

ARCHITECTURAL PRAGUE

When we hear the name "Prague", we immediately identify it as the capital of Czechoslovakia. However, what we may not know about Prague is its architectural history, that is, the role played by the various architectural eras of the past in the development of this city. I will now attempt to develop this aspect of Prague in some detail.

Few of the cities of Europe have chanced to have as fine a site as Prague. The soil on which the historic city stands is pliable, varies in quality, and the natural outlines it has formed within the city are the basis of its monumental beauty. The several hills which rise in a transverse manner above the river Vltava provide a scaffolding which the river's broad ribbon knits together. The river is transformed into a lake within the city, which mirrors the dominating architectural features: the Lesser City and Castle Hill.

Upon this site the development of a thousand years has produced architectural achievement of great sculptural force, unique in dramatic outline and charming in detail, a complex architectural synthesis in which history and art meet harmoniously and which has accorded a place to all trends of Europe, an architecture which extends from the tenth to the twentieth century. To this day, the architectural highlights hold the drama of the city's evolution. The story is on a vast scale and of a high order of artistic achievement. At first only a huddle of scattered medieval settlements, Prague has been fused in the course of the centuries into a large urban unit. In the making of this variegated architectural pattern all the styles of our age have played their part.

The gradual assumption of definite architectural outline starts with the city's entry into history in the tenth century. The basic components of the urban organism were the two focal points: the Knights' Castles of Hradcany and Vysehrad, and the "suburbs" nestling beneath them on both banks of the river, the market centre of Tyn and the foreign traders' colonies. The first monumental structures, contrasting to the artistically insignificant architecture of the common population at the various settlements, were the stone edifices of castles and churches, Judith Bridge,

and the steepled and spired domestic buildings of the patrician burghers. This romanesque urban nucleus still conformed to the primitive, tangled street pattern, with few and sparsely built-up areas. A compact urban pattern did not emerge until the first half of the thirteenth century with the growth of the Old Town as the result of proper enclosure and intensive building-up in what was already a mature form of gothic. From this period until the 1350's, the gothic age gave rise to further urban groupings, representing at the same time differentiated medieval patterns of settlement in terms of civic law as well as architectural form. This period includes the gradual development of the Lesser City, the Castle District and the new city of Prague. The building of the new quarters which paralleled the growth of the Old Town until the end of the fourteenth century, marks the flowering of high gothic. It received its greatest impetus and attained its highest level in the arts of the royal court during the reigns of Charles IV and Wenecslas. Gothic influence lingered far into the sixteenth century and continued to determine the architectural character of the city. The renaissance, however, brought with it a profound rebuilding which affected the entire city. Yet, although the renaissance impinged on practically every single component of the structural pattern, it failed to dislodge the city's medieval lay-out.

It remained for the sweeping power of the baroque period to displace the medieval urban pattern, and to recreate it in terms of a new architectural and sculptural drama of magnificent outline and monumental climaxes on both banks of the river. This intensive transformation brought about by the baroque era completely changed the architectural picture in large outline as well as in detail, and gave Prague different scale and different quality. A new architectural balance was struck especially in the early baroque period, later seventeenth century, which forcibly grafted new fortifications on the vast new complexes of monasteries and palaces upon the original lay-out. The city's new silhouette did not fully emerge until, in the early nineteenth century, the architectural accents were shifted on both banks of the river, the slopes of the hills of Prague were turned into terraced gardens, and throughout the city intense work of rebuilding and adaptation went on which affected all levels of the architectural picture. The replanning of streets and squares and the detailed transformation of the urban pattern of the gothic and renaissance ages in material and outline are characteristic of this period.

The architectural development of Prague ceased to produce new values at about the middle of the eighteenth century. The artistic assets of the city were much depleted by the practice of desecration and destruction of churches, chapels, monasteries and churchyards and the adaption of these buildings to secular purposes which the reforms of the Emperor Joseph brought in their trail.

The technique of modern industrial civilization which began to supersede the artistic line of urban development at the turn of the nineteenth century, did not alter the character of Prague as a baroque city over the next half century. The classicism of the French Empire, and the romantic style which succeeded it did no more than supplement the urban picture by a new embankment of the river, the construction of the first Iron Bridge, the building of walls on the filled-in moats, and the creation of new parks and suburban districts. The latter half of the nineteenth century, however, brought radical transformation: destruction of the fortifications, new embankment of the river bed within the city area, the development of the new suburban districts, replanning and sewage improvements in the old quarters, all these contributed to change the architectural picture. But this extensive activity no longer produced a specific architectural idiom. The new blocks and quarters were schematically imposed on the old environment in terms of ground plan. On the new buildings all the architectural styles of the preceding centuries were used in turn. About the turn of the century, a healthy reaction set in. This reaction took the form both of the spontaneous movement for the protection of ancient Prague, an endeavour for the deliberate development of the city on the basis of the technical, social, and artistic principles of modern urban planning, and of a demand for new architectural patterns. Though the twentieth century saw the fruit of these efforts in the sweeping building development of the fast-growing capital city of the Czech Republic, the quality of the artistic solution was not in harmony with the quantitative rate of growth. Modern Prague as an architectural organism does not sustain comparison with the artistic legacy of past centuries. It will be the task of future planning to place these new urban quarters on an equal basis with the still existing old sections.

The noble synthesis of medieval and baroque, which gives the architecture of Prague its unique quality, represents the architecture of the continent only in a small measure but signifies its greatness.

—KRISTINA MOYSIYAKHA '53.

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