

Monumental Project to Mark Battle of Austerlitz

- by Roger Aitken

Award-winning Czech-Canadian architect Petr Franta was on hand at the Czech Embassy late last November providing details of the ambitious 'Slavkov/Austerlitz Project', and the challenges to bringing the 'Cairn of Peace' memorial from 1914 - near the site of the 'Battle of the Three Emperors' - into the 21st century.

The presentation, titled 'Architecture of Memory & The Test of War', is perhaps timely given recent world events and the futility of war and also served to mark the 10th anniversary of the Czech National Trust led by chair Irena Edwards. The Czech National Trust were supported in this by the Czech Embassy, Czech Tourism and Budvar.

Accompanying Franta in a panel discussion and Q&A in the embassy's cinema was Richard Bassett, writer, military expert and author of the first definitive history of the Habsburg Army, and Dr Irena Žantovská-Murray, architecture historian, curator of the project based in Prague.

The Battle at Austerlitz, which took place on December 2 1805 in fields around Slavkov u Brna in southern Moravia, was one of Napoleon's greatest victories, won against the odds from Austrian and Russian forces.

Franta, whose is perhaps best known project is Václav Havel Prague Airport and Grand Prix of Czech Architecture winner (x3), referred to original drawings from Professor Josef Fanta (not to be confused with Franta!) of the Cairn of Peace at the turn of the last century that were recently discovered. Another architect at the time was Otto Wagner who wanted views from the memorial. "By studying these original drawings we discovered that the site was arranged on various floors. It seemed therefore sensible to restore Fanta's concept of stepped terraces," Petr Franta explained.

The whole site has been renovated, after winning a competitive tendering process with the South Moravian regional authority, with new paving in front of the chapel.

The original memorial should have been completed by 1905, to mark the centenary of the battle, but was in finished in 1914. According to Franta it was anticipated that the new project would be completed by the Spring of 2024. There were delays in finishing due to the Ukraine war and increased material costs, he disclosed.

The main focus in the current works has been on a new visitor access circuit with an observation tower around 8 metres high that provides a view over the battleground. Landscaping around the memorial is also envisaged. And a multi-media exhibition has been created in the renovated museum next to the cairn. Franta added: “The Cairn of Peace is a reminder of humanity repeating the same mistakes. After the Iron Curtain came down we thought there would be no more conflicts.”

The casualties of the battle on a single day amounted to some 9,000 French lost, 12-14,000 Russians and c.600 Austrians plus 2,000 wounded, with around 14,000 Austrian and Russian troops taken captive.

The Czech National Trust’s website, with much information about their projects, is at <https://www.czechnationaltrust.org/en/>. The event they organised at the Czech Embassy on November 29 can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7xAeqK5WHg>.

For more info see: www.south-moravia.com/en/sights/o70370-the-cairn-of-peace-memorial

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