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PRAGUE

THE PRECIPICE OF PROLIFIC ARCHITECTURE

Architect **Rajan Goregaoker** explores the meld of architectural styles in Prague, with a structure-by-structure look at the historical city

My visit to Prague came soon after I had spent some time in London, soaking up all the architectural wonders the city has to offer. I was excited about Prague, which in my opinion, is the world's capital of architecture. Aptly named 'the city of a hundred spires', Prague is rich with architectural landmarks. Where else can you witness Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, Art Nouveau, Cubist, Functionalist and Communist Era architecture in one place?

The Czech capital is a paradise for history and design fans for so much more than its Gothic architecture. Mostly spared from the wide-scale bombings of WWII, the city's medieval centre has remained pretty much intact, and eye-catching examples of Baroque and Renaissance architecture lie around every corner. The largest urban historical centre listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, this well-preserved area covers 900 hectares that include almost 4,000 monuments.

We settled into our hotel very close to Old Town Square, with fabulous views of the Vltava River, Charles Bridge and the towering cathedral of St. Vitus. The square and the surrounding quarter form the heart of the city of Prague. This lively square is lined with magnificent buildings and bordered by colourful houses, palaces and churches.

We took a walk along the narrow, cobbled lanes with beautiful buildings in pastel shades of green, pink, beige and blue. The walk itself was so enriching that I could hardly wait to discover the rest of the city!

A graduate of JJ School of Architecture, Mumbai, Rajan Goregaoker is the director of GA Design, a multi-disciplinary design firm he founded with his brother Sachin Goregaoker. With over 20 years of experience in architecture and interior design of residential, commercial and township projects, Goregaoker has his name behind some landmark buildings in Mumbai. He has collaborated with multiple design teams, builders and industrialists for large and small-scale projects in India.





ROMANESQUE ARCHITECTURE

Romanesque architecture, as the name suggests, descended from Roman times. The structures are simple in their beauty and elegant in their symmetry. Wide massive walls, mighty towers, round arches and ornate colonnades are all characteristics of this style.

ST. GEORGE'S BASILICA

St. George's Basilica is located inside the castle complex. The 17th century red façade leads into a Romanesque stone interior with an impressive cross-vaulted ceiling and semi-circular arches. Built by Prince Vratislav, it is the second oldest church in Prague.

(This and above) St. George's Basilica



St. Vitus Cathedral

GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE

Gothic architecture is usually seen in grand churches and university buildings in places such as Oxford and Cambridge. It was made to instill fear for the worshipper, by making people feel small in comparison. This ornate architectural style includes flying buttresses, pointed arches, and ribbed vaulting, with massive stained-glass windows – one of the most recognisable elements of Gothic architecture.

ST. VITUS CATHEDRAL

The most popular structure in Prague, St. Vitus is visible from nearly any elevated place in the city. The cathedral towers over Prague Castle and is an architectural landmark in the city.

CHARLES BRIDGE

The oldest bridge in Prague, Charles Bridge connects the Old Town and Lesser Town. It is lined with 30 statues and sculptures, all replicas of the originals, which date back to the 17th century.

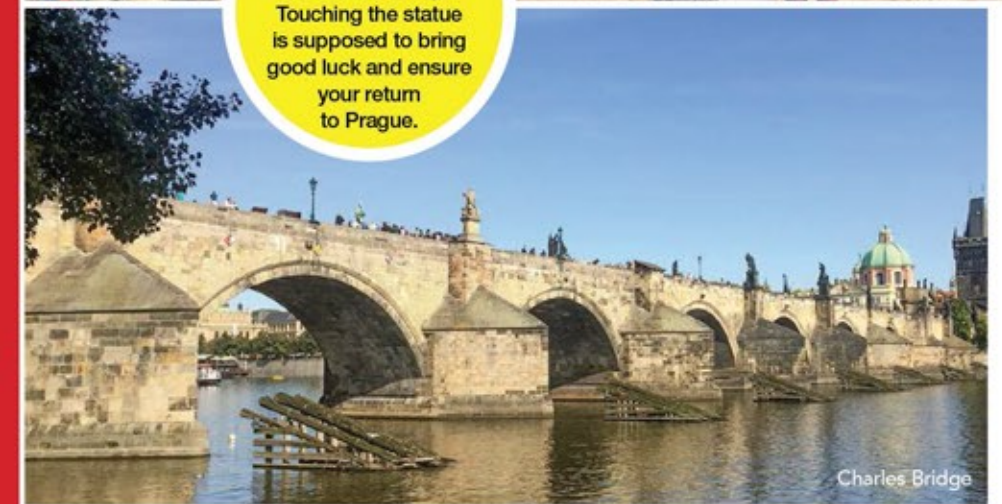
POWDER TOWER

This impressive 210ft Gothic tower is one of the 13 original gates to Old Town. Modelled after the Old Town Bridge Tower and studded with sculptures, its name comes from its use as a gunpowder store in the 17th century.



The statue of St. John of Nepomuk on Charles Bridge

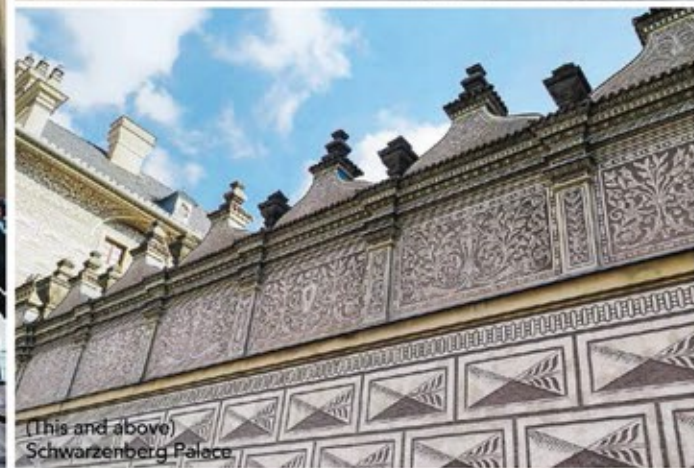
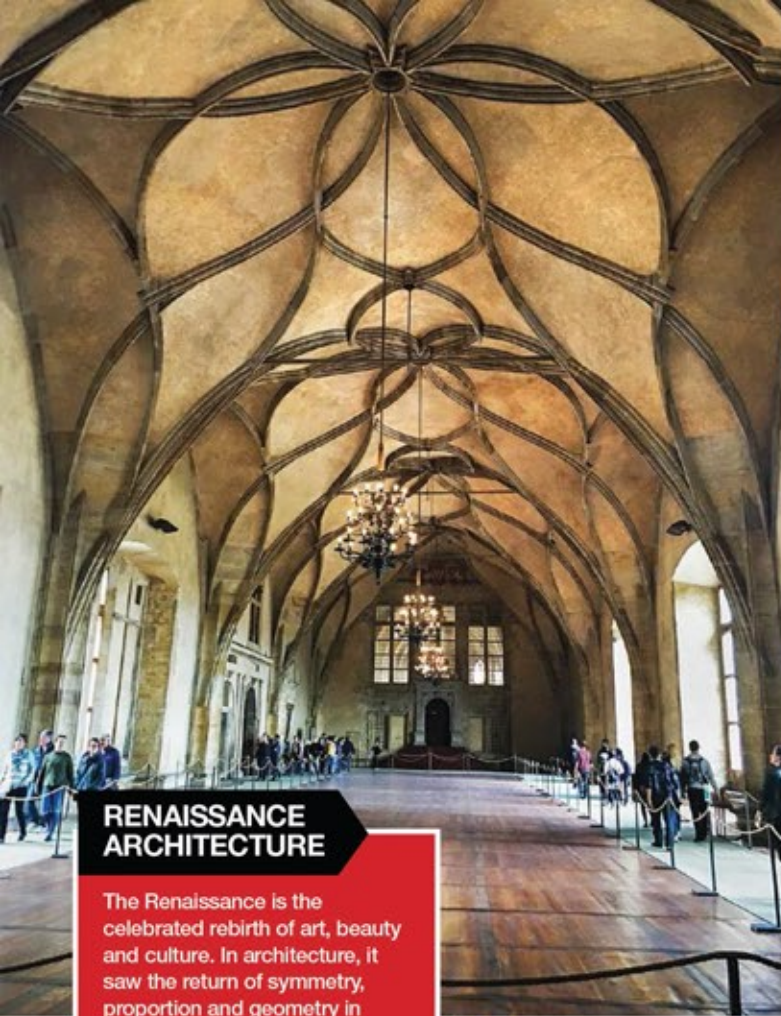
The statue of St. John of Nepomuk is the most popular on Charles Bridge. Touching the statue is supposed to bring good luck and ensure your return to Prague.



Charles Bridge



Powder Tower



(This and above) Schwarzenberg Palace

RENAISSANCE ARCHITECTURE

The Renaissance is the celebrated rebirth of art, beauty and culture. In architecture, it saw the return of symmetry, proportion and geometry in columns, pilasters, domes and niches. Prague has a handful of Renaissance buildings, with intriguing sgraffito-ornamented façades.

ROYAL SUMMER PALACE

Located on the grounds of the Prague Castle, Royal Summer Palace is one of the finest examples of Renaissance architecture outside of Italy. Often referred to as Queen Anne's Summer Palace, it was commissioned by Ferdinand-I for his wife Anne. However, Queen Anne died before the palace was completed.

SCHWARZENBERG PALACE

With a beautifully preserved façade of black-and-white Renaissance sgraffito, the Schwarzenberg Palace houses the National Gallery's collection of Baroque art. Located in the Prague Castle complex, this building stands out from the rest for its unique wall treatment, a typical Renaissance architectural style.



(This and above left) Royal Summer Palace

BAROQUE ARCHITECTURE

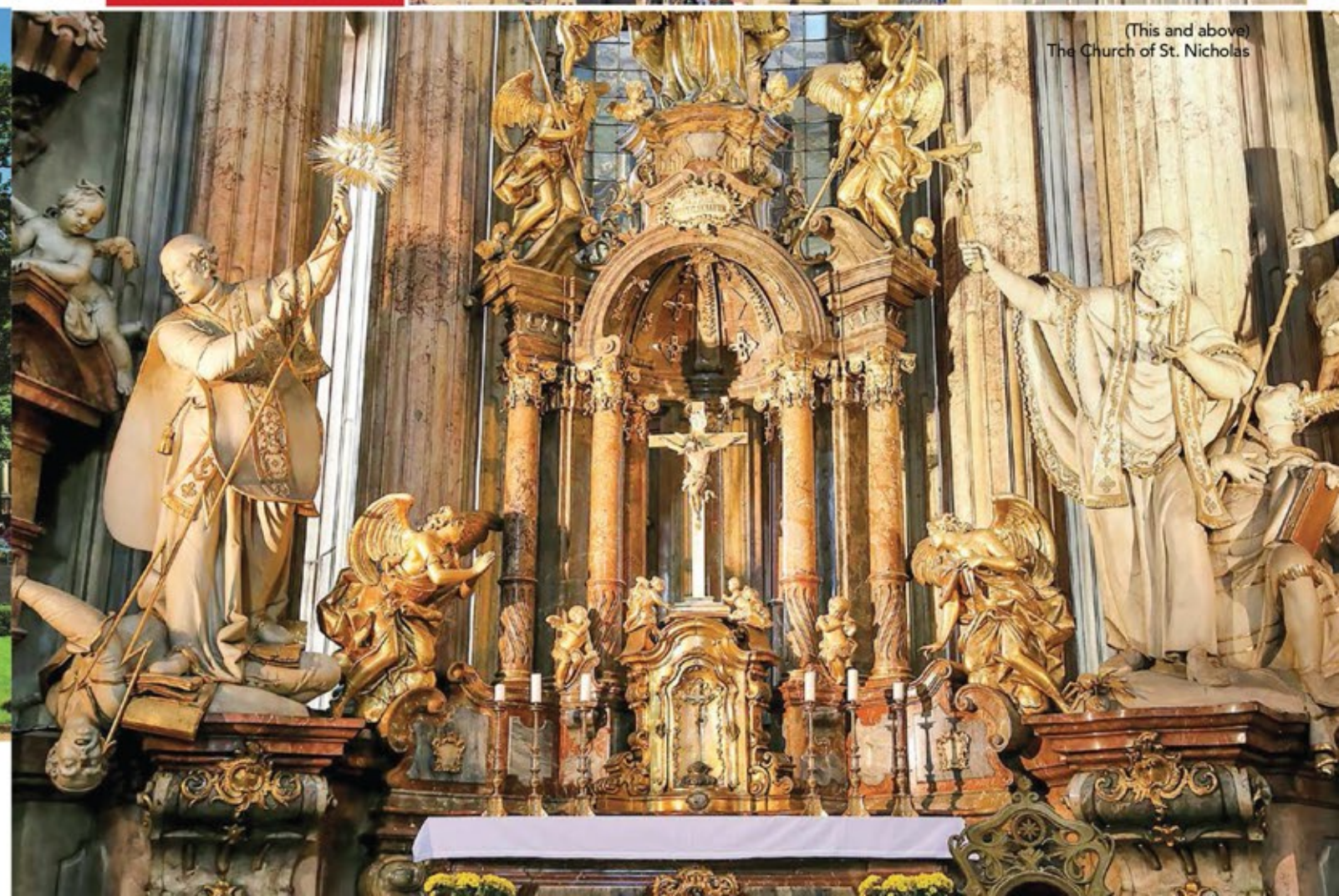
From Prague Castle, you can go straight down to Lesser Town, where there is perhaps the largest concentration of Baroque buildings in Prague. A prominent Baroque symbol of the entire capital is the Church of St. Nicholas.

CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS

A dominant feature of the church is the Bell Tower, commanding a beautiful view of the historic core of the city. Inside, there is everything you would expect from High Baroque – a magnificent play of light and shadow, illusive frescos, a lavish sculptural decoration and an almost 260ft-high dome with a lantern. This highly decorative architectural style can be distinguished from other types by its overabundance of gilded-everything, large-scale ceiling frescoes, tromp l'oeil paintings, florid sculptures, opulent use of colour and ornaments, and dramatic use of light.



(This and above) The Church of St. Nicholas





ART NOUVEAU ARCHITECTURE

Art Nouveau is one of the more represented styles in this gorgeous European capital. The style is characterised by lovely, rosy-cheeked maidens with intertwining flower and leaf motifs, and new production methods that would seemingly try to dissolve the line between fine and applied arts. Of course, the Czech Republic is represented by its most famous Art Nouveau son, Alfons Mucha.

THE MUNICIPAL HOUSE

The Municipal House is one of the most famous Art Nouveau buildings in Prague, where the history of the Czech nation was written. This majestic national cultural monument stands right next to the Powder Tower where the Royal Mile begins. The Francouzská Restaurace in the Municipal House boasts a gorgeous Art Nouveau interior.

(This page) The Municipal House



DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE

Deconstructivism is more like a form of art, covering weirdly-shaped buildings in the Post Modern Era. The creative rationale of this style goes against the natural geometrical order of architecture.

THE DANCING HOUSE

The Nationale Nederlanden building, known as the 'Dancing House' is one of the most significant landmarks in Prague and definitely the most internationally-renowned piece of post-1989 Czech architecture. The frontispiece consists of two towers, resembling a dancing couple. The building has nine floors with asymmetrical rooms, and reaches over the street line onto the pavement. However, people in Prague have mixed opinions about this building. Despite this, the Dancing House has proven itself to be a true architectural gem of Prague, and today, you would be hard pressed to find anyone who doesn't appreciate it.



The Dancing House

We spent five days in Prague, and before I had a chance to fully appreciate the architectural beauty around me, our time was up. Hopefully, touching the statue of St. John of Nepomuk will ensure my return to Prague!