny Pražského hradu, 2008]



Slika 4: Simbolične povezave – ‘Bikov prehod nad stopniščem’: vrh piramide Nikolajeve cerkve – in Hartigov vrt; piramida in katedrala Sv. Víta. Foto: Kateřina Nesládková.

Figure 4: Symbolic links – “Bull Stairway”: the top of the pyramid St. Nicholas' church – and Hartig garden; the pyramid and the cathedral of St. Vitus. Photo: Kateřina Nesládková.

### History of Southern gardens - the Paradise Garden and the Rampart Garden

We should recall that the area south of the Castle were originally open fields. It served as a convenient rubbish tin for the Castle. Rubble was also dumped here, in particular after the disastrous fire of 1541. As a result the slope of the land, once very steep, was gradually leveled to form a terrace. When Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol built a new palace to the south of the Castle in the mid-16th century, he also wanted to have a small private garden right in front of the palace in typical style of Renaissance. So in 1562 the slope below the western end of the Castle, between the palace and the New Castle Stairs, was built up and buttressed with a massive retaining wall. The garden, apparently laid out as a series of terraces, terminated at the eastern end in a small pavilion – The Burle Tower. Nearby were the royal baths an aviary.

As we can see on the illustrations from the 17th century another areas around the ramparts were still bare hillside. In 1617 the so-called Matthias Pavilion was erected in the Paradise Garden, on an exposed spot overlooking the city. This building marked the first reorientation of the Paradise Garden towards the town because, in fact, it is a lookout tower. The idea of exploiting viewpoints was later to become a key element in Plečnik's conception of the southern gardens.

At the end of the 18th century came a radical change. The Bugle Tower was pulled down in 1724. Pacassi's austere, unifying reconstruction of Castle was finished in 1769. The Paradise Garden was alternately subjected to neglect and to improvement, according to prevailing fashion. The baroque age also saw the appearance of a fountain with a flat quadrofoil base, which Plačnik later transfer to another site. Gradually, vegetation took root on the ramparts (Present-day Rampart Garden). Towards the end of the century the Paradise Garden seems to have been extended eastwards. The new part of the garden was bounded by the wall and was thickly wooded. The two sections of the garden were separated by a baroque wall with a gate, traces of which have survived in Plačnik's scheme.

After the revolution of 1848 the entire south garden area was divided off from the city by a crenellated brick wall, reinforced with two

bastions. These were later incorporated very effectively into Plečnik's design. In 1860 the whole garden was laid out as an English park, with only some residual features of previous ages surviving.

When President T. G. Masaryk arrived at Prague Castle after the rise of independent Czechoslovakia, the whole area was rather dilapidated. In August 1919 acknowledged garden expert, F. J. Thomayer, was appointed Master of Gardens, and before long he had submitted plans for the improvement of the southern gardens. Notwithstanding the radical new layout of trees and alteration of the historic axis of the Paradise Garden entailed in his design, it was immediately approved. Work commenced, and was interrupted only by the discovery, during excavations at the western end of the Paradise Garden, of the remains of a double flight of steps. The Department for Ancient Monuments ordered that the steps should be preserved. The Chancellery of the President used this as a pretext for dropping Thomayer's scheme altogether, and started considering architectural rather than landscaping options for the area around the remains of the "monumental" steps.

On 27th January 1920, an open competition for designs for the Paradise and Rampart Gardens was announced. The jury consisted of Jan Kotěra, Antonín Balšánek, Josip Plečnik and Zdeněk Wirth. In March the jury came to decision. They awarded first prize to architects Schmiedl and Fikr and second to the landscape architect Kumpán [Valena, 1996: 260 - 261]

However the whole result of the competition was dubious. So, then the professor and architect Josip Plečnik was asked to design the reconstruction of these gardens. Plečnik tackled the demanding task with respect, yet with some boldness. He did not try to create an illusion of old gardens, but was rather concerned with a broadminded modern approach, fully respecting the centuries old trees, and accentuating important linked with the history of Castle. Plečnik's approach was successful and in response to it, important personalities (J. Kotěra) and societies (Mánes) recommended his appointment of the Architect of Prague Castle. The gardens were reconstructed exactly from 1920 to 1935, when Plečnik resigned as the Castle Architect.

The last important event in Southern Gardens was happened, when the gardens were under the reconstruction from the late 1980s to the summer of 1993. Architects from the SÚPRMO design office J. Burian and J. Crockettová had a difficult task to reform. In the 1980s the route of a giant collector traversed the gardens, thus drastically intervening with both the greenery and architecture there. Furthermore the original project did not take exact reconstruction into account. In the second part of reconstruction, the President's Office required a precise reconstruction. [Lukeš 1994: 1-3]

### Conception of Plečnik's project at Southern gardens

Plečnik's concept was simple and monumental at the same time. The gardens exactly planned lawn areas, interwoven with a network of sand paths. Significant places along the main axis of the Rampart Garden, formed by a wide main pathway parallel to the south front of Prague Castle, were marked by minor structures and architectural elements (obelisks, pyramids, viewing terraces, arbours, a fountain, etc). Mature trees were respected by Plečnik, but in his plans he counted on their eventual replacement by greenery more in keeping with his concept. The gardens were conceived as an intimate space, because originally they were to serve the president, his family

and guests only. However, later on they were more and more often opened to the public – in the 1930s it was four times a year. Plečnik conceived of the gardens as not only a space designed for contemplation, but also a unique viewing area in which gradually the whole panorama of Prague opened up before the visitor. Therefore he lowered the defensive wall – part of fortifications of the Castle dating from 1849. The adaptation of the terrain is fairly apparent as well.

Between the area of the Castle, the gardens and the city, there are a number of symbolic links. For example: the view through the "Small belvedere" revealing the dominant point of Malá Strana – St. Nicholas' church or - when you look down from the terrace of the "Bull Stairway", the top of the pyramid standing by the viewing terrace, points to the St. Nicholas' church - and from the opposite site, when you look up from the Hartig garden, the pyramid points to the cathedral of St. Vitus; gate to the Alpine garden" frames the view of the Caroline architecture – the Karlov area in the New Town.

Another theme of various interpretation is the originally intended dialogue between the (not realized) obelisk on the cascading staircase to the Paradise garden, and the monumental monolith bowl in the garden. In short, as is typical of Plečnik's work, everything has a certain intention in mind, and bears a relation to the given context.

Introduction of Southern gardens by walking

1. Hradčanské Sq.
2. Entrance gate – Double portal
3. Plečnik's staircase
4. Matthias pavilion
5. Granite bowl
6. Baroque fountain
7. Small belvedere
8. Music pavilion
9. Hartig garden
10. Viewing terrace
11. Bull stairway
12. The Alpine garden
13. Gate to the Alpine garden
14. Gardener's house
15. Bellevue,
16. Hercules' fountain
17. Vineyard
18. Moravian rampart with monolith
19. Opyš
20. Castle steps
21. The Paradise garden
22. The Rampart Garden

### Red colour – designed by arch. J. Plečnik

Walking through the Southern Gardens can start in the west, from the ramp of Hradčanské Square (1). There the visitors pass through the double portal by Plečnik (2) and from the narrow triangular landing step straight onto the monumental cascading staircase (3) of the small Paradise garden. They pass the sandstone amphora in the niche of the wall of the New Palace. In about the middle of the staircase, an obelisk with eternal light was to be placed, topped by a sculpture of the Lion of Bohemia reaching to the Slovak double cross. On

the balustrade near the foot of the staircase, there is a black diorite vase. Below the staircase, by the wall of the New Palace, there is a narrow passageway with a small fountain at the front. From there, the vaulted hall under the staircase is accessible, with the preserved foundation for the monolith. The space is additionally lit by windows cut through the wall adjoining the New Castle Steps. An exhibition room is established in the hall under the staircase. In the middle of the trapezoidal Paradise garden, a giant granite bowl (5) is placed, which was made of one piece of stone and extracted in the Mrákotín stonepit.

Plečnik connected the Paradise Garden with the adjoining Rampart Garden. A symbolic dividing line is formed by a group of conically trimmed hornbeams leading towards a space adapted by Plečnik in front of the Matthias Pavilion (4) by the South Wall. The balustrade next to the pavilion bears a sculpture of the Good Shepherd by the sculptor Kalvoda. On entering the elongated Rampart Garden, the visitors first notice the baroque fountain (6) moved by Plečnik from its original position in the Paradise garden. The adaptations in the immediate vicinity of the fountain recall the former French garden with typical geometric yew – trees. The main axis of the garden is formed by a straight viewing pathway. Walking along it for about 80 metres, the visitors get to the central space of the South Gardens. There is the foot of elegant Bull Stairway 11, which is cut through the south wing of the New Palace and connecting the Third Courtyard with the Rampart Garden. The Bull Stairway is very interesting production, with number of brilliant details. On the axis, just opposite the Bull Stairway on the southern edge, there is semicircular viewing terrace (10) – unfortunately completely rebuilt in the 1960 – with the slate limestone pyramid and a viewing pavilion called the Small Belvedere (7).

In the eastern direction, the Rampart Garden continues down to the gate to Opyš near to Old Castle Steps. Gradually the visitors pass the granite balustrade with the original stone obelisk reminding of the defenestration. On the southern side there is a small structure with a pergola, the so-called gate to the Alpine Garden (12), which is – together with the terrace vineyard and two fountains by Plečnik – situated on the slope below the fortification wall. Next to the front of the Theresian wing of the Old Palace there used to stand a glazed Aviary, insensitively reconstructed in the 1960s into the transformer station. Still further on, beneath the Palace of Noblewomen, is a supporting wall with columns. Below the wall, there is a path with Venetian tile slab paving leading to the lofty summer house Bellevue (15), with high Egyptian columns and a paneled ceiling. Beneath this elevated part of the garden, there is a small supporting wall whose masonry is composed of fragments of stones from various part of the Castle. The wall is decorated with putt – light bearers. Below the Bellevue, there is also a Baroque sculpture of Hercules with a fountain, on a base designed by Plečnik (16).

Further on, it is possible to continue in two different ways – along the higher placed main pathway, and on a narrower track beneath it. Both provide a magnificent view of the panorama of the city. The main path is lined with trees. The last stop before the gate to Opyš at the eastern end of the garden is the Moravian Rampart (18). This place was accentuated by Plečnik by a slim needle of another monolith, finished in a sandstone Ionic capital. An arbour with a pergola and an oval stone table used to serve various negotiations

of President Masaryk in summertime. The viewing terrace on the Rampart provides a view of Prague [Lukeš 1994: 3 - 4].

### Conclusion

When I was younger I used to go to Prague Castle very often and one of my most favorite places was The Southern Gardens. I didn't know nearly anything about it. I didn't know the names of all buildings, sculptures and places as well the names of architects or sculptors. I didn't know the history which was behind the creation of these gardens. I was just fascinated with this space, with its harmony and mysteriousness.

If you want to see Prague in its most beautiful views you can't find more suitable place than Southern gardens. I am quite sure, that architect Josip Plečnik knew about the unique of this place and that he tried to confirm it with his design of gardens. There are a lot of mystique connections between the sculptures in the gardens and important buildings in the old part of Prague.

That's not long ago when I started to be interested in the various elements, which are situated there, and the whole composition of it. Except the bigger buildings and elements (which are described in part IV.), there are many minor architectural elements designed by Plečnik – portals, grilles, handles, ceramic vases, railings, pavement and balustrades. All this forms a harmonious whole and in its perfection, precision and clear – cut composition belongs to the most beautiful instances of modern landscaping, in a masterly way incorporated into the unique space of the area of Prague Castle.

I can't judge Plečnik's work in fact. For me is just important that Plečnik by his inventions created the place which keeps it's unique. The gardens were, are and I am sure that will be never forgotten place for whole generations of people.

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