

# Plečnik, President, and Hippodrome

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JAN BAŽANT

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In 1918, when the Habsburg Empire collapsed, the Czech lands became a democratic state. The Prague castle, the past seat of Habsburg emperors, became the presidential residence of the Czechoslovak Republic. Its first president, Tomáš G. Masaryk, set it as his goal to convert the old castle into a symbol of the new democracy.<sup>1</sup> It was assumed that architect Jože Plečnik realised his ideas.<sup>2</sup> Recently, Tomáš Valena returned to this assumption, and restated the main arguments in its favour. He sees 'a democratic nature' of Plečnik's reconstruction of the Prague Castle in the following features: "transparency, successive openings of the castle grounds to the public, discursiveness, the anthropomorphic scale of the small interventions in the public space, and, above all, the reference to Greece as the cradle of democracy."<sup>3</sup> In this project, the ideals of Periclean Athens allegedly played the key role.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Masaryk's text of April 20, 1925 (Institute of T. G. Masaryk in Prague, inv. no. TGM-R, KPR 370/10), cf. Tomáš G. MASARYK, *Světová revoluce*, Praha 1925, p. 563; Karel ČAPEK, *Hovory s T. G. Masarykem*, Praha 1990, p. 147 (originally published in 1931).

<sup>2</sup> On Plečnik and Prague castle cf. *Josip Plečnik. An Architect of Prague Castle* (ed. Zdeněk LUKEŠ – Damjan PRELOVŠEK – Tomáš VALENA), Praha 1996; Damjan PRELOVŠEK, *Architekt Josip Plečnik. Práce pro presidenta Masaryka*, Praha 2001; Zuzana GÜLLENDI-CIMPRICHOVÁ, *Architekt Josip Plečnik und seine Unternehmungen in Prag im Spannungsfeld zwischen denkmalpflegerischen Prinzipien und politischer Indienstnahme*, Bamberg 2010 (Dissertation, <http://www.opus-bayern.de/uni-bamberg/volltexte/2011/314/pdf/1DissCimprTextopusneuseA2.pdf>).

<sup>3</sup> Tomáš VALENA, Plečnik, Masaryk und die Antike oder eine Architektur für neue Demokratie, *Umění*, LX, 2012, pp. 39–52, 89, quotation on p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> VALENA 2012, cit. n. 3, p. 48: "Plečnik's Rückgriff auf antike Formen bei seinen Arbeiten für die Prager Burg ist offensichtlich. Es sind aber nicht die imperialen Formen der Repräsentation, und sei es der demokratischen Staatsmacht, sondern wie wir bereits gesehen haben eher die diskursiven Formen im anthropomorphen Maßstab, die wir dem Menschenbild der griechischen Polis zusprechen möchten."

Jože Plečnik became the architect of Prague Castle on November 5, 1920. In numerous sketches, which he made for the Castle, he repeatedly returned to several motives. They seem to occupy pivotal positions in his proposal how the ancient castle above Prague should be revived.<sup>5</sup> The hippodrome and obelisk were the oldest of these motives. When Masaryk became president, he learned how to ride horses and cultivated a public image of himself on horseback, in a semi-military outfit (fig. 1). Masaryk did not see, however, Prague Castle as his private residence, but as an institution, as the residence of the president of the Czechoslovak Republic. We must, therefore, try to find another explanation for Plečnik's hippodrome and obelisk. They do not belong to common elements of state residences of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, the hippodrome with obelisks is synonymous with the imperial Rome. Plečnik's Prague hippodrome has demonstrably nothing to do with democracy and that is why it deserves a closer analysis, even though it was not realised. What was behind this idea?

In Plečnik's plans, hippodrome and obelisk appeared together, in the frame of his work on the so called Paradise Garden.<sup>6</sup> It is the westernmost part of gardens in front of the southern façade of Prague Castle, which faces the city. The importance of the Paradise garden lies in that it is right next to the First Courtyard, the ceremonial entrance to the Castle. It was the president's private garden, but Plečnik's gate of 1924–1925 provided anyone a spectacular view of it. Masaryk used it, but it was a matter of all citizens of the republic.

Between July 14 and 17, 1920, Plečnik made ten plans for the Paradise garden.<sup>7</sup> In four plans, numbers 3 to 6, the architect filled its total extent by a park in the shape of a hippodrome (figs. 2–3). In the first plan, the hippodrome is of the ancient Greek and Roman type. Its distinguishing feature is that only the one side was semi-circular. The other side was even, with an extensive portico in which stands for the horses and chariots were. Exactly these arrangements we find in Plečnik's plan three (fig. 2). We find here a semi-circular end at the west end and a square end with a row of columns or pillars at the east.<sup>8</sup> Designs numbers 4 to 6 have the both

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jan BAŽANT, Plečnik, Prague, Palatine, *Ars*, XLVI/1, 2013, pp. 51–74.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Tomáš VALENA, Courtyards and Gardens. Plečnik's intervention in the context of Prague Castle, *Josip Plečnik* 1996, cit. n. 2, pp. 259–290; Tomáš VALENA, Plečnikova Rajska zahrada Pražského hradu. Vývoj ideje projektu, *Umění*, LI, 2003, pp. 428–436.

<sup>7</sup> *Josip Plečnik* 1996, cit. n. 2, designs on pp. 56–58.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. VALENA 1996, cit. n. 6, design on p. 57 below and p. 262: „there is an obvious parallel with a Roman circus or hippodrome, or with Canopy of Hadrian's villa at Tivoli.“ Plečnik's Prague pupil, František Oktávec, designed hippodrome of this very type, cf. Jozip PLEČNIK, *Výběr prací*



1. T. G. Masaryk on horseback,  
Karlovy Vary, July 1931

ends semi-circular, like in modern hippodromes. In subsequent versions, Plečnik dropped the idea of the hippodrome garden and returned to standard rectangular compartments. He proposed this solution in his ultimate plan of February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1921.

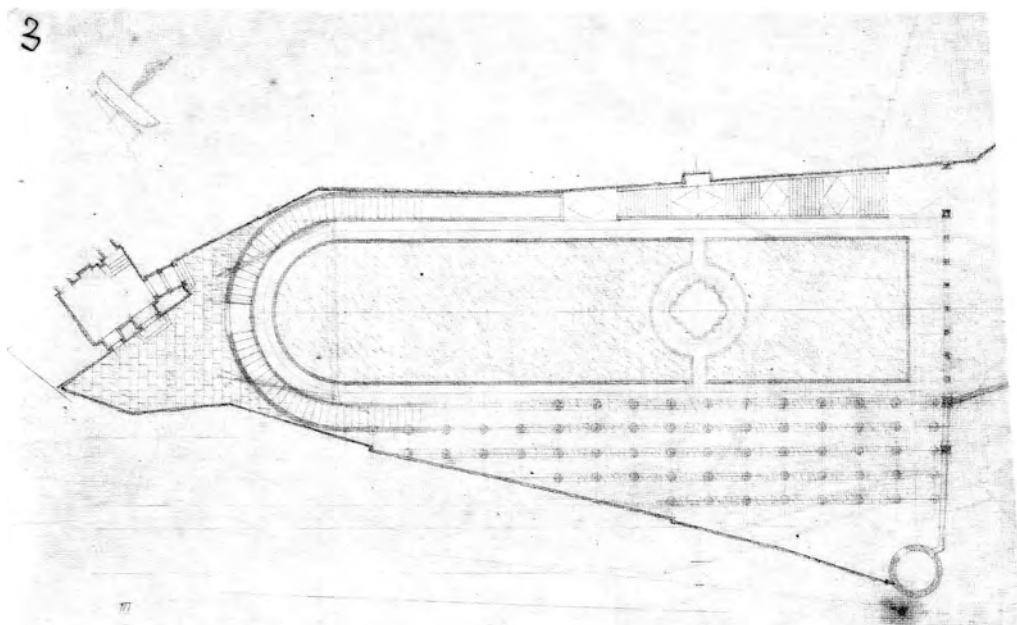
In ancient Greek hippodromes and Roman circuses, there were posts at both ends that the horses or chariots turned around. In Plečnik's design, the idea of a stressed turn appeared on plan six (fig. 3). On this plan, he placed a monumental sculpture on a high basis to the centre of the western rounded end. This statue was the first step to an obelisk. In autumn 1920, Plečnik dropped the idea of a hippodrome-garden. He filled with enormous stairs the entire west side of the garden. In its middle, in the place where was the statue in his hippodrome garden, he erected an obelisk (fig. 4). Masaryk became enthused by this idea and together with his architect they elaborated it with relish. Plečnik started to work on a monumental column with an eternal light at its top.<sup>9</sup> It would honour legionnaires, whose actions in WW1 contributed significantly to the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918. The monument in the Paradise garden had, however, a complicated history. Finally, Plečnik dropped this idea, and in 1925, he decided that the fragment of the obelisk should be placed in the Third Courtyard of Prague Castle, where it stands now.<sup>10</sup>

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*Školy pro dekorativní architekturu z roku 1911–1921*, Praha 1927, p. 89 (title: „Study after classical antiquity“).

<sup>9</sup> Plečnik told students in Ljubljana, that it was his idea: “When I said that there could be an eternal light for fallen warriors, Masaryk was thrilled” (Dušan GRABRIJAN, *Plečnik in njegova šola*, Maribor 1968, p. 72, cf. also p. 108).

<sup>10</sup> „Plány M. Plečnika/Plans by M. Plečnik,” April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1925, Archive of Prague Castle, cf. VALENA 1996, cit. n. 6, p. 284 and p. 290 note 80. The first obelisk for Prague castle broke and the fragment was erected at the Palacký square (arch. Hübschmann), it was destroyed during German occupation, cf. Věra MALÁ, History of the Obelisk, *Josip Plečnik* 1996, cit. n. 2, pp. 291–295. Obelisk was also planned, but not realised for the Victory square in Dejvice (arch. Engel, project of 1923–1928).

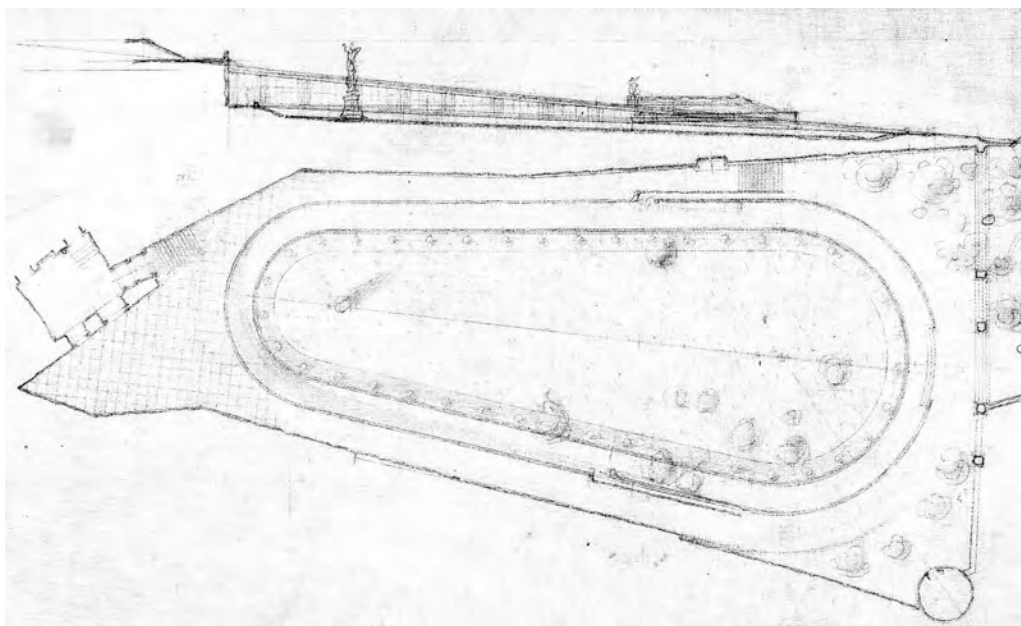


2. Jože Plečnik, plan three for the Paradise Garden, Prague Castle, 1920. Prague, National Technical Museum

For the reconstruction of Plečnik's creative process, and for understanding of his intentions, his unrealised projects are as valuable as the realised ones, perhaps even more so. It is, therefore, quite reasonable to ask, why the ancient Greek or Roman hippodrome at Prague Castle. What meaning could have a giant Egyptian obelisk here? We may begin with the Egyptian obelisk, which started its second life in the Roman Empire. In order to celebrate the incorporation of Egypt in the ancient Roman Empire in 30 BC, Augustus erected the imported obelisk of pharaoh Ramesse II in the Circus Maximus (today it is in the middle of Piazza del Popolo). The most famous Roman obelisk erected Caligula in his circus in Horti Agrippinae, Rome, which later belonged to Nero (fig. 5). The circus was standing in the place, where Christians later constructed St. Peter's basilica. In 1586, pope transported the obelisk to its present location in front of this church, as a silent witness of martyrdom of countless Christians.<sup>11</sup> As a standard feature of the ancient Roman circus, Egyptian obelisk became part of Roman, and later European culture.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Géza ALFÖLDY, *Der Obelisk auf dem Petersplatz in Rom*, Heidelberg 1990.

<sup>12</sup> E. g. „L'épine des cirques était orné avec un luxe extraordinaire: c'est de là que proviennent tous les obélisques qui se dressent aujourd'hui sur les places de Rome" (Auguste CHOISY, *Histoire de l'architecture*, II, Paris 1899, p. 579).



3. Jože Plečnik, plan six for the Paradise Garden, Prague Castle, 1920, detail. Prague, National Technical Museum

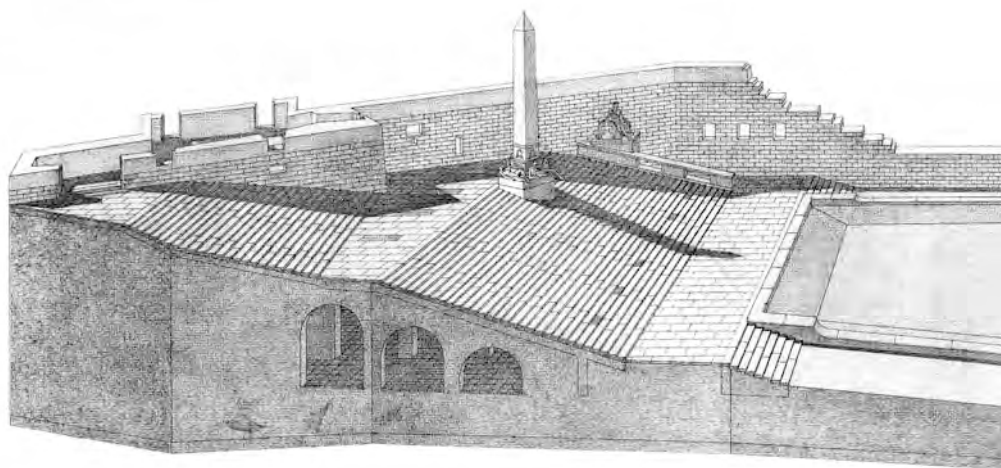
Thanks to Tacitus, circus and obelisk started appearing in Christian martyrology. Ancient Roman historian wrote: “Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus.”<sup>13</sup> The idea of Vatican obelisk as an eternal witness of self-sacrifice was revived in Prague. Plečnik and Masaryk adapted this idea to local conditions and incorporated it into the image of the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic.

The idea of the Vatican obelisk took roots in Prague already in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1618, Czech Protestants threw Jaroslav Bořita Martinic and Vilém Slavata out of the window of Prague Castle. After 1638, these Catholic martyrs were honoured by obelisks erected on the spot, where they miraculously landed without any injury.<sup>14</sup> Plečnik took considerable care to provide the obelisk of Slavata with an ap-

<sup>13</sup> Tac. ann. 15, 44, cf. also 15, 39 a 14, 14 (translated by A. J. Church, and W. J. Brodribb).

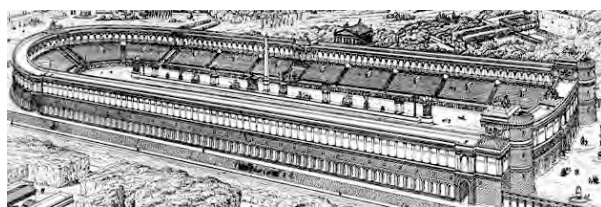
<sup>14</sup> Cf. Jiří DVORSKÝ – Rudolf CHADRABA, Votivní obraz Viléma Slavaty v Telči, *Umění*, XXXVIII, 1990, pp. 128–14.





4. Jože Plečnik, Plan for the Paradise Garden, Prague Castle, 1920, detail. Prague, Archive of Prague Castle 10117-0105

5. The Vatican obelisk on its original location in Caligula's (later Nero's) circus, 1882



appropriate setting in the redesigned garden (fig. 6). In 1925, he put in front of it, as a rail of its kind, a monumental granite cylinder, which together with the obelisk forms a cross.<sup>15</sup>

In ancient Rome, the obelisk and circus were attributes of emperors and their palaces.<sup>16</sup> The main Roman hippodrome, Circus Maximus, formed a functional and aesthetic unity with the complex of imperial palaces, which stood above it, on the Palatine hill. After 92 AD, the palace of Domitian became the definitive residence of emperors in Rome. Its private area with the imperial apartment had its colonnaded façade directly above the Circus Maximus. The imperial tribune connected the palace with a circus, and this symbiosis of the imperial palace and circus was a regular feature of imperial palaces in other cities of the Roman Empire.

<sup>15</sup> Damjan PRELOVŠEK, *Josip Plečnik. Život a dílo*, Šlapanice 2003, p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. John H. HUMPHRY, *Roman circuses: arenas for chariot racing*, Berkeley 1986.



6. Jože Plečnik, new arrangement of Slavata's obelisk. Prague, Castle, southern gardens

Plečnik's plan for a hippodrome in Prague castle garden had, however, yet another aspect. In ancient Rome, a private hippodrome was a hallmark of luxurious residences. This was a well-known fact thanks to letters of Pliny the Younger. In a letter of 105-106 AD, he praises the garden of his villa in Etruria: „But though the arrangements of the house itself are charming, they are far and away surpassed by the riding-course (hippodrome). It is quite open in the centre, and the moment you enter your eye ranges over the whole of it ... At the far end, the straight boundary of the riding-course is curved into semi-circular form, which quite changes its appearance. It is enclosed and covered with cypress-trees, the deeper shade of which makes it darker and gloomier than at the sides ... When you come to the end of these various winding alleys, the boundary again runs straight, or should I say boundaries, for there are a number of paths with box shrubs between them. In places there are grass plots intervening, in others box shrubs, which are trimmed to a great variety of patterns, some of them being cut into letters forming my name as owner and that of the gardener. Here and there are small pyramids (*metula*, diminutive of *meta*, posts at ends of the real hippodrome).”<sup>17</sup>

In the Plinius's hippodrome, vegetation replaced stones and bricks.<sup>18</sup> Villa's axis run parallel with that of the hippodrome garden; culture and nature were in harmony (fig. 7). The same configuration we find in the most famous and most influential archaeological example of the palace with a hippodrome garden – the imperial residence at Palatine, Rome.<sup>19</sup> As we noted above, it faced the Circus Maximus, but it had also a private hippodrome garden. In 1899, during his four month stay in Rome, Plečnik no doubt visited also its ruins.<sup>20</sup>

During Plečnik's stay in Vienna, the imperial idea was still topical. He was brought up in conviction that empire guaranteed security and cultural flowering. In the school of architecture of Otto Wagner, which Plečnik attended in 1894-1898, the historicist style prevailed, but the use of new materials and new forms was en-

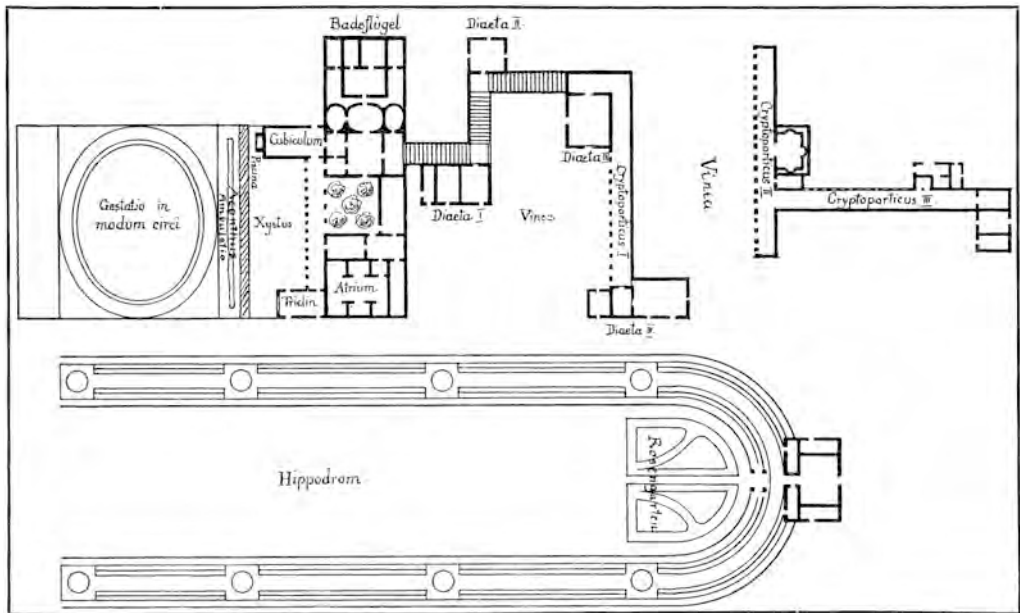
<sup>17</sup> Plin. epist. 5, 6 (translated by N.S. Gill). Plečnik could find more information in, e. g., Hermann WINNEFELD, *Tusci und Laurentinum des jungeren Plinius*, *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*, VI, 1891, pp. 201–217; Marie Luise GOTHEIN, *Geschichte der Gartenkunst*, I, Jena 1914, pp. 104–110.

<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that Roman magnates could not have real hippodromes next to their residences, see Mart. 12, 50, 5: “pulverumque fugax hipodromon ungula plaudit.”

<sup>19</sup> Literature accessible to Plečnik, e. g.: Friedrich MARX, *Das sogenannte Stadium auf dem Palatin*, *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*, X, 1895, pp. 129–143; Eberhard von HAUGWITZ, *Der Palatin. Seine Geschichte und seine Ruinen*, Rom 1901; GOTTHEIN 1914, cit. n. 17, p. 110.

<sup>20</sup> France STELÈ, *Arh. Jože Plečnik v Italiji, 1898–1899*, Ljubljana 1967; Alessandra PONTEL, *Appunti di viaggio: Joze Plecnik in Italia*, *Arte documento*, IX, 1996, pp. 181–187.





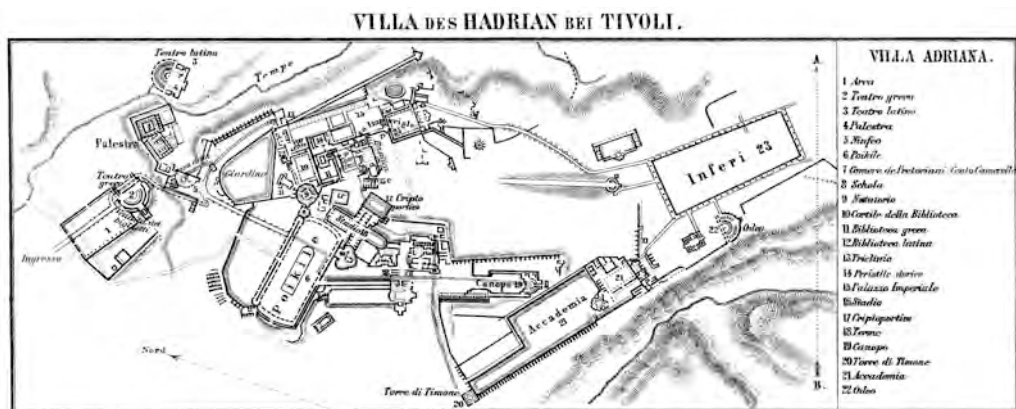
7. Reconstruction of the villa of Plinius the Younger in Etruria, 1914

couraged. According to Wagner, the preservation of traditional aesthetic canon in no way contradicted the cultivation of modern culture. In his school, for instance, Rudolf Weiss designed a royal villa modeled on the ancient imperial palace at Palatine in Rome. The central courtyard of this palace has a shape of a hippodrome with obelisks at both ends of the spina.<sup>21</sup>

Wagner's pupils, including Plečnik and his Czech schoolmate and friend, Jan Kotěra, disseminated the views of his school in central Europe.<sup>22</sup> This is not to say, of course, that Plečnik's did not distinguish between ancient Roman emperors, and the first president of the democratic Czechoslovak republic. This is to say, that in his work for the Czechoslovak president Plečnik took inspiration in the most magnificent residential architecture he knew about: the palace of ancient Roman emperor. In this way, we may also explain the similarities between Plečnik's projects for Masaryk and that which he simultaneously made for his patrons in Ljubljana.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Marco POZZETTO, *Die Schule Otto Wagners 1894–1912*, Wien 1979, figg. 278–280.

<sup>22</sup> Denis BOUSCH, „Cosmopolis imperatrix“: la notion de style imperial dans l'architecture viennoise: de l'historicisme à la Sezession, *Europe centrale = Mitteleuropa. Revue-germanique-internationale*, I, 1994, pp. 137–149.



8. Hadrian's villa in Tivoli, hippodrome ("Stadio") is in its centre

Plečnik planned the hippodrome at Prague castle because it was the attribute of palaces of ancient Roman emperors. That is why he did not replace it by some other feature which would integrate the garden area in front of the southern façade of Prague Castle. Plečnik saw the hippodrome as a part of the epic message of the Masaryk's Prague castle. The main component of this epic message was the opening of the Southern castle gardens to the surrounding space. He integrated the gardens with the fabulous vista of the city panorama. Plečnik did not connect pavilions and other elements of garden architecture together. This diversity, unpredictability and conspicuous lack of unified scheme were entirely in keeping with that what Plečnik knew about ancient Roman villas. He could read about them in Plinius' letters, but most important of all, he saw them during his "grand tour." On May 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup>, 1899, he visited the Villa Hadriana in Tivoli.<sup>23</sup> The villa, which served from the beginning of the year 134 AD as the imperial residence, is a charming combination of heterogeneous buildings, including the hippodrome garden (fig. 8).

Plečnik's architecture is outspokenly historicizing, and in this is seen his contribution to the architecture of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which after the middle of this century definitively turned away from the classical tradition. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the classical tradition in architecture was definitively abandoned, this traditionalist architect was rediscovered, and his work started to be studied. The reception and interpretation of Plečnik's work is, however, strik-

<sup>23</sup> STELÈ 1967, cit. n. 20, pp. 20, 188.

ingly asymmetric. In spite of the fact, that ancient Roman forms clearly prevail in his oeuvre, its interpretation is not based on them. This remarkable asymmetry is in no way surprising, because it is a logical consequence of exceptional position of Josip Plečnik in the history of architecture.

In Plečnik's youth, architects addressed the audience which was fully conversant with vocabulary, syntax and semantics of the architecture of ancient Romans. Their patrons had a precise notion of that what is fitting and proper. Plečnik took it for a granted that also his work would be compared with ancient Rome, which he considered an axis not only of architectural, but also of spiritual tradition. Already in Plečnik's time, however, his work was perceived in entirely different context. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the classical education and classical taste in architecture ceased to be a hallmark of the social elite.

Buildings designed by Plečnik entered to the world, in which the knowledge of ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman architectonic language became exclusive domain of specialists. Rome and its ancient monuments lost their exclusivity, which had far reaching consequences. Today, the popularity of Plečnik's work is to a large extent a result of nostalgia after the forever lost world, which his buildings evoke. Historical aspects of his work are admired, but they were semantically emptied and could be, therefore, filled with a new content. Plečnik's architecture could be, for instance, labelled as "democratic" or "inspired by classical Greece," even though we have no proofs that it was his intention.

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Illustration credits: Koblenz, Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-11965 / CC-BY-SA (1); Photo Jan Bažant (6), older publications (2–4: *Josip Plečnik* 1996, cit. n. 2, pp. 55, 58, 60; 5: Alphonse SIMIL, *Le Vatican*, Paris 1882, I, pl. 4; 7: GÖTHEIN 1914, cit. n. 16, p. 105; 8: Th. GSELL FELS, *Rom und die Campagna*, Leipzig – Wien 1895, after col. 1060, detail).

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## Plečnik, predsednik in hipodrom

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### POVZETEK

Tomáš G. Masaryk, prvi predsednik novoustanovljene češkoslovaške republike, si je postavil za cilj preobrazbo starega praškega gradu v simbol nove demokracije. Splošno mnenje je, da je Jože Plečnik realiziral njegove ideje v letih 1920–1935 in s to trditvijo pričujoči članek polemizira. V številnih skicah, ki jih je narisal, se je Plečnik vedno znova vračal k nekaterim motivom. Najstarejša med njimi sta hipodrom in obelisk: skupaj se pojavita v okviru njegovega dela za t. i. "Rajski vrt". Že leta 1920 je Plečnik opustil idejo hipodroma in se pet let pozneje odločil, da je treba obelisk postaviti v trejte dvorišče praškega gradu, kjer stoji še danes. Motiv hipodroma ne izraža ničesar v smislu demokracije, zato si zasluži posebno obravnavo, čeprav ni bil izveden. V Wagnerjevi šoli, ki jo je Plečnik obiskoval med 1894 in 1898, so si hipodrom in obelisk razlagali kot atribut starorimske rezidence najvišjega ranga. Lahko se vprašamo, če ni bila v Plečnikovem delu za čehoslovaškega predsednika vir navdiha nemara najveličastnejša bivalna arhitektura, ki jo je poznal: palača rimskega cesarja na Palatinu v Rimu.