

## Two Gardens Designed by Architects: Jože Plečnik in Prague and Mies van der Rohe in Brno

by Caroline Cannon-Brookes

Although very different, the gardens of Prague Castle and the Villa Tugendhat in Brno share a common concern for the view from each, which is fundamental to their designs. Both gardens have been restored in recent years and the Villa Tugendhat is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

When in 1918 Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk became the first President of the new Czecho-Slovak Republic, he made Prague Castle the seat of his government and stated:

“Another important aspect of my politics is refurbishing the Castle, by which I mean turning it into an historical monument, the emblem of our once old, now new state, and a symbol of both its past and future. In ‘concreto’, I wish to transform the monarchic castle into a democratic castle”.

Prague Castle was in a serious state of neglect. The last major remodelling had been undertaken in the 18th century for Maria Theresa by her court architect Nicholas Pacassi, who regularised with plain façades all the existing buildings and had built the First Courtyard as a *cour d'honneur* with the early 17th century Matthias Gate reinstalled as its central feature. The Castle had continued as an official royal residence throughout the 19th century while the country was governed by the Habsburgs from Vienna.

A restoration programme was drawn up in 1920 with priority given to the President's official residence and the adjoining gardens, which had been planted with trees as an English-style park. The Castle had to be transformed for a democratic President and it was demanded that at every level it should express simplicity though in a noble and artistic way. The Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik was chosen by Masaryk to carry out this formidable task. No doubt Plečnik's interest in art and antiquity, and the ideas he put forward, corresponded to Masaryk's ideals – they saw eye to eye! Plečnik had trained in Vienna in the studio of Otto Wagner and he won the Rome Scholarship in his first year. With little evidence of any interest in the Modern Movement he was faithful to his Slavic and Roman Catholic identity. Due to growing anti-



*Prague Castle, the Paradise Garden*

Slav sentiment in Vienna he was encouraged by his Czech friend, the architect Jan Kotěra, to move to Prague. In 1911 he took up a post in the School of Applied Arts. By 1920 he had already formulated ideas for the gardens below the south-facing Theresian Palace, which included the former summer palace of the Archduke Ferdinand of the Tyrol dating from the second half of the 16th century. This had opened onto a small Renaissance-style garden within the fortifications. Today this small area is called the Paradise Garden and Plečnik designed a monumental entrance staircase on which he proposed to place a high monolith carrying a perpetual flame in memory of the fallen Czech Legionnaires, and which could be seen from the city. After various proposed designs this was abandoned but the idea was resurrected with the obelisk in the Third Courtyard erected on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the Republic. Close to the entrance to the Paradise Garden is a niche containing a large amphora, while at the base of the stairs - on the site of the former Baroque fountain - he installed a massive granite basin in the centre of an area of grass, which echoes that outside the Altes Museum in Berlin designed by the Neo-Classical architect

*The granite basin in the Paradise Garden*



Friedrich Schinkel. Both objects illustrate the desire to highlight the harmony and affinity of Masaryk's philosophy and ideals with Ancient Greek philosophy. In his respect for the 'old', Plečnik retained the small tower built for the Emperor Matthias in 1617. His monogram may be seen above the copper roof in the south-east corner, and Plečnik transferred the Baroque fountain to the entrance of the Garden on the Ramparts which extends eastwards.

Plečnik dramatically re-ordered the Third Courtyard and provided improved access to the gardens by means of the Bull Staircase, so-named after the four mythical bulls which carry two decorated poles supporting the copper canopy covering the entrance. Using a variety of Czech-sourced materials with great precision fashioned into symbolic decorations, it opens with views to the south from landings as one descends. It debouches onto a broad flight of steps leading, across a wide space, to a large semi-circular terrace, above a former bastion. From here a wonderful view opens up of Malá Strana below, with the dome of St Nicholas and the entrance to the Charles Bridge and the Old City of Prague beyond. One's eye is captured by a strange pyramid on a brick base prominently placed to the right of the entrance to the terrace, an original touch typical of Plečnik. This fulfils Masaryk's vision to open up the Castle and connect it to the City.

Plečnik's reconstruction of the area below the south part of the Castle resulted in different ground levels and to accommodate this he lowered the rampart walls to allow one to enjoy the view while retaining many of the established trees. The central path continues eastwards, punctuated with a variety of monuments including the two obelisks erected to commemorate the Roman Catholic Counsellors Jaroslav Bořita of Martinice and Vilém Slavata of Chlum, who came in 1618 to treat with the dissident Czech nobles and were bundled out of the window of the Czech Chancellery in the second Defenestration of Prague. The Great Belvedere is an L-shaped loggia set on a grassy bank with eleven Classical columns. These are enlivened by three playful groups of torch-bearing putti by Ignac Platzer (1770s) standing on a low wall, below which illustrate his success of combining the old with the new. Towards the eastern end of the path, steps lead down to the Moravian Bastion which was again lowered by Plečnik and onto which he erected a highly visible eleven-metre granite needle topped with a gilded sphere. Hints of the Mediterranean are omnipresent which perhaps comes as no surprise since in 1920

Plečnik had been appointed Professor of Architecture at the newly founded Ljubljana University.

Turning to the north-west corner of the Castle, the fortified bastion there had been levelled by Pacassi when he established a new entrance to the Spanish Hall. In 1927-30 Plečnik inserted the Hall of Columns as a new ceremonial entrance. He re-designed the garden between the Archbishop's Palace and the west façade of the Spanish Hall wing and made it accessible from the Second Courtyard. He raised the ground level reached by means of an extremely refined staircase composed of two semi-circular flights, one convex and the other concave, and planted it with a regular pattern of clipped cypress trees. From the Garden on the Bastion he constructed a pathway with an impressive balustrade along the northern side of the Spanish Hall, below which is an arcade, enabling the public to walk from the Powder Bridge to the Hradčany Square without entering the precincts of the castle. After Masaryk resigned in 1935, Plečnik felt unable to continue and his work was carried on by Otto Rothmayer and Pavel Janák. Although heavily criticised, Plečnik had carried out Masaryk's wishes, and as the artist Max Švabinský said, "No one could have done it better than him".

After the First World War Brno gained importance as the regional capital of Moravia. It was already a wealthy city due to industry and was a centre for Modernist architecture with a thriving contemporary culture. In 1928 Fritz Tugendhat married Greta Löw-Beer and her father, Alfred Löw-Beer, a wealthy industrialist, gave the couple as a wedding present the upper part of the family garden on the slopes of Černá Pole on which to build a house and for which he paid. Greta had lived in Berlin for four years with contacts among artists and philosophers and had greatly admired the art dealer Perls' house built by the Bauhaus architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. She always longed for a modern spacious house with a clear and simple shape. Mies was to fulfil her dreams with the house he built for them at the top of the garden.

Viewed from the garden, the house with its strong, white horizontal element above a wall of glass floats above a flower bed, in complete contrast to her parents' house, an *Art Nouveau* villa of 1903 (now a museum). The garden was an important element of the design and Mies employed Greta



*Villa Tugendhat:  
the white horizontal  
element, above a wall of  
glass, floats above  
a flower bed*

Roder-Müller, a landscape architect, who had graduated from the Gardening School at Lednice where perennial flowers had been introduced. The house is built of three floors and on entering from the street above one is confronted with a rectangular opening, like a picture frame, which reveals (although today largely obscured by a tree) a view across Brno to the notorious Špilberk Castle. The bedrooms and a large terrace are on the entrance level and have superb views across the city which was a major factor in the design. One descends to the main living area planned to create the sensation of flowing space. The building is supported on a structure of steel columns set on a grid-shaped floor plan, and functional space is cleverly designed by the straight line of the onyx wall and the curve of the Macassar ebony screen around the dining table. The wall facing the garden is glass so that the garden is integral to the main living space. Technically the building was very advanced in that the windows can sink into the floor giving one the sensation of being outside. One can also look through the living space to the winter garden which contained a rectangular pool with water plants and potted plants. In summer the greenery gave the sensation of continuity with the outside world, while in winter Greta ‘recalled the view through the greenery of the winter garden to

the snow was remarkable’. At the opposite end is the door to the garden and, from a covered area, a wide flight of stairs leads to the terrace below. On the south-facing side is the wall covered with a ‘growies’ which hide the lower floor containing the plant room and services.

From the beginning a large weeping willow below the terrace was sacrosanct and had to be preserved. The family would sit under it and Greta would read to the children. The layout of the garden was designed under Mies’s supervision in the spirit of so-called ‘emptiness’ as the main motif was the large sloping grassy meadow with mature trees around the edge providing a paradise for children who spent much of their time out of doors. Greta’s daughter, Daniela Hammer Tugendhat, recalls her mother saying: “The connection between the interior and the exterior, the dialogue between architecture and nature, served to define the essential structure of the house”. Greta and Fritz were the ‘ideal’ clients providing Mies with relatively unlimited funds and a large degree of freedom to design a house according to his ambitions.

*From a lecture given as part of a Study Day on Czech Gardens for the Birkbeck Garden History Group, March 2023*

*The view over the centre of  
Brno from the roof terrace  
of the Villa Tugendhat.  
On the top of the hill is the  
outline of Špilberk Castle*

