

Church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin

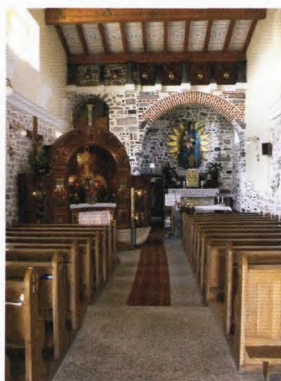
<i>IRN</i>	3928
<i>Location</i>	Ponikve
<i>Planning and implementation</i>	1951-1958
<i>Renovation</i>	1996-1998
<i>Chief conservator</i>	Robert Červ

The present-day church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin is the third sanctuary on the hill to the west of the village of Ponikve. The first church was built or at least renovated by the building workshop of Andrej from Loka in the 1480s, as is evident from a plaque inserted in the southern wall of the present-day nave. In the 18th century a new Baroque church was built at the location, which was burnt and partly demolished during the Second World War.

In 1951 the local priest Janez Lapanja commissioned the architect Jože Plečnik (1872-1957) to prepare plans for the renovation of the sanctuary. Plečnik was faced with the decision whether to reconstruct the Baroque structure or to re-interpret the existing architecture more freely. Plečnik decided on the latter. He preserved the existing outline of the outer walls, but changed the layout of the interior by 180ffl, transforming the former presbytery into the entrance to the church and the western part of the building into the presbytery. He placed the ridge of the gable roof at a right angle to the long axis of the nave. The main façade lost its classical, monumental appearance and is marked only by a lower portico and a simple staircase. Next to the northern wall, Plečnik placed a small cylindrical “angel tower”, as he called it in his plans. Thus he created a pendant to the preserved Baroque tower standing diagonally to the southern corner of the building and directed the attention of the visitor to the new entrance. He left the inside walls unplastered and only roughly grouted, creating a rustic appearance. Of the old church, he preserved part of the triumphal arch. He placed the presbytery asymmetrically next to the wall of the former tower, introducing a dynamic note in the interior. The open roof structure is ornamentally painted. Individual elements

Exterior of the church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin in Ponikve





View of the interior towards the high altar

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of the former Baroque altar are placed along the long wall, but their presentation is not particularly effective as they are bereft of their former function and message.

Work began, after many bureaucratic obstacles, in 1954, when the ruling authorities were not in favour of the construction of church buildings. Most works were carried out by the local population, who was not always skilful enough for the demanding project. Plans changed during the construction as they were adapted to the conditions at the construction site. The ageing Plečnik could not supervise the construction; instead this role was filled by his assistant, the architect Anton Bitenc (1920-1977). In his memoirs, the priest Lapajne writes that work did not always proceed smoothly. He relates one such instance where Plečnik, referring to Bitenc's intention to design the new altar from parts of the damaged Baroque one, apparently lamented: "The young ones are so influenced by the Institute for the Protection of Monuments that they want to turn every church into a museum. This must not be tolerated. Churches are living organisms, therefore they must be allowed to grow and find their appearance in new, contemporary forms." This is another example of the eternal dilemma between the effectiveness of the conservation doctrine and the power of an architect's creative freedom.

The church was completed and consecrated a year after Plečnik's death. Since then, it has undergone several maintenance procedures: the roof tiles were replaced, the concrete dome on the cylindrical tower was renovated and a fence around the church erected (1996, 1998).

ROBERT ČERV

photos: **ROBERT ČERV**