

Church of St Benedict

<i>IRN</i>	925
<i>Location</i>	Zgornje Stranje
<i>Renovation</i>	1946-1948
<i>Chief conservator</i>	Maja Avguštin

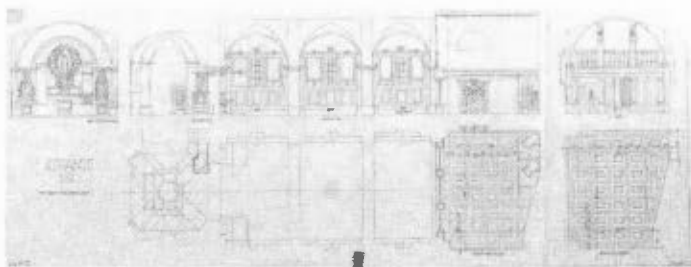
The church of St Benedict stands on a hill 455m above sea level, near the village of Zgornje Stranje. The road below the church leads to Kamniška Bistrica in one direction, and Gornji Grad in the other. Before the present-day structure, a medieval church stood on this location until the early 19th century, as recorded in a document regarding the consecration of the presbytery from 1499. According to Valvazor the church was fortified. A description by the vicariates of Nevlje, Šmartno and Zgornji Tuhinj from 1703, says the church had three altars and a tower with two bells. In the early 1830s the medieval building was demolished and replaced with a new structure that was consecrated in 1834. It consisted of a rectangular nave and presbytery with truncated corners. The roof ridge of the nave was slightly higher than the roof ridge of the presbytery. The sacristy was added to the south of the presbytery, and the tower was separated from the church.

In his book entitled *Politični okraj Kamnika* (Kamnik Political District) from 1929 Stelè gives a detailed description of the church prior to the renovation carried out by Jože Plečnik. He describes the interior as follows:

“... the nave is covered with a barrel vault on pendentives resting on shallow pilasters along the walls. Each wall features three rectangular windows. The choir is vaulted and rests on two stone

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Zgornje Stranje, church of St Benedict





Plečnik's design for the renovation of the interior of the church of St Benedict, June 1947 (HRAUSKY, KOŽELJ, PRELOVŠEK, *Plečnikova Slovenija*)

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pillars. The presbytery is covered with a shallow dome on an octagonal base. The colours of the walls: greenish with white strips and pilasters in the nave. The presbytery features three rectangular windows."

And the exterior:

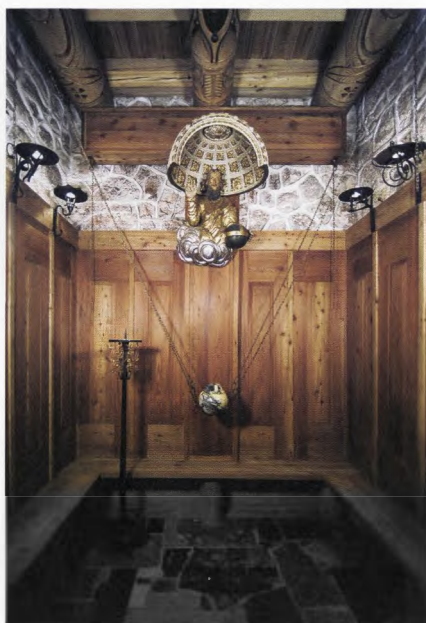
"... The stone main portal with a triangular tympanum, surmounted with a semicircular window and a round loophole at the top. The presbytery is embraced with a projecting parapet at ground level. The entire exterior is of greenish colour and the church is covered with a single roof with slate tiles... The tower has no parapet at ground level; the ground floor can be accessed through a rounded, stone Gothic portal with ogee moulding. The walls are plain, large, semicircular openings at the bells, Baroque roof..."

The church was heavily damaged during the Second World War. Because of its strategic position, the German army converted it into a military post. The nave was divided into two storeys with a concrete platform, the windows were sealed and the church was surrounded with bunkers. Much of the furniture was burnt. After the war, the local priest and Franciscan friar Martin Perc and his parishioners succeeded in removing the concrete ceiling without



Portico to the south of the church

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Baptistery

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causing additional damage. As a great admirer of Plečnik's work, Perc invited the architect to participate in the renovation. Initially Plečnik declined the invitation and the priest turned to the master's student Majda Neřima, who in early July of 1946 produced plans for the incorporation of the tower into the main building of the church.

In 1946 Jože Plečnik visited Zgornje Stranje for the first time and took over the planning of the renovation and furniture for the church.

As materials were in short supply after the war, Plečnik adapted his designs such that available materials could be used: concrete, river stones, timber. Plečnik used balusters from the demolished façade of the Glasbena Matica building in Ljubljana for the pillars of the southern portico. He concealed the concrete window frames inserted as an emergency measure in 1945 with curtains and explained his decision to the locals as follows:

"... When you come to the Sunday service, your thoughts and gaze will wander through the window towards your home, ... you will be distracted ... the curtains will prevent this, you will be able to focus better and your gaze will rest constantly on the altar ..."

Plečnik achieved an exceptional effect with the paving: the floor in the nave and presbytery are covered with concrete, in which wooden cubes that were boiled several times are inserted. Several of Plečnik's students followed this example and went on to design similar floors. Plečnik converted the newly-created area between the church and the tower into a baptistery, which was completed in 1947/48. Because it is separated from the rest of the church, it became a model for other baptisteries built in that period. Like in his altar designs, Plečnik adorned his architecture with various furnishings from the previous church. He placed the statue of God the Father under a canopy on St Anthony's Cross. The walls are decorated with simple panelling. The baptismal font hangs from the



Sacristy, door handle

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ceiling on four thin chains. The ceiling is embellished with carved beams. The carvings are combined with gilding. On the left and right side of the wall, wrought-iron lamps resembling blossoms are placed. The walls under the ceiling remained unplastered, with Plečnik characteristically emphasising them with grouting. The floor is paved with the remains of marble plates.

The area below the choir and the choir itself are made of wood. The ceiling under the choir consists of wooden panels. The area also features confession boxes. The choir can be accessed through a turret placed against the southern wall of the tower and featuring a spiral metal staircase.

Plečnik also redesigned and furnished the sacristy. He removed the plastering from the stone vault and marked it with grouting like in the baptistery. The wooden door leading to the sacristy is an exceptional example of craftsmanship. The upper part is designed as a wooden statue in the shape of an amphora. The metal door handle is shaped like a rooster with displayed wings. The lamp on the ceiling of the sacristy opens up like a star in the sky. The western corner of the sacristy features alternating tread stairs that facilitate a shorter span.

In addition to the new sacristy and choir, the rebuilding of the sacristy, the construction of a new access point to the tower, the redesign of the main entrance to the church and the construction of the portico, Plečnik paid special attention to the rich furnishing of the interior.

In 1948 he designed a new high altar of St Benedict. He adjusted his designs to the knowledge and capacities of the local masters. The retable is shaped like a large foliate monstrance containing the old statue of St Benedict. He used the same approach in both side altars.

The church is a veritable museum of Plečnik's church design. He designed the lamps, chandeliers, several suspended and stand-



Choir loft

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ing candlesticks, a candelabrum in the memory of the deceased parishioners, a seven-branched candelabrum, a gong with two small bells, pews, crosses, lights under the choir, lights and frames for the Stations of the Cross, chalices, wooden frames for the window and door in the presbytery, a pulpit, a door to the confession box and more.

In the church of St Benedict, Jože Plečnik appears in the role of an architect transforming an earlier structure. The Zgornje Stranje parish archive keeps an account of Plečnik's explanation of his work in the church to the villagers:

"... At home, old people, the young masters of the house and children all live under the same roof. You must be patient with one another and live in harmony. Similarly, when you come to the church, you will be able explain and show the history of your old church to your children..."

Stele's description of the church portrays a different building than that which is known today. Although great damage was inflicted by the German army during the Second World War, the post-war years brought even greater architectural changes. The church has kept its basic structure with three windows on each side of the nave, the shape of the presbytery and the tower. It has also kept the trapezoid stone parapet on the exterior of the presbytery. The only change Plečnik introduced in the presbytery is the sealing of the two windows from the outside. In his writings, France Stele mentions two medieval portals. The main entrance featured a pointed portal, whereas the portal leading to the tower was semicircular with ogee moulding. The main portal has not survived. The portal that used to lead to the tower now gives access to the baptistery. Plečnik placed the new entrance to the tower in the northern wall, which can be accessed on an external, concrete spiral staircase. After Plečnik's rebuilding immediately after the war, the church remained untouched until 1996, when the Kranj branch of the

then Institute for the Protection of Natural and Cultural Heritage carried out a sounding investigation of the façade and renovated the exterior based on the results.

MAJA AVGUŠTIN

photos: **DAMJAN PRELOVŠEK**

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Archive of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of Slovenia, Kranj
Regional Unit

Zgornje Stranje Parish Archive

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