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Hlavní Nádraží: Past, Present, and Future

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With thanks to Vašek Píšoft, Patrik Kotas and Alena Sramklová
Prague’s main train station, Hlavní nádraží, was first designed around the turn of the twentieth century by the art nouveau architect Josef Fanta. The station’s former main hall is defined by its domed ceiling and intricate interior which has gradually worn away in neglect in the years since it was built. The Fantova café and a secondhand clothing shop called Megasekáč are the only fixtures still attracting a few travelers to this part of the building. The old ticket counters and kiosks are closed and the clock has stopped.

A freeway dividing the city sends speeding trucks and highway noise flashing by the old entrance, dangerously close to skimming the sidewalk.

In the mid-1970s Fanta’s building was joined by another station, designed by a team of four architects including Alena Šrámková, Jan Šrámek and Jan Bočan. In contrast to Fanta’s ornamental design, the newer main hall is sleek and modern. Over the past few decades the station and its adjacent park have become a haven for homeless people and drug dealers, deterring locals and travelers passing through.

In an effort designed to improve the condition of the station, Grandi Stazioni Česka republika (a branch of the Italian giant Grandi Stazioni) has recently begun the daunting renovation of Hlavní nádraží. Their vision for the project includes the addition of shopping and entertainment facilities, restoration of both historical areas of the station and the incorporation of modern design elements.
I first conceived of this project in pursuit of an abstract quality that seemed inherently difficult to grasp. Everywhere I encountered references to an admirable “character” and “spirit” at the old train station—a spirit that is soon to evaporate with the pending renovation and restoration. In observing the station and talking with architects I saw many paths I could take in my research. No matter which direction I headed, though, I wanted somehow to reveal this elusive character.

The most straightforward way I saw to attempt this was through a photographic documentation of the current state of Hlavní nádraží. It seemed for once that I was in the right place at the right time: ongoing construction changed the station almost daily in the weeks I had to put this together.

I wanted to capture the atmosphere through an investigation of the links among past, present and future. The next step in considering how best to approach this was a methodic comparison of time periods, photographing details of Fanta’s art-nouveau building and placing them opposite similar features of the 1970s design. This part of the station was intentionally built underground with a cave-like structure so as not to disturb the original building above. The result is a harsh juxtaposition of architectures that today is further complicated by societal developments that have followed since the 1970s, and by the pending reconstruction of the station.

It became too complicated, too unnatural to contrast the two parts of the building so rigidly, as over the years they have seeped into one another and gradually incorporated influences from a modern age. Sausage and pastry kiosks have popped up in the formerly open underground hall and a second-hand clothing warehouse has found its way into deserted waiting rooms of Fanta’s building. The station is overflowing with signs pointing this way and that toward the metro, taxis and platforms, and half of them are wrong, or have been crossed out, or have deteriorated to a point at which they are unreadable altogether. The Fantova café struggles to maintain its business in a part of the station many people don’t realize is there. Amidst all of this, renovation has begun and the first island of shops has already appeared in the center of the main hall.

If I have discovered anything about the character of Hlavní nádraží it derives from connections between the past and present, and the contrast between what was intended by the original design and what has resulted given its changing use in society over time. However, the spirit is fleeting—the current project promises a harmony of past, present and future, but for now three different eras collide and intertwine until it is impossible to tell which part of the space belongs to which time.
Entrance to Fanta’s building and adjacent freeway

Park entrance to the main station
Glass towers were built near the entrance and in the parking lot of the main hall to symbolize and remember the trees cut down during the station’s construction.

The steel and glass structure over the platforms was an engineering masterpiece of the early twentieth century. The current redesign strategy intends to restore this structure and harmonize it with modern platforms.
Platform entrances, past and present
Low, fluorescent-lit ceilings and the tile and granite interior of the 1970s design.

Details of the original station dome and arches in old waiting rooms.
Hallway in Fanta’s building, an original passageway to the platforms

Hallways and waiting areas of the 1970s station
This stained glass window and arched passageway serve as an architectural link between the buildings, where the ornate dome of the original station meets the underground hall.
Sasch, the first of many designer clothing shops planned in the renovation of Megasekáč will soon be replaced by restaurants and cafeteria space.
newsstands and convenience shops of the past and present
The Fantova Kavárna was built in the dome of the original station as a tribute to the architect Josef Fanta.
Old and new architectures meet again at a semicircle balcony overlooking the 1970s hall from the Fantova Kavárna.
Kiosks and vending machines scattered in the open floor plan of the 1970s hall.
Platform 1, with the steel roof structure above
Metro platforms, built in the 1970s along with the main hall.
Barbed wire, locked doors and boarded-up windows of the old station

Construction and restoration underway
The president’s wing preserves some of the original glory of Fanta’s building. A VIP lounge is planned for the space after renovation.
On the walls of the original dome are photographs commemorating Fanta and his building.