

Instructor: M. Stephen Zdepski

## GRAND HOTEL: Prague



**Introduction:** The central question is what Architecture might become, what is its potential. Architecture is at its core "Design." The design process is itself integrative, exploratory, speculative, resolved, rigorous, developed, and significant. It combines the diversity of structure, technologies, culture and professionalism into a whole which is both quantifiable and, most importantly, creatively combined to transcend the measurable. Architecture exists in both realms. Without this simultaneity is not Architecture

The project is a new Hotel to be located in Old Town Square of Prague, the Czech Republic. Prague is itself a museum of ten centuries of European architecture. Never facing the reconstruction due to the devastation of war, or vast urban renewal programs, Prague remains as it evolved, layer-by-layer, over its thousand-year history. Virtually everything remains preserved, the Romanesque city plan, the Gothic parceling of land, the Renaissance and Baroque street façades with contemporary landmarks of the last century interspersed.

*"They should be just sheer inspiration...just the place to be ...the place which does not change except for the people who go in and out."*  
Louis I. Kahn

**Premise:** The new Hotel will be a major component for the completion of the historic center of the city. Located within the protected urban fabric, its construction will have international importance. The Hotel will fill a void in the urban structure and complete the old town square. During the past ninety years there have been nine international competitions seeking designs for the site. Located within one of the four most historically significant places in the city, urban designers, historians, planners, politicians and the people themselves, have never found an adequate architectural solution. The combining and providing counterpoint to Western and Eastern traditions, studying historic and avant-garde concepts, investigating formal or bohemian orders only begin to suggest the variety of concepts and forming principles that may define the architecture of the new building. However, the urban planners of the city require that the new Hotel be consistent in scale to the historical setting in which it is placed. They specifically do not desire a building which superficially mimics historical styles, decoration, symbols or imagery, nor simply creates another international monument expressing the architect's ego rather than caring for its context and culture.

Historically the Old Town Square was active throughout the day and throughout the year. It combined residence, commerce, social and cultural events. The transformation of Prague historical center into a place for tourists, without residency and for primarily the warmer months, has resulted in a void of activity during many portions of the day and year. It is intended that the new Hotel will activate the town square

in ways not possible with historic structures. It will include a small restaurant to "help activate" the town square throughout the entire year located on the square and will include outdoor dining. The second urban component asks that the architecture bring "life and vitality". It is a building which only succeeds "when it provides an active environment during the entire year and throughout the day-night, provides places for social interaction, while adding a piece of architecture of exceptional quality and international importance". Thirdly, with the closing of the adjacent clock tower, the new Hotel is to provide a scenic overlook of the Old Town Square and the historic city beyond, for tourist and citizen alike, the public living room of the city.

The Hotel can be considered both a self-contained world, an escape from the pressures of tourism and new situations, and, on the other hand, an extension of the town square, a public living room. The proposed hotel is meant to directly relate and develop from its context. It is not a conference center, nor resort. It is not meant solely as an accommodation for overnight stay, nor is it to provide the anonymous lodging. Travelers from throughout the world, of all cultures and ages shall find temporary residence within its facilities. Tourists as they pass through the hotel, or through the square, will find the Hotel a major catalyst for both pause and relaxation, a extension of the urban stage and possibly the last piece in the puzzle of the Old Town Square.

**Site:** The site, which is currently vacant, measures about 160 ft. x 210 ft. and is on the western side of the Old Town Square, provides the opportunity for a numerous site/conceptual strategies. Recently the site has been renovated by a relatively innocuous urban park and arcade for street vendors. Although a City Hall on the site was removed by the Nazi army as they left Prague, at the end of World War II, the destroyed building was never particularly revered by the people nor government of Prague. In fact, there were numerous proposals for its removal before its destruction in 1945. The urban legends tell that bombing at the end of the war was either the last act of hostility as insult against the Czech people, or was prompted by local citizens as a way to remove a particularly unfavorable landmark. The Urban Planning Office of Prague has required that the new Hotel reestablish the spatial and organizational characteristics of the Old Town Square that existing prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century urban renewal.

The entire project area is composed of a rich variety of architectural imagery. The surrounding architecture, with Gothic origin, and Renaissance/Baroque facades portrays numerous moods: fanciful, spectacular, somber, frozen in time, etc. Everyone recognizes that there is a building missing, a break in the enclosing façade of the town square, and that a portion of the streetscape is missing, in an otherwise energetic setting. Photographs of the town square and motion pictures of the site routinely avoid showing the generally vacant site. Although in a Unesco protected environment, the void in the urban structure needs to be filled; the square needs its completion.

