 Society For Old Prague: One Hundred and Two Years



An aerial, sepia-toned photograph of a dense urban landscape, likely Old Prague. The image is dominated by a complex arrangement of dark, tiled roofs with varying pitches and textures. Several buildings with light-colored facades are visible, featuring small, dark windows and some with arched openings. A prominent building on the right side has a taller, more ornate structure with arched windows. The overall scene conveys a sense of historical depth and architectural density.

Society For Old Prague



One Hundred and Two Years





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TO ALL THOSE WHO HAVE STRUGGLED AND CONTINUE TO STRUGGLE TO KEEP OUR CITIES ALIVE AND PRESERVE THEIR UNIQUENESS.

The organisers would like to thank the following:

- Mairie de Paris
- Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic
- Bohemia Magica, une Saison tchèque en France (Bohemia Magica, Czech Season in France)
- The volunteers of the *Klub Za starou Prahu* and l'association de *Sauvegarde et Mise en valeur du Paris historique*
- All those who devoted their time and labour to aid the preparation of this exhibition and publication.

Every European historic city has experienced that difficult moment when, under the pressure of the vehemently asserted requirements of modern times, buildings that were ancient and dilapidated but of great architectural value began to vanish. Sooner or later, the sad image of such demolitions would provoke at first individuals and, directly afterwards, groups of people to oppose what appeared to be the irreversible destiny of the cities' decaying elements. Their efforts were often to no avail, just as the methods of their struggle were at times naïve. Nevertheless, such opposition awakened the public's consciousness to the idea of what an architectural monument was, and why its preservation value went beyond the feelings of a select group of admirers of the antiques encompassing the cultural wealth of a nation and its future generations. In Prague, this critical moment arose in the 1890s. In 1900 the *Society For Old Prague* was founded, and since then many generations of its members have tirelessly contributed to enlightening the general public to the advantages of protecting architectural monuments and the city's unique historic image.

We are delighted today by this opportunity to present in Paris the more than one-hundred-year long endeavour of our predecessors, in co-operation with and under the auspices of a society of an allied cause; all the more so since the *Society For Old Prague* had, in its early years, enjoyed an exceptionally strong relationship with the French cultural environment. This relationship was established through Czech artists' time-honoured links with Paris - represented in particular, in the context of the *Society*, by the painter Zdenka Braunerová and the friendship between Vilém Mrštík and the Swiss writer William Ritter, who was enchanted by Prague and became somewhat of a French language spokesman and supporter of the city and the *For Old Prague* movement in several European countries. Influenced by these relationships, the *Society* developed an amicable alliance with the Commission for Old Paris (*Commission pour vieux Paris*). The delegation of this Commission - led by M. Charles Normand, its member and, concurrently, president of the Alliance of the Patrons of the Monuments of Paris (*Société des amis des monuments de Paris*) - was

welcomed at the *Society's* ceremonial meeting, organised on the 4th of July 1901 in Prague. Following this event, on December 15th 1902, Charles Normand was appointed honorary member of the *Society For Old Prague* at its general assembly, for which occasion the Czech painter Jan Konůpek, instructed by the *Society*, had designed an original diploma for M. Normand. Following the birth of the independent Czechoslovak state, Ernst Denis, the historian and great authority on Czech history after whom the French Cultural Institute in Prague was named, also became an honorary member of the *Society*.

Resuming these old friendships and numerous cultural links between Prague and Paris, the *Society For Old Prague* delightedly welcomed the initiative of our friends from the Association for the Conservation and Promotion of Historic Paris (*l'association de Sauvegarde et Mise en valeur du Paris historique*) to present this exhibition of the *Society*, the very first organised abroad, in their exhibition hall and as part of the 2002 Czech Cultural Season in France.

This offer is all the more valuable for us as an opportunity to strengthen the links between our two societies, which share a common aim: to protect the legacy of the past for future generations. And this heritage becomes the property of us all, whether we are in Paris or in Prague.

KATEŘINA BEČKOVÁ

President of the Society for Old Prague

Safeguarding and highlighting national heritage have always been, since its foundation, the essential values of the Association for the *Conservation and Promotion of Historic Paris*.

Founded in 1963, the Association has attracted attention through its numerous actions for the conservation of the Marais district in Paris. At the end of the Second World War, this district, destined to be demolished because it was insalubrious, owed its renovation to the tenacity and the lucidity of a few volunteers who drew the attention of the authorities to the state of decay of nearly all the prestigious 17th century mansions.

As early as 1962, these volunteers also created the *Association for the Marais Festival* to set up various cultural events (plays, operas, concerts set in the mansions' courtyards).

This initiative aimed at sensitizing the general public and the political authorities to the fact that it was essential to act to preserve the threatened urban, architectural and historical heritage.

The following year, André Malraux, then the Minister of Culture, had a law passed on the protected areas.

Historic Paris increases appeals to public funds, establishes an architectural inventory of the 3rd and 4th districts and undertakes the renovation of most historical sites of the Marais, beginning with the House of Ourscamp, which has since become its headquarters. Until the year 2000, the Association received many official awards for the various works that it still carries on.

Today, the Association for the *Conservation and Promotion of Historic Paris* continues its activities in the entire Paris area. It has more than 2500 members of which more than 100 regular volunteers and three employees.

In May 2001, in Prague, during a European meeting of Heritage Associations, the Heads of *Historic Paris* and of the *Klub za Starou Prahu* ("Society For Old Prague") decided to try a new "cultural adventure" together. They decided to arrange an exhibit in Paris, which through photographs, will show some buildings that have given its present aspect to the city of Prague and for which the

Klub struggled ceaselessly for more than a century. Created at the beginning of the 20th century, the *Klub* intends to protest against the demolition of buildings or historical housing in the heart of old Prague. Its actions are backed by renowned architects and art historians.

Even if one of our associations is run with the help of non-professional volunteers, and the other, by fine arts professionals and technicians, our two associations are nonetheless "sisters". Our ambitions and aims are undoubtedly similar.

Safeguarding and giving life to the urban heritage, so that future generations may also appreciate it, as we are today conserving the undeniable treasures of the past.

In 2002, in France we celebrate the Czech Year. What a wonderful opportunity for us to go back to our roots and sensitize once more the general public to its heritage and its ancient neighbourhoods.

PRAQUE CAPUT REGNI

In order to convey the history and the contemporary character of the *Society For Old Prague* to a foreign audience, we must first of all introduce Prague, the capital city of the Czech Republic and the city in which the *Society* has established itself. We must express its unique beauty and the specific problems of its preservation.

Golden Prague, the Hundred-Spired Prague, Magic Prague – these are only some of the attributes used to describe it. They relate to its specific features (such as its multitude of towers and campaniles, in the Middle Ages often decorated with gilded tops), for it is only through their interaction that the unique character of this city has been created.

As early as the Middle Ages, Prague had already been designated as the mother of all cities – *Praga Mater Urbium* – or the head of the kingdom – *Praga Caput Regni* – to mark its exclusive position among Czech towns, as well as its profound bearing upon the history of the entire country. (In those times, Prague consisted of four separate settlements – the Old Town, Malá Strana, Hradčany with Prague Castle and the New Town – all originating from the Middle Ages; autonomous and with their own fortifications, these towns were only united in 1784.) For a thousand years, Prague's most prominent aspect – Prague Castle with St Vitus' Cathedral – was the seat of its political and religious power, while the Old and New Towns on the opposite bank of the river Vltava functioned as the centre of trade and capital.

Situated in the very heart of Europe, at the point of intersection of the ancient trade routes, the city became an important gathering place of different epochs, peoples and cultures. All the architectural styles of Europe, from the Middle Ages to the present day, have permeated its image. It adopted their various artistic expressions with absolute ease and moulded them to complement its setting. In the Gothic period, and especially in the Baroque, it reached new, highly unique forms. It advanced the treasury of architectural styles with a style of its own – Cubism. The authenticity of all the various forms of architecture that exist here in the

utmost harmony must be that unique force that created the extraordinary energy of this city – its genius loci.

This blending of the architectural styles of different periods acquires an exceptional charm as it unfolds along the undulating terrain of the Prague basin, embracing the bend of the river Vltava. A range of forms has accumulated here, the horizontal shapes of the buildings giving way to the whole host of vertical contours of towers, domes and spires. The image of the city would be inconceivable without the many gablets of its dormer-windows, without the oriels, turrets, richly ornamented gables, cornices and sculptures. The heart of Prague, its Old Town, has, to this day, kept the medieval fabric of its winding streets almost intact – with the Old Town Square at their centre, interrelated by a system of passageways and arcades. Prague's magical spirit, that mysterious revelation of its hidden charms, radiates as soon as we set foot outside the customary tourist routes. And then there are the historic quarters of Malá Strana and Hradčany, their impressive panoramic view rising above the surface of the Vltava, from the foot of the hill crowned with Prague Castle. After the fires that broke out there in the late Middle Ages, these districts became the dwelling place of the nobility. The Renaissance and Baroque palaces were constructed as a result of this, with their balconies and staircases, their many gardens with pavilions and loggias. They have preserved their picturesque quality owing to the minimal input into their organism of any architecture of a later date. Only the features of Prague's most recent historical town – the New Town – have been markedly transformed. The New Town was founded in the mid-14th century by the emperor Charles IV, in a manner that was generous to such a degree that, until the mid-19th century, a significant part of its territory was taken up by spacious gardens and orchards bordering a large number of monastery courtyards. The span of these green zones, which contained the upsurge of building activity in the 19th century, most probably saved the other

historic districts from much graver intrusions. The remarkable rise of construction projects in the latter half of the 19th century transformed Prague, resting on the laurels of its past greatness, into a modern city, as did the gradual awakening of the Czech nation within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Beginning in the 1860s, the Baroque city walls were gradually pulled down and the city began its expansion. New communication routes were required, and symbols of a new era were constructed – the National Theatre, the Rudolfinum, bank and insurance company buildings, and shopping arcades. The life of modern man could not be tethered by the limits of the ancient city. It blossomed everywhere by way of new buildings, which often drastically upset the scale and relations of the historic urban environment. The area of the former Jewish ghetto, whose structure was an agglomeration of housing units clustered together at the time when the ghetto was entirely sealed off from the rest of the city, was the most problematic. It became the site of regulated slum clearances, which, however, did not remain limited to its territory. Within the framework of the area designated as a low neighbourhood, many valuable houses, churches and synagogues were also demolished.

From the wave of protests that arose, from an intellectual elite that was, at first, still thriving on the Romanticist ideas of the period, a society was born in 1900 that included the idea *For Old Prague* in its name. Some years later, after the *Society's* members adopted the modern theory of heritage protection and gained an understanding of modern architecture, they became aware of the problematic nature of the *Society's* name. The *Society* did not aim to renounce modern life and new architecture; it merely maintained that their integration within the historic environment needed to be harmonious and beautiful. However, the proposal to name it the *Society For Beautiful Prague* was never accepted.

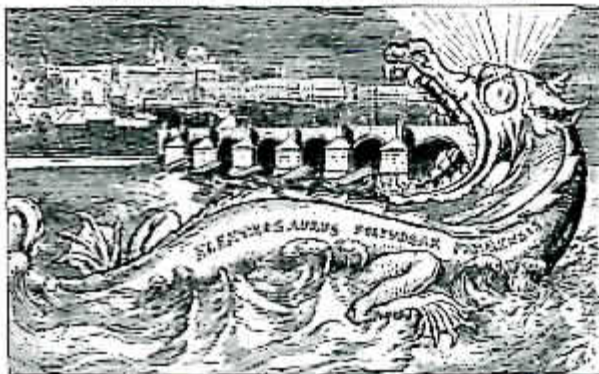
The great damage inflicted by the construction activities of the 19th and 20th centuries never
14 succeeded in seriously impairing the fundamental structure of Prague's historic core, with all its

mentioned characteristics. Thus, the main tasks of the *Society For Old Prague* today remain analogous:

- To protect the historic character of the city by advocating the regulation of the volume and height of all new buildings.
- To struggle to protect specific buildings of architectural merit.
- To monitor conversions and reconstructions, so that they are undertaken with the greatest respect and guided by professional expertise.
- To be attentive to architectural competitions and building plans for the hitherto vacant sites.
- To provoke, and participate in, public debates on these subjects.
- To be a partner to the heritage institutions, as well as a mediator in the complex discussions with the architects and the building contractors.
- To identify the mistakes of both these parties, and to reveal possible misprisions on behalf of the state or the municipal authorities.
- To educate the public through lectures, tours, and individual consultations.
- To provide necessary information on the pages of its magazine (nowadays also via Internet) and to be publicly active through the means of the media.

The *Society* fulfilled all these activities a hundred years ago, as it still fulfils them at present, now that Prague has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (since 1992). Being a civic association, the *Society* has no legal authority. All it possesses is its moral repute, resting on the activities of the important architects, historians, art and architecture historians of its Resident Board; which is the executive body of the *Society For Old Prague*. All the members of the *Society*, who work here as volunteers, are deeply aware of their responsibility for the fate of this exceptional city.

Já jsem ten drak z té pohádky, co sžrá staré památky!



"I am the dragon from that fairytale, devouring monuments of historic scale", drawing from the *Šipý* (Arrows) satirical magazine from 1900, reacting to the "wired" Charles Bridge

View of Prague Castle from
Petřín Hill, František Friedrich,
after 1890



History of the Society For Old Prague

BIRTH OF THE IDEA "FOR OLD PRAGUE"

The inspiration of the radical reconstructions of the centres of many great European cities, such as Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris and similar urban planning solutions for the medieval centres of Vienna, Budapest and Brussels, reached Prague belatedly. While the first thoughts concerning a slum clearance in Prague originated in the 1870s, it was only in 1893 that the law was passed which allowed for the extensive full-scale demolition and creation of a modern district in the city centre. The area sacrificed was the most neglected part of the city's urban core: the old Jewish ghetto in the Josefov district and an adhering section of the Old Town, Prague's oldest district. However, the Prague slum clearance, which commenced in the mid-1890s and consisted of the demolition of 620 historic buildings, was not the only building project that was implicated in the eradication of a vast number of houses of architectural merit and in the erosion of the very complex fabric of the city's medieval street plan. The advantages of building entrepreneurship in the period of general economic boom in the 1880s had already resulted in the gradual introduction of new buildings into the city's highly compact historic layout. In Prague's historic quarters – Old Town, New Town, Josefov, Malá Strana and Hradčany – close to one and a half thousand houses were demolished in the course of only two decades at the turn of the 20th century, which statistically amounts to half of all residential housing. Of that total, a third was demolished in the course of development work listed as slum clearance and organised by the Prague municipal authorities, while the remaining two-thirds were demolished through private construction and entrepreneurial activities. The districts on the left bank of the Vltava – Hradčany with Prague Castle and Malá Strana – were least affected. In contrast, the greatest changes took place on the right bank, where the residential area of Josefov was entirely wiped out and the Old and New Towns were partially destroyed.

It is not at all surprising that the demolition of old bourgeois houses provoked a wave of **disapproval** amongst the Czech cultural elite. Alongside the individual style and picturesque





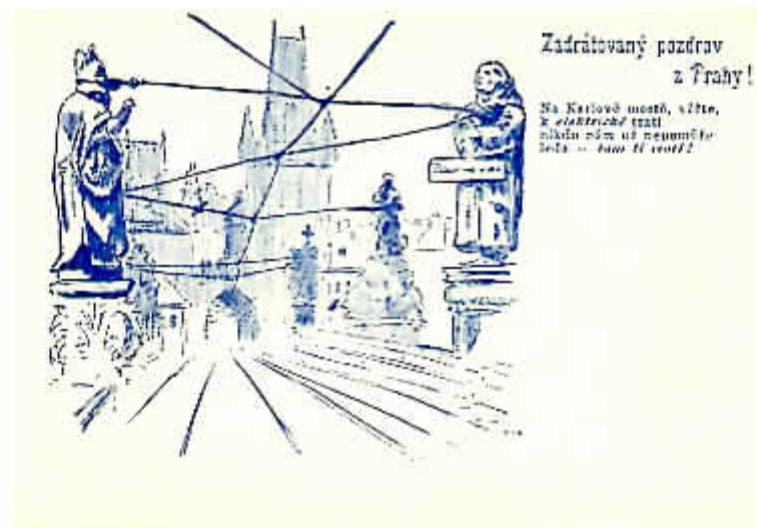
Demolition of Prague's ghetto
with the construction of
Pařížská street

charm of these buildings, often renovated in a number of architectural styles, the houses also provided material evidence of the city's architectural development from its earliest days. What quickly became evident was the futility of protest directed against particular cases of demolition, for the demolition works began to spread at such a pace that the very essence of Prague as a historic city seemed to be disintegrating. It was impossible for anyone to predict when and at what stage of damage would the demolition be halted. The first exceptionally fierce criticism, entitled *To the Czech Nation!*, was published in the daily press at Easter, on the 5th of April 1896. With the emotional pathos typical of the period, its author, the Czech writer Vilem Mrštík, addressed the



nation with the following words: *"Prague is not the property of only a few people, it is the property of us all, and it is the people alone, championed by each and every individual, who have the right to decide its destiny".* Moreover, he stirred up the public and issued a call to arms: *"We do not want this to be only a Platonic protest against the vandalism being perpetrated on our hundred-spired, lovely Prague. We know how little effect such a protest would have. We call on the entire nation to speak up in its mighty voice and declare its will".* The protest, signed by dozens of significant public figures such as writers, painters, architects, MPs, was prodigiously well received. The press published texts daily voicing further support. Various protest meetings followed, as well as student and platform

Demolition of
Prague's ghetto with
the construction of
Platněfská street



Caricature of the
electric wiring at
Charles Bridge,
postcard

meetings, articles and reproving pamphlets; the most poignant of which was the article *Bestia triumphans*, filled with sharp irony and pitilessly direct criticism, whose author was again Vilém Mrštík. The public figures most actively involved in the protests, as well as other advocates of the idea *For Old Prague*, gradually formed a movement, and, on the 28th of January 1900, founded an association bearing the same name.

THE CHAOTIC SEARCH FOR WORKING METHODS

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The executive committee of the newly established association, the so-called *resident board*, rushed to work immediately and in earnest.



The conception of the new association's activities did not diverge from the scheme which had already proved efficient: that is, to compose a letter of protest, spread it in all directions and promote it by all means, and to exert pressure on the city and state authorities with the aid of allied personages and press. Nevertheless, it soon became obvious that the association's actions could not rest simply in the formulation of fervent protests. What was needed was studious, systematic work, qualified supervision and many hours spent in discussion during regular weekly meetings.

Many of the first conservation problems in which the *Society For Old Prague* intervened concerned the results of new transportation schemes. The network of electric tramlines was

Sketching indicating
the electric wiring at
Charles Bridge, Karel
Kluzáček, 1900

increasing in density in the city centre and it was planned that the network would even lead across the Gothic Charles Bridge, Prague's greatest attraction and the most characteristic feature of all its panoramic portrayals. However, that would have entailed obscuring the world-renowned view of Prague Castle's panorama with "electric wire netting". The *Society* did not succeed in preventing the installation of the tracks on the bridge, but, by means of an extensive protest campaign in which many other associations took part, it prompted an original technical solution that ensured that the tramcars were charged with an electrical current coming from the tracks below.

The construction of a rack railway up the steep Nerudova street, leading from Malostranské square directly to Prague Castle, was successfully opposed, while optimal alternatives were sought for further new tramlines originally designed to cut across the most valuable residential areas of the Old Town and Malá Strana. From the distance of a hundred years, the designs and alternatives that our predecessors in the *Society For Old Prague* proposed strike us now as unacceptable. However, aware of the tragic events the admirers of architectural heritage had witnessed in the Prague of those days, we must recognise that out of a number of inferior initiatives which permanently, insidiously and very realistically threatened this heritage, it was necessary to choose those that were least damaging. The abundance of alarming information, warnings and issues discussed and carefully checked – for it was almost impossible to guess how idle or truly important they could be – testifies that our predecessors found themselves in a situation which was not in the least part simple. Anything could happen in the Prague of those days, and it was impossible to argue that any significant historic building – with only the probable exception of Prague Castle and several large churches – would be spared in the next demolition. This is perhaps why the activities of the *Society For Old Prague* were so highly intense, almost overzealous, but at the same time very chaotic in the first years of its existence.

The old Kolkovna
building at Dlouhá
třída, demolished
in 1904



From dozens of houses designated for demolition during the first decade of the 20th century, the members of the Society's resident board chose only the most significant and led an assiduous struggle for their preservation - often to no avail. Their successes included, in 1902, the preservation of the façade of the Pauline monastery building (no. 930-I in the Old Town), the only historic building at the north end of the Old Town Square. However, they did not succeed in rescuing the nearby spacious building, the so-called *Kolkovna* (*House of Stamps*), in Dlouhá street (no. 922-I in the Old Town), which contained a medieval palace with a large courtyard and a prism-shaped tower concealed at its core. The gravest problem on the left bank of the Vltava, at Malá

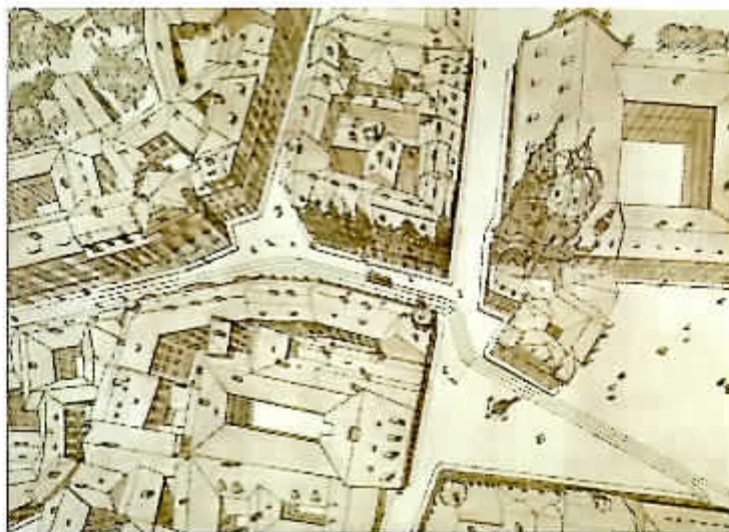
View of the Old Town Square before the slum clearance; on the left-hand side the town hall (its east wing was destroyed during the Second World War), centre: Kren's House (demolished in 1901); on the right-hand side, on the north side of the square, the Pauline monastery building, preserved due to the *Society's* intervention



The Society's
design for the
vacant site U Kijō,
corresponding to
the original mass
of the buildings
and with an
underpass for
trams



Design for new housing
at the vacant site
U Kijō, created in
the spirit of the slum
clearance



Strana, was the narrow end of Karmelitská street leading onto the Malostranské square, where an entire group of valuable, mainly Renaissance houses was torn down in the 1890s in order to widen the street enough to install tramlines. The search for the best design for this ungainly breach and the healing of this wound in the architecture of Malá Strana lasted for almost two decades. The *Society For Old Prague* advocated the construction of a new building in harmony with the volume and mass of the demolished urban ensemble, whose parterre would include an underpass for tramlines. Unfortunately, this design was not chosen.

NEW INSPIRATION

At the very end of the 20th century's first decade, the *Society For Old Prague* went through an important generation change. A number of young architects and art historians, the majority of them still students, joined the resident board. They did not just bring young blood into the organisation – they departed from the original working methods of both the founding generation and its critics. Their methods included an active co-operation in resolving problems; they provided the *Society's* own proposals, including architectural designs, as well as its own expert opinions. It was an exceptional, extraordinary generation. Many of these young architects (Antonín Engel, Josef Chochol, Pavel Janák, Bohumil Hübschmann) later became extremely successful, and their works are now part of the history of Czech architecture. The same could be said about the role of Zdeněk Wirth, V. V. Štech and Antonín Matějček in the advance of Czech art history and art theory.

For almost two decades after 1905, the resident board of the *Society For Old Prague* was involved in development projects on the Vltava's embankment in the New Town district, where a dominantly positioned group of buildings of Na Slovanech or the so-called Emmaus monastery stood on an elevated terrain. The historic outline, strongly present in the panoramic views of the river's right bank, had lasted since the founding of the New Town in the mid-15th century. Now, in

the first decade of the 20th century, it was to be distorted by the construction of tall apartment blocks on a newly regulated embankment, obstructing the view of the monastery and its spacious church building. The architect Bohumil Hübschmann, one of the young members of the resident board of the *Society For Old Prague*, became deeply involved in this project. As of 1905, he developed several alternative designs for the new embankment complex, more heedful of the historic urban situation than those devised by the city's construction office. Fortunately, the debate concerning the planned layout for the development below the Emmaus monastery hindered the hasty construction of the problematic design, and other architects gradually presented their proposals. However, the First World War interrupted the selection of the most suitable design. After the War, the new Czechoslovak state reopened the question of a new development below the Emmaus monastery as a possible location for its new state institutions. Moreover, the centrally designed new square was deemed to be an excellent location for a monument dedicated to the soldiers of Prague origin who fell on the battlefields in the war. In the early 1920s, Bohumil Hübschmann was the architect selected to complete his pre-War designs for the complex below the Emmaus monastery, and it was his project that was finally executed in 1924-1929. It is composed as a set of buildings separated from the embankment by a park area. In 1932, a monument entitled *Prague to its Victorious Sons* was placed in the central space between the buildings. Bohumil Hübschmann, designer of the overall urban plan and architecture of the square, shaped the architecture of this elaborately figurative work created by the sculptor Josef Mařatka. (In the Second World War, the Nazis intentionally destroyed the monument. It was restored only in 1998, according to a preserved model). Needless to say, Hübschmann's overall composition of this urban complex demonstrates great respect towards the historic view of the Emmaus monastery buildings. The execution of this design, initiated by the *Society For Old Prague*, is what we today consider the greatest success of the *Society's* hundred-year-old history.

Embankment with the remains of original housing, from the period of the earliest disputes regarding the protection of the Emmaus monastery view, before 1907



Architect B. Hübschmann's project for Palackého square and the buildings of the ministries beneath the Emmaus complex



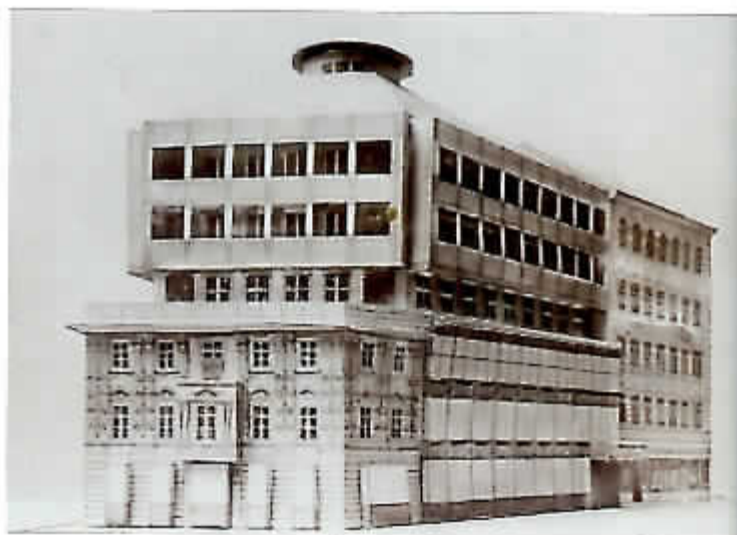


Contemporary view of the Emmaus complex
(the church façade was obliterated by a
bomb at the end of the Second World War; its
two towers were replaced in the 1960s)

The architects from the resident board of the *Society For Old Prague* proposed a number of original designs in an effort to save the so-called Braun's House (no. 730-II in the New Town) from being demolished. This building, dating from 1726 and owned by Matthias Bernard Braun, the most prominent sculptor of Czech Baroque, was an exceptionally valuable architectural jewel, highly unique within the usual morphology of the Baroque. However, its new owner was determined to use the plot to construct a taller and more lucrative building. The alternative designs by the architects Pavel Janák and Vlastislav Hofman proposed additional storeys, erected on columns over the mass of the original house, which would reach up to the level of the adjacent new



P. Janák's design for the preservation
of Braun's House, 1910



V. Hofman's design for the preservation
of Braun's House, 1910

buildings. Their projects would thus have provided the owner with the desired volume of the building while still preserving the most valuable quality of the original house – its façade. Although today we can hardly avoid feeling serious doubt with regard to these solutions, we must acknowledge their effort to preserve at least a section of this valuable building. We must also understand that the blending of historic architecture with new forms corresponded with the theory of the Austrian scholar and art historian Alois Riegel, whose ideas were unconditionally adopted by the *Society For Old Prague* in that period. This theory strongly objected to historicizing appendages and to completing a building in quasi-historic forms. It argued that the greatest value of a monument of architec-

Braun's House,
demolished in 1910



ture rested with the authentic material quality of all the different phases of its development, which it valued as historically and aesthetically equal. Unfortunately, the owner of the Braun's House rejected the design proposed by the *Society* and the house was demolished in 1910.

Another building threatened by demolition was a highly unique Renaissance edifice known as U Vejvodů (no. 353-I in the Old Town). Karel Klusáček, a member of the *Society For Old Prague*, gained recognition for the preservation of this building after buying it and offering part of it for rent to a number of associations. In 1909, the *Society* began using several rooms in this house, and this period, until the beginning of the First World War, can be considered as a time of great

flourishing in the *Society's* activities. Its membership base reached 900 members and its office staff included from one to three waged office clerks, who managed the extensive correspondence that amounted to twelve hundred letters sent annually - with the number of received letters being even higher. The members had at their daily disposal a library offering 400 literary titles and 87 (!) different periodicals. It had an equipped photo-chamber, and its photographic archive was systematically developed. Among others, its accessions included entries from a number of photographic competitions organised by the *Society*. It is worthy of note that, between 1911 and 1913, Bohumil Kubišta and Jan Zrzavý - two young men who were to become great Czech painters - earned their wages there as paid office clerks.

In order to manage the *Society's* public relations, communicate its opinions and present its own ideas for resolving problematic building developments, it was absolutely essential that the *Society* should establish its own journal. The first five volumes of the *For Old Prague* bulletin, published from 1910 until the outbreak of the First World War, were packed with topical news, information and theoretical essays, and illustrated with a large number of photographs, small plans and sketches. The bulletin's main contribution was that it presented the principles and practice of heritage preservation and the conservation of artworks of all categories. In this manner, it became a significant substitute for state conservation institutions. (The bulletin was published, with varying periodicity and pauses throughout both World Wars, until 1954. During the next forty-five years, only a miscellany of contributing articles was published, either half-yearly, yearly or every couple of years. On the occasion of its 100th anniversary in 2000, the *Society For Old Prague* returned to the bulletin's original concept of 1910, stating its respect and admiration for its predecessors.)

34 In 1910, another laborious and remarkable work was coming into existence under the organisation of the *Society For Old Prague* - a paper model of Malá Strana and Hradčany, the his-

U Vejvodů House, former
seat of the Society For Old
Prague



toric parts of Prague situated on the Vltava's left bank. The impetus for the creation of this model came from heated discussions about the impact of proposed interventions on the panoramic view of Malá Strana and Hradčany, which gradually rose from the Vltava towards the great tower of the St Vitus' Cathedral. The subtle harmony of the urban terrain, slowly formed over centuries, was easily disturbed. The model was thus meant to serve as a practical utility for testing the effects of new building developments upon the urban design of the two districts. The work on its creation continued gradually until 1941, under the supervision of the architect Bohumil Hübschmann. The project succeeded in winning state subventions for a number of years, thus providing for a team

1. NAME OF THE PARTY : THE NATIONAL FRONT FOR INDIA

[illegible]

the Czechoslovak Republic was created in 1918. For the *Society for Old Prague*, this year marked



two decades of challenging work and a great number of valuable experiences. The young generation of architects and art historians from within the association had, in the meantime, reached a mature age. Whilst having become highly prominent in the social, artistic and institutional life of the new state, they all remained faithful to the *Society For Old Prague*. Although still not founded legally, this meant practically that the heritage protection ideas – born and developed in the preceding period of crucial struggle with the engineering and entrepreneurial approaches to historic architecture – grew to be the predominant and, more or less, respected opinions held by the official authorities. It was this very fact that in the mid-1920s resulted in the founding of an

Model of Malá Strana
and Hradčany

opposition movement issuing from the positions of radical Modernism, which operated under the indicative name of *For New Prague*. It criticised the *Society For Old Prague* for exerting such an influence on the relevant municipal institutions during the twenty-five years of its existence that it had become absolutely impossible to construct a building in a new style in the city centre; that is, a tall building with a flat roof. While, according to them, the centre was laden with insignificant old houses, the beautiful modern architecture was being pushed out to the periphery... Unfortunately, the Modernists were not completely right. The influence of the *Society's* ideas was indeed great in this period, but it did not have an absolute predominance - as was proven in numerous cases.

As Prague Castle was yet again being transformed into the seat of the head of state, it underwent numerous adaptations that lacked any particular unifying concept. The *Society For Old Prague* criticised these chaotic proceedings, and its advice was that the work should be entrusted to a single creative individual. The *Society* supported the idea to appoint the Slovene architect Josip Plečnik as the Castle architect. The suggestion was accepted, and the period of Plečnik's engagement at Prague Castle represents a notable phase of the modern architectural history of this thousand-year-old seat of the head of the Czech state. It marked a period in which the historic architecture blended superbly with its modern finish, reaching a symbiotic union and revealing a compelling harmony of the old and the new.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the *Society For Old Prague* began to carefully monitor the development plans for the left bank of the Vltava, which encompassed a highly important vista: the foreground of the celebrated panoramic view of the Malá Strana, dominated by Prague Castle. The riverside neighbourhood of Malá Strana is formed by an island called Kampa, which is separated from the mainland by an arm of the Vltava known as Čertovka. Kampa has always been chiefly an area of gardens and mills, which is why this green belt bordering the river has a characteristic panoramic quality and, in the view of the *Society For Old Prague*, is worthy of the highest

protection. The *Society* averted a dangerous proposal to cover up Čertovka, and various development proposals – first of all for a block of apartment buildings, then for a line of office buildings, and finally for a housing estate. Nonetheless, in 1922 the new state became fascinated by the idea of constructing a modern art gallery at Kampa. It promoted an architectural competition in which the design by the famous Czech architect Josef Gočár triumphed and, as early as 1927, the foundation stone for the gallery building was put in place. Although appreciating the worth of the newly designed building, which was low and richly partitioned, the *Society* found it difficult to accept its horizontal scope reaching across the entire island. The contour line of the new Kampa gallery was graphically demarcated in 1930, illustrating how conspicuously it would feature in the panoramic view of Malá Strana and Hradčany. Fortunately, this building was never completed – not so much because of the problematic demarcation but largely owing to the fact that the state, affected by an economic crisis, was reluctant to invest a large amount of its finances into a cultural enterprise.

These experiences in averting numerous threats to Malá Strana, the best preserved and least affected by demolitions of all Prague's districts, inspired the members of the *Society For Old Prague* to propose its nomination as a conservation area. Parallel to this, they were active in preparing a general policy for the regulation of historic quarters, ensuring that the principles of their historic urban planning would be respected – as would be their architectural and conservation merit. These proposals and attempts to formulate proper conservation legislation were applied only after the Second World War, when the official heritage institutions adopted the *Society's* pioneering and founding activities in the field of conservation theory and legislation.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Prague was troubled by typical metropolitan problems. The most pressing was the need to improve transportation links between the city centre and the outskirts, especially the northwest section separated from the centre by the Petřín hill, the incline with Prague Castle, and the slope known as Letná. Although historic routes already existed

Panoramic view of Malá
Strana and Prague Castle,
c. 1875



between these elevated sections of Prague, their capacity was insufficient for the demands of modern traffic. As a consequence, the so-called "Petřín thoroughfare" project was developed: a design for a road leading across the peaceful zone of greenery on top of Petřín hill which would substantially degrade the area. The city authorities discussed this issue for years and searched for optimal solutions for the thoroughfare route – whether it should be designed in serpentine or in a straight line, whether it should include all types of transport, together with trams, or be used only for cars, etc. On 1st of April 1937, the *Society For Old Prague* initiated a public protest meeting of



Design for a new housing development at Malá Strana embankment, drawing on a photograph, 1911



Probationary demarcation of the modern art gallery at Kampa Island, 1931

the municipal council to promote a public competition for a new project to improve Prague's communication links with its northwest sector. As a solution, the winning design proposed two tunnels – one below Petřín hill and the other below Letná. The architect Alois Kubiček, who in 1938 was the president of the *Society For Old Prague*, was part of the victorious team. (Both tunnels were later built and their value for present-day Prague is immeasurable.)

The minute but architecturally highly significant building of a garden pavilion on the left bank of the Vltava river, in the district of Smíchov, became one of the many victims of growing demands for quicker and safer traffic routes. This building, dating from 1735 and designed in the style of High Baroque, was the work of the famous Czech Baroque architect Kilián Ignác Dientzenhofer. The *Society* first intervened to protect the building in 1905; on that occasion the issue at stake was only the positioning of an embankment wall in the pavilion's proximity, and the *Society's* demand for an appropriate revitalisation of the pavilion's surroundings. In 1928, the building came under threat of demolition because of a planned new bridge across the river. The city representatives guaranteed to move the pavilion to a small park that was further south from its original location. The relevant city and conservation authorities discussed for over half a year the possibilities of transferring the pavilion without damaging it, as well as the particular technology for this transfer. After that, evidently on account of technical difficulties and the cost, the municipal council decided to demolish the pavilion. The *Society For Old Prague* postponed the execution of this decision by organising a protest meeting. It also made an effort to obtain the financial means to undertake the costly transfer. Unfortunately, the construction of the new bridge had in the meantime advanced to such a degree that it was impossible to wait any longer, and the city's decision regarding the pavilion's demolition was endorsed and executed.

During the 1920s the activity of the *Society For Old Prague* flourished outside Prague, in an unexpected but extremely gratifying manner. The *Society's* popularity was so great that, as early

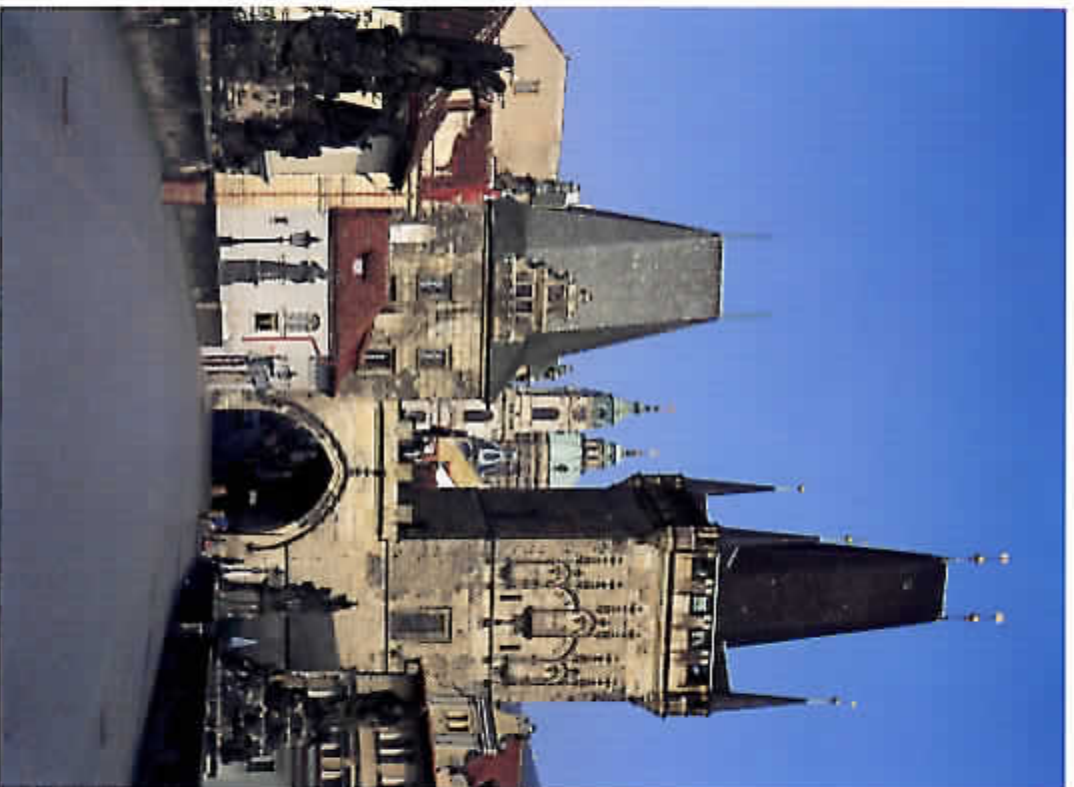
Pavilion designed
by the renowned
Baroque architect
K. I. Dientzenhofer,
demolished in 1928



as from 1910 onwards, interested parties in many Czech historic towns began establishing local branches. The volunteers in the towns of České Budějovice, Domažlice, Kutná Hora and Pelhřimov were the most committed, their branches being the most active. These local branches frequently featured in the association's magazine and Prague members regularly travelled to meet their colleagues in other towns, bringing with them advice and practical aid.

In 1927, the *Society For Old Prague* began renting an unusual building as its seat – a former Romanesque bridge tower, originally part of the now demolished Judith Bridge across Vltava. It is located on the left bank of the river, on Malá Strana, at the foot of the Charles Bridge, adjacent to

View of Charles Bridge
featuring the bridge towers
at Malá Strana; the one on
the left, Renaissance and
completed in the Renaissance
style, has been the seat of the
Society for Old Prague since
1927



From the exhibition of the 50th anniversary of the *Society For Old Prague* in the Museum of Decorative Arts, featuring photographs of the chief Communist leaders, an inevitable appendage of the period, 1950



a Gothic bridge tower of later date, and the *Society For Old Prague* has kept its premises on the three storeys inside this tower to this day.

THE SAFE HAVEN OF PASSIVITY

During the Second World War, the activity of the *Society For Old Prague* was suppressed for obvious reasons, but its usual working methods were re-established immediately after the end of the War. However, they were not to last for long. In February 1948, after a coup d'état, the so-called socialist society controlled by the Communist Party began to flourish in Czechoslovakia. The *Society For Old Prague* had an advantage in this new situation, as its mission was

Vinohrady market
building prior to
reconstruction



Former Těšnov railway
station, demolished in
1985

not obviously political, and the care of historic monuments became one of the proclaimed aims of the state's cultural policy. It was probably this very reason that successfully protected the Society's autonomy and independence in the early 1950s, when a new law regarding the status of associations was passed (just as the *Society For Old Prague* was celebrating the first fifty years of its existence). In an era which was extremely unfavourable to independent associations, in which practically all the pre-War associations were either abolished or became dysfunctional, it was almost a miracle that the *Society For Old Prague* survived without any breach of its legal status; however, there was a tendency to make it subordinate, as a group of volunteering collaborators, to a state conservation institution.



During the 1950s and 1960s many of the representatives of official Prague heritage institutions were also members of the resident board of the *Society For Old Prague*, which is why direct protests or independent public engagement proved unnecessary. The association's premises were used as a place for social gatherings of individuals with the same professional orientation and similar interests. The contents of the miscellany that the association published included articles loyally reporting the various events in the field of heritage protection, important archaeological findings and the results of architectural history research. Nevertheless, the *Society* did not publish any critiques or non-conforming commentaries. This was altered only during the late

1960s, when a brief moment of chance brought a relaxing of the political atmosphere. During this period, the *Society's* resident board openly criticised the construction of the so-called "Malá Strana tunnel", designed to direct heavy traffic underneath the territory of Malá Strana and Kampa Island, which would have resulted in a number of irreversible urban intrusions. The *Society's* protest against the intended construction of an underground railway was another important public contribution. The *Society* published a memorandum entitled *Beware!*, which expressed its fears of the vital losses in the urban structure that would be caused by the construction of this railway, whose shallow routes were devised to lead not only underneath the streets but also below the houses in the historic centre. If these houses did not fall victim to the construction works, they would almost certainly be damaged or destroyed by the traffic. Fortunately for these buildings of architectural merit, in 1967 – after a period of dramatic hesitation – the state institutions voted for an underground metro system recommended by the Soviet experts. However, its construction – especially its stations – still entailed the demolition of valuable historic urban ensembles.

After the mid-1970s, the association's public activities focused on the preservation of the former Těšnov railway station building – a graceful neo-Renaissance edifice dating from 1878, ideal as a potential cultural location. Unfortunately, however, the building was partly in the way of a future elevated highway, whose design was the pride of the city representatives and their political leadership at that time. The building was brutally done away with in March 1985. Two other neo-Renaissance buildings were meant to share its destiny: a school building in the Žižkov district, left as the last small island of an old urban structure in the midst of new apartment blocks, and a market building in the district of Vinohrady, which was to be replaced with a new edifice. The efforts of the *Society For Old Prague* were crowned with success in both cases, and the two buildings have survived to this day.

The alleys of Prague,
photograph for a
competition, 1924



Our contemporary concerns

The fall of the Communist regime in 1989 marked a turning point in the life of our entire country. Not surprisingly, in the years of turbulent changes that followed, the face of Prague also became transformed, as a long period of slow devastation and deterioration of the city's historic core was replaced by a sudden construction 'boom'. The impetuosity and haste of this process can only be compared to the late 19th century – the period when the *Society For Old Prague* was founded. Indeed, one could say that history is repeating itself here. The majority of houses in Prague's historic core are jeopardised by reconstructions that threaten to wipe out their historic character altogether, while others had to give way to new, taller buildings. In such circumstances, heritage conservation often literally means a struggle for the very substance of a historic building. This is why we have witnessed an unparalleled revival of the *Society's* activities in the last ten years. Due to its political and economic independence, the *Society's* role seems once more to be as vital as it was during the first daring years following its foundation.

To attempt to evaluate a period which still belongs more to the present than to the past is undoubtedly very difficult. In time, we will be able to perceive everything from an appropriate distance with, hopefully, more impartiality. Nevertheless, to prevent the recurrence of certain grave mistakes engendered by the turbulent times, we must endeavour today to define the main phenomena of the period that has just past. Moreover, this is essential in the current situation where, even after more than ten years, steps that should have been undertaken at the very beginning of this period are still awaiting completion. Here, in particular, we have in mind the institution of basic requirements, such as the definition of the rules for new developments and for the reconstruction of existing buildings of architectural merit in the historic centre of Prague. What we can say with certainty at the outset of this evaluation is that the gravest problem for Prague in the 1990s was the absence of appropriate rules that would regulate the built-up area of the historic centre of this city, which, in 1992, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Ledeborská zahrada

Lobkovičská zahrada

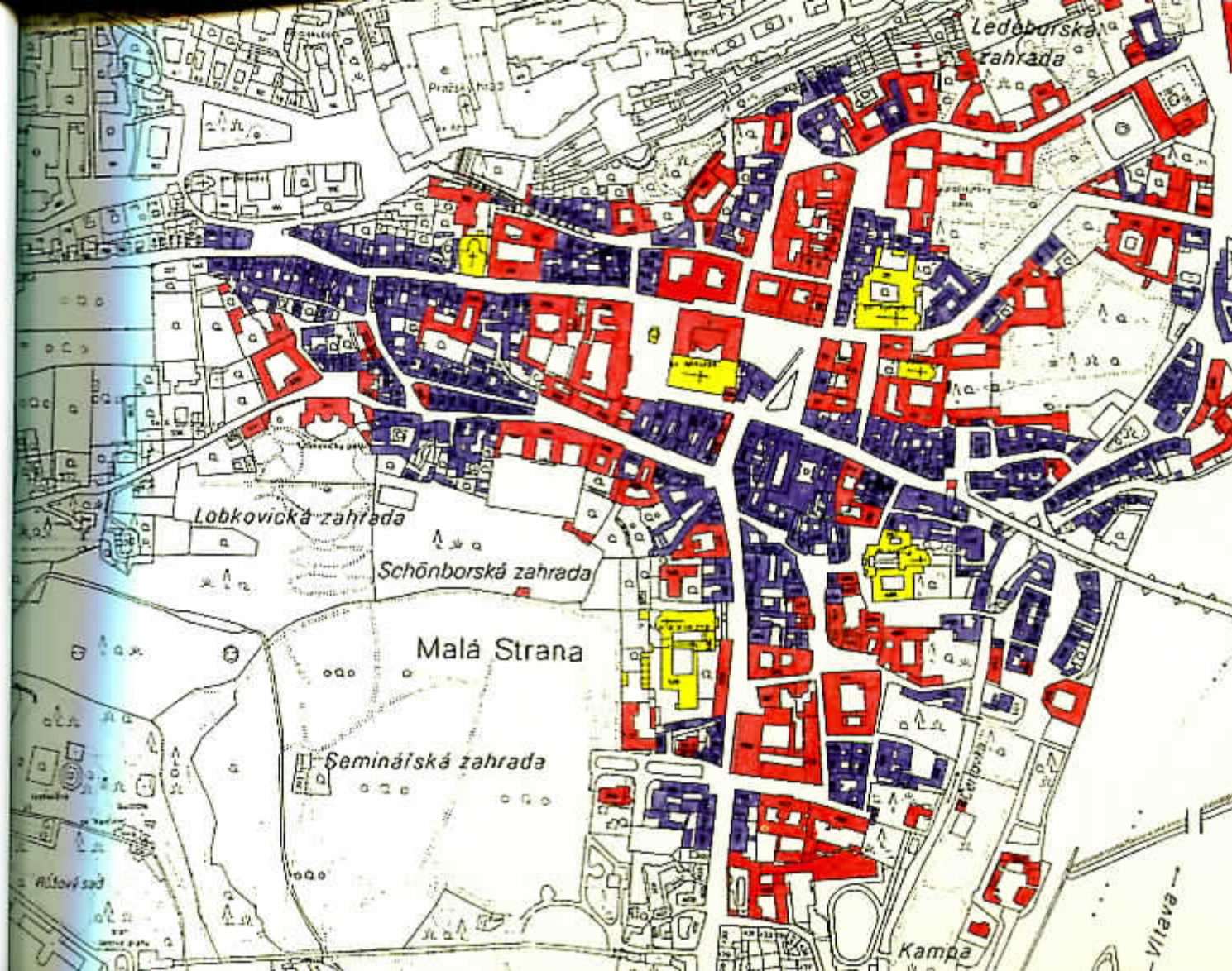
Schönborská zahrada

Malá Strana

Seminářská zahrada

Kampa

Vltava



CHANGES IN THE CITY'S HISTORIC CENTRE

In many respects, 1990 found the city's core in a state that was peculiar and, in comparison to other European metropolises, somewhat unnatural. The long years without maintenance had left their mark on most buildings, and the symptomatic shabbiness of the ancient houses had lent the city a strange, almost mystical atmosphere. To an outsider it could have appeared that, inside the city, time had come to a standstill. Tenants from all sections of society occupied the various houses, and the most beautiful and currently exclusively tourist areas of Malá Strana and Hradčany formed a village of a kind in the very heart of the city. There were no banks operating on the main streets, no expensive restaurants or shops with exclusive goods. On the other hand, there were ordinary bakeries, chemists' dispensaries, pubs and bookshops around which revolved the everyday lives of ordinary citizens.

All this changed almost overnight as Prague became the most frequently visited European city of the early 1990s. The buildings were returned to their original owners and the real estate prices rose steeply, generating an enormous pressure to realise a lucrative exploitation of each and every square metre of property. In the course of this short period the atmosphere in the city was almost completely transformed, initiating the processes which will take a long time for the city to overcome; such as the depopulation of the city centre, the massive conversion of apartments within historic buildings into more lucrative office spaces, and a rushed construction of new office buildings in vacant sites - most of which had been reserved for buildings of special importance to the city.

THE DEMOLITION AND CARELESS RECONSTRUCTION OF THE BUILT HERITAGE

One of the major fiascos of these turbulent times was the loss of the neo-Baroque Špaček House in Petřská district, which was replaced by a new building despite being one of the oldest edifices in the general vicinity. In its place, in very close proximity to the Romanesque church of St Peter, a new

Špaček House,
demolished



New building on the
location of the former
Špaček House, in
the vicinity of the
Romanesque church
and tower of St Peter





Façade of the Darex building,
with an entirely new
structure protruding above
the cornice



The breach left after the
demolition in 1999 of the Baroque
house in Vodičkova street

office building of very tasteless design was erected, attempting, unsuccessfully, to hide its actual height behind a massive cornice which was apparently supposed to help it merge with the subtle scale of the surrounding houses. At the time the entire cultural elite protested in vain against the demolition, the most outspoken of whom was the director of the National Heritage Institute who, as a consequence of this, was presently removed from her office.

The "reconstruction" of the Darex building on Wenceslas Square provoked a similar wave of disapproval. In this case only the façade was retained from the historic structure, behind which an entirely new building was erected. Such a method, being of course entirely inconsistent with the

Parental home of Jaroslav Hašek,
author of *The Good Soldier Švejk*
and *His Fortunes in the World War*,
so far preserved



basic principles of conservation, was later applied in the city centre on numerous other occasions, and the danger represented by it continues to be a burning issue.

Furthermore, several Neo-Classical buildings from the first half of the 19th century were knocked down to provide space for new buildings. Even substantially older houses did not escape demolition – one can mention here the eradication of three houses in Vodičkova street in the New Town, which were the last to illustrate the historic width of the street and whose Gothic cores belonged to the time of the founding of the district by Charles IV in the mid-14th century. A similar fate recently threatened the Neo-Classical building in Školská street, whose importance, moreover, is

Increased by the fact that it was here that the writer Jaroslav Hašek, author of the famous novel *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War*, was born in 1883. The building was finally rescued through the joint efforts of the state heritage office and the independent professional organisations (alongside the *Society For Old Prague*, these organisations included the Czech Society of Art History and the Institute for Art History at the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic).

The number of negligently reconstructed houses is of course much greater. Let us, however, note here one shameful example – the turning of the church of St Michael into a kitschy St Michael Mystery Show. This house of worship, which was already a parish church in the 13th century and one of the Old Town's most important temples, was last reconstructed in the Gothic style in the mid-14th century, while its final adaptations date from the late Baroque period at the latter half of the 18th century. Its blighted fate began with the deconsecration of the church in the period of the reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph II of Austria in the late-18th century, after which the temple's interior was divided into separate floors and used as storage space for the next 200 years or so. Nevertheless, its Baroque interior, including details of the profiles of its columns and mouldings, remained remarkably well preserved despite the aforementioned reconstructions, and, after 1990, it seemed that the church would be restored to its rightful condition at last. Instead of the requisite restoration, however, the temple was further degraded, and even the impressive protests of the Czech cultural elite could not halt this process. At present this former church is a nightclub with a prospering restaurant in its loft, and there is no indication that this disgraceful state of affairs will change.

The so-called loft adaptations – in fact, new apartments constructed inside the historic area of Prague's roofs – are another major problem for the historic centre. Their main drawback is the creeping but ultimately massive change they will wreak upon the highly valuable outline of the ancient Prague roofs, as almost each adaptation requires the construction of new dormer-

Façade of the church
of St Michael, hiding
the St Michael Mystery
[Show](#)



windows or non-original skylights. Moreover, the adaptations have in most cases damaged the historic roofs, often 300 years old or more, with Gothic roofs dating from the 14th century being no exception.

Of the monuments of modern architecture, the interior of the unique Functionalist Juliš Hotel by the architect Pavel Janák, dating from 1932, was utterly destroyed through reconstruction. This case was a crude violation of the conservation law, since the new owner demolished parts of the building without consulting the conservation authorities. The hotel's unique coffeehouse, which extended over two floors of the building and was the heart of Prague's social and cultural



View of the Old Town
roofs from the tower
of the church of St
Giles, photograph for a
competition, 1908

life in the 1930s, was entirely ruined as a result of this. We cannot really expect that its replica – which the new owner apparently aims to create – will be an appropriate replacement for the original coffeehouse interior.

NEW BUILDINGS IN THE HISTORIC CENTRE

New buildings in the city centre, erected on sites that had been vacant for years, are a problem in their own right. Unfortunately, we must say that, in the majority, these buildings typify the effort to gain maximum profit from a given piece of real estate. Such an attitude leads to the situation where a new building fills its entire



Objectionable roof adaptation,
1990s



Baroque House at Kampa in the vicinity of Charles Bridge; its roof
also faces the threat of a possible adaptation

allotment and, moreover, considerably overtops its surroundings. Furthermore, new buildings do not respect the historic urban allocation, and ungainly colossi rise in the place of several houses – damaging the subtle scale of their historic surroundings. This was the unscrupulous manner in which the Myslbeck office and shopping centre entered a line of older buildings, filling the lots of what used to be five individual buildings – including their adjacent gardens, which had been removed after a bank was planned for this location during the 1920s. The integration within the historic surroundings was not made any more successful by the imitation of a mansard roof or the simulated division of the façade into several separate units – the mass of this colossus, rising

substantially above its surroundings, unfortunately dominates a very wide area both in close-up and long-distance views.

The planned new building of the Astra Palace, at the bottom corner of Wenceslas Square, grew to represent an analogous problem. The city had sold a small but extremely exposed lot to a private investor, who introduced the idea of a high-rise tower block that would become the most imposing building in the city centre. The urban layout of Wenceslas Square and its vicinity dates from the period of the founding of the New Town in 1348, while the Old Town, on whose edge the intended building is to be located, has an urban structure dating from as early as the 12th and 13th centuries. At the end of the 19th century, the neo-Renaissance building of the National Museum effortlessly grew to dominate the architecture of Wenceslas Square, with all of the other buildings slowly graduating towards its mass.

The suggested tower in the lower part of the Square would impair this natural gradation and become an unacceptably placed projection in its urban layout. After long discussions, an agreement was reached to reduce the height of the tower to the level of the small corner tower of the Koruna Palace, situated on the opposite side of the Square. Nevertheless, despite their corresponding heights the two buildings differ substantially - what in the case of the Koruna Palace is only a sculpturally treated accent at the corner of the building corresponds, in the case of the new building opposite, to two standard office floors. We can only commiserate that the city of Prague, rather than sell the lot, did not endeavour instead to build, for example, a city information centre here, whose form would not be defined by the pressure for the maximum exploitation of each and every square metre of the building but by the architectural qualities of the prospective design.

The construction of the spacious administrative Longin Business Centre in the closest proximity to the Romanesque rotunda of St Longinus, dating from the 12th century, is another unfortunate example of a new architecture built inside a historic context. A single block took the

Interior of the Juliš
Hotel coffeehouse,
demolished in the
course of the 1990s



place of a long defunct cemetery and some demolished Neo-Classical buildings, and the minute church next to it now seems more like a piece of city paraphernalia than a building in its own right. As a consequence of this, all the new building's potential qualities have been eradicated by the inappropriate scale it has introduced into its historic surroundings.

The so-called Dancing House on the Vltava's embankment, designed by the architects Frank Gehry and Vlado Milunić, is one of the very few successful examples of a new building located within the city centre, whose highly modern architecture was composed into a row of architecturally imposing historicist buildings along the embankment. In the example of the



Historic buildings
on the south side
of Ovocný trh,
demolished in
1930

Dancing House, we can clearly see the crucial influence of the investor on the future appearance of the building. The Dutch company Nationale Nederlanden wisely allowed the architects' creative flight to unfold without the pressure of the constantly voiced demands for a maximum exploitation of each and every square metre of the expensive lot. Owing to this accent on the architectural quality, the Dancing House – which at the time of its creation divided Prague into two very opposed factions of supporters and adversaries – is today one of the city's popular tourist attractions.



Façade of the
 Mysibek shopping and
 administrative centre
 facing Ovocný trh,
 completed in 1996

MAIN CAUSES OF THE UNFORTUNATE SITUATION AND THE ROLE OF THE SOCIETY FOR OLD PRAGUE IN THE AFOREMENTIONED ISSUES

There are several main causes for the aforementioned situation. What lies at the very core of the problem is the fact that, at the beginning of the 1990s, neither the city nor the conservation bodies were prepared for such a rapid growth of building activity. No rules were set down to define the conditions under which new developments would be allowed in the city centre – simply because at the time of Communism it was either the case of nothing being built in the city or, considering the unlimited power of the ruling party, there being no need to set any rules at all. A short decree proclaimed by the municipal authorities in 1985



Recently constructed Astra
Palace in the lower section of
Wenceslas Square

thus remained the only regulatory article that, in terms of conservation, set certain limits to the reconstruction and new developments in the city's urban core. In the early 1990s, it had already become obvious that this decree had to be made more accurate and grounded upon an urban regulation plan that would provide a backing both for the city and for the building contractors. Nonetheless, what finally happened was that the municipal authorities abolished the decree in 1997 without providing any replacement. We can only speculate what lay behind such a decision. Nevertheless, it remains clear that the absence of binding rules opens a wide loophole for all manner of speculation and corruption.



The so-called Dancing House
by the architects F. Gehry
and V. Milunić at Rašínovo
embankment,
completed in 1997

An inadequate heritage law, created under Communism and highly inappropriate after the changes that took place in 1989, creates an additional problem. All attempts to make substantial amendments fell through in the face of insufficient interest demonstrated by the country's politicians to responsibly resolve these delicate and complex problems for the protection of the country's cultural heritage. The situation is further obscured by the fact that very often the current law is not complied with. Thus, any effectiveness that it could still provide is reduced to an absolute minimum.

The last grave problem is the intricate system of heritage protection, with two parallel conservation bodies active in Prague - one managed by the state and the other by the city. However,

the city office, which is frequently influenced by local or political interests, has the final say in the matter. In effect, the two institutions repeatedly issue contradictory views, turning an already rather complex situation into an insoluble labyrinth for the ordinary citizen. Needless to say, the inconsistencies of the two institutions create a corruptive environment and undermine the authority of the conservation bodies in the eyes of the architects, the building contractors, and the general public.

The chaos that emerged in the 1990s once again confirmed the indispensable role of the *Society For Old Prague* as an independent specialist authority making every effort to prevent the worst breaches in the historic appearance of the city. The *Society* was highly active in all the aforementioned situations, as well as in many others. Being an independent civic association, the *Society* has limited possibilities and the power of its voice is solely moral and carries no legal weight whatsoever. Nevertheless, it has in many cases already succeeded in preventing the worst from happening – be it by stirring up timely media attention, by appealing to higher authorities, or by nominating the threatened building to become part of the national heritage. Furthermore, the members of the *Society* are active in the various advisory boards and committees (such as the academic board of the Czech Ministry of Culture, the advisory board of the Prague Lord Mayor's office, the academic board of the National Heritage Institute, and others) where, in direct discussions about the various projects, they offer opinions which allow a monument to be preserved or a new building to be sensitively composed within a historic environment.

PRAGUE'S SUBURBS – THE CITY'S FUTURE

Prague is usually perceived as a mono-centric city dominated by the silhouette of Hradčany. At the beginning of the 1990s, this perception led all the business activities of the flourishing society to focus on the relatively small territory of Prague's historic core. Nevertheless, this central core is surrounded with a zone of historic suburbs whose numerous vacant lots unambiguously invite the construction of full-value urban



spaces. After the capacities of the city centre were exhausted in the mid-1970s, as it was being literally choked up with administrative and trading areas, the attention of the investors finally turned to the former suburbs.

It would be logical to expect that the city would have used those five or so years of minimal interest in its suburbs to prepare their regulation plans. Instead of a carefully planned development taking into account the needs and the future of the entire city, however, what usually happened in the reconstruction of these suburbs mainly repeated the situation we know so well from the historic centre – a strong investor would single out a territory and submit a completed



Facade of the
Ringhoffer factory
before the factory's
demolition in 2000

vision of the future formation of that particular location, from which he would be very reluctant to compromise by so much as an inch. The relevant town hall would then attempt in vain to define certain rules in retrospect. Besides regulating the height and volume of the new buildings, these rules should ideally serve to define the proportion of administration, trading, and residential units that are vital for the normal functioning of the city. It all usually ends with a compromise, which does involve a certain limitation as to the building's height and volume, yet cannot interfere with the building's function. As a result of this, further buildings that are exclusively office and shopping centres are built, where all life ends after the closing hours of the shops situated within their premises.



Façade of the Carrefour supermarket, completed in 2000



Golden Angel shopping and administrative centre designed by Jean Nouvel, completed in 2000



This is very much the manner in which the heart of Smíchov has been reconstructed during the last three years, where – apart from the attractive Angel building designed by the French architect Jean Nouvell – ostentatious office buildings, multi-cinemas and supermarkets have risen. The price that was paid for these new buildings was a reckless clearance of vast factory areas dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whose large assembly shops and hangars could have been incorporated into the new buildings without much difficulty, enhancing them with additional value and style. Instead, as if mocking the conservation authorities, only a single Secessionist front façade of one of the factories has been left, becoming only a piteous backdrop

Photograph with the demarcation
of the future skyscrapers
at Pankrác, as indicated in
R. Meier's and J. Eisler's design

for the truly trivial new building that rose above it. The reconstruction of the centre of Smichov realised thus far can, on the whole, be evaluated as a wasted opportunity to bring new life to this old industrial district close to the historic urban core, a gloomy locale of factories that is being transformed into an area of business and administration. Furthermore, the reconstruction plans did not include any apartment blocks whatsoever, thus excluding from the area all the pertinent elements that inevitably participate in the organic life of a city - parks, children's playgrounds or even a square as an elementary component of a city's organism.

The results of the reconstruction of the Neo-Classicist suburb of Karlín are far superior, with the individual factory buildings slowly being adapted to serve new purposes ranging from business administration to housing and culture. The gradual reconstruction provides the continuity so crucial for any area, and the creative approach often results in exceptionally attractive buildings.

The completion of Pankrác, which has troubled the architects of every generation for the last half-century, is a problem in its own right. This height-oriented district, placed on the southern border of the historic urban core, was in the 1960s designated as a kind of *La Défense* of Prague. This resulted in the construction of a number of very tall buildings, which, owing to their exposed position, make their presence felt in the wider context of the panoramic view of historic Prague. The architects Richard Meier and John Eisler, who only last year designed a project for the completion of the Pankrác plane, envisaged it as a conclusion of the 1960s idea, planning the construction of further skyscrapers - some of which would rise one third above the level of the existing buildings.

This daring project has divided the professional public into two factions. Its supporters find it the most appropriate, and, indeed, the only possible solution for the problem of completing the development of Pankrác. In their opinion, the existing freestanding or horizontally extended housing units have already established the necessity to complete the original idea. The critics, on the other hand, point out that the construction of skyscrapers on such an exposed site in the

historic centre of the city was a mistake from the very beginning, which cannot be set right by erecting additional sky-scraping buildings. Quite the reverse, this can only further complicate the problem. The *Society For Old Prague* endorses the latter opinion – sky-scraping buildings do not belong in close proximity to the historic urban tissue, with the panoramic view of Prague Castle and Hradčany as its only dominant feature. The arguments portraying skyscrapers as the modern equivalent of Prague Castle, which were voiced in the discussion, are rather absurd in this context, for a commercial centre could never counterbalance the culturally dominant environment of Prague Castle, which has for a thousand years been the seat of Czech kings as well as the spiritual centre of the entire city. Furthermore, the planned construction of skyscrapers would not provide the final solution to the problem. On the contrary, it would reactivate the process, as one sky-scraping building would only provoke the building of the next one. In the course of several years this manner of construction could outweigh all others in the southern section of the city, thus bringing an end to Prague's thousand-year-old urban structure.

CONCLUSION

This short stroll through the Prague of the 1990s has revealed a number of serious problems that the city is still facing today. Those were also challenging years for the *Society For Old Prague* and the ideas with which it was founded over a hundred years ago. Moreover, this period has left us with a valuable lesson that apparently could not be learnt without certain losses. The role of the *Society* in the process has remained clear – to endeavour to keep the impairments of this turbulent period to a minimum. The historic face of the city, however, is a fragile image, easily damaged or even broken. The changes in its structure are irreversible, and we are, at every moment, making decisions whose consequences can be measured in centuries.

72 Prague is presently undergoing a difficult internal test, such as every city of its significance and repute must apparently face at a certain phase in its growth. Some twenty or thirty years

ago, other European cities experienced very similar periods in their development. They did not all emerge from this period successfully, and many of the once lively historic cities have now become dead administrative ghettos where the everyday life that is the true soul of any city has been lost. Other cities were irreversibly disfigured by the ill-judged construction of sky-scraping or oversized buildings within older urban structures of a smaller scale. As a result, they have lost the most valuable quality of a historic city – its historic urban planning with a clear hierarchy of squares, streets and small alleys, and its natural relief dominated by towers crowning its temples and city halls...

We could say that Prague has not yet crossed its Rubicon. The problematic interventions we mentioned here have not yet reached the scale at which it would be possible to speak of a loss of the city's historic character. So far – we must add. The level of a historic environment's tolerance can be arrived at sooner than we think. When this happens, it will be too late for rectification.

Life in a historic city implies, above all, responsibility – both towards the past generations who created it, and towards the future generations who we will pass it on to. This responsibility cannot be renounced by a political act or by a loud proclamation driven by a transitory need for a proposed development. Such action is shortsighted and very dangerous, for our deeds are nothing but pearls on the long necklace of the thousand-year-old history of this city. One thing, however, is clear: if we do not lose our strength or give up hope, what will lay at the end of this arduous path will be the intact, living image of our city, which is rightly celebrated as one of the most beautiful in the world.

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