



THE LITOMYŠL MIRACLE

HOW A RENAISSANCE TOWN
BECAME THE CENTRE OF MODERN CZECH
ARCHITECTURE

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LITOMYŠL, IN THE EAST OF CZECHIA, IS WHERE THE FIRST PRINTED SOFFA ISSUE WAS BORN. SINCE THEN WE HAVE BECOME FAITHFUL CUSTOMERS OF THE H.R.G. PRINTING HOUSE, AND EVERY TWO MONTHS WE MAKE THE JOURNEY TO LITOMYŠL. NOT UNTIL OUR LAST ISSUE, HOWEVER, WHEN WE FEATURED THE LOCAL BAROQUE CHURCH AND ITS HARMONIOUS BLEND OF HISTORICAL AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE, HAD WE SPENT MORE THAN A COUPLE OF HOURS IN THIS GEM OF A TOWN. IN THIS ISSUE WE EXPLORE THE NOTABLE PROJECTS THAT HAVE MADE LITOMYŠL THE CENTRE OF MODERN CZECH ARCHITECTURE.

When speaking of today's Litomyšl, people often use the word 'miracle'. Calling it a miracle is misleading, however, as it takes credit away from those whose enthusiasm and perseverance have contributed to the town's transformation. After all, it was human effort, not supernatural forces, that created a gem from a town previously known only for its Renaissance chateau. Indeed, it was the restoration of this very chateau that was the impetus for Litomyšl's second 'Renaissance'.

The chateau was designed by the Italian architect Giovanni Battista Aostalli and built in the sixteenth century by Vratislav of Pernštejn. Restoration on the *sgraffito* – the stunning decoration on the external facade – began in 1974 and continued for more than ten years. The work was entrusted to prominent Czech artists like Olbram Zoubek, Václav Boštík, Stanislav Podhrázský and Zdeněk Palcr, who for political reasons were unable to create their own work during those years. They found their new home in Litomyšl and in time drew other artists to the town.

This meeting of creative spirits led to a group exhibition in 1989 at the City Gallery on Smetanovo náměstí [square]. One of the visitors to the exhibition was Miroslav Brýdl, an admirer of modern architecture and the future town mayor. Brýdl was elected as mayor the very next year and became the key initiator behind the town's transformation. His goal seemed simple – to make Litomyšl into a pleasant place to live. From the very beginning this meant a clear focus on public space and on ensuring that any new development would serve the needs of the town's residents. Brýdl also appointed Zdeňka Vydrová to the newly established post of city architect. Most importantly, he

RIGHT | LIBRARY OF THE FACULTY OF RESTORATION

The new library for future restorers of historical objects is flooded with pleasant daylight. It also offers an inspirational view of the chateau brewery, carefully restored by Josef Pleskot.





ABOVE | COWORKING CARRIAGE HOUSE

After restoration the chateau carriage house now houses cafés, a coworking space and the office of the chateau manager. In the places where carriages used to stand, both in the interior and the exterior, one finds furniture and other objects made of fibreglass.





created a vision for Litomyšl which subsequent leaders have been happy to embrace and fulfil. Had it not been for this continuity of vision, the most complex of the town's recent projects – the revival of the chateau hillside precinct – would not have been possible. In only six years the town managed to renovate eleven separate sites, which opened up for everyone parts of the town that had previously been visited only by tourists. Dilapidated buildings were restored and found new functions, and formerly desolate courtyards became great examples of modern public space.

The first building that greets visitors as they ascend the chateau hillside precinct is the Regional Museum, which is located on the site of a former Piarist Gymnasium [secondary school]. The building was renovated between 2012 and 2014 by the architect Josef Pleskot and his team, but the project ran into difficulties when it uncovered remnants of older buildings and cellars underneath. The architectural team incorporated the archaeological findings into the museum collection by encasing them in a protective structure made of reinforced concrete, and 'inserted' this structure into the original Baroque building. The museum entrance was transformed into a striking geometric steel and glass feature that draws the attention of all who pass and offers a stunning view over the town.

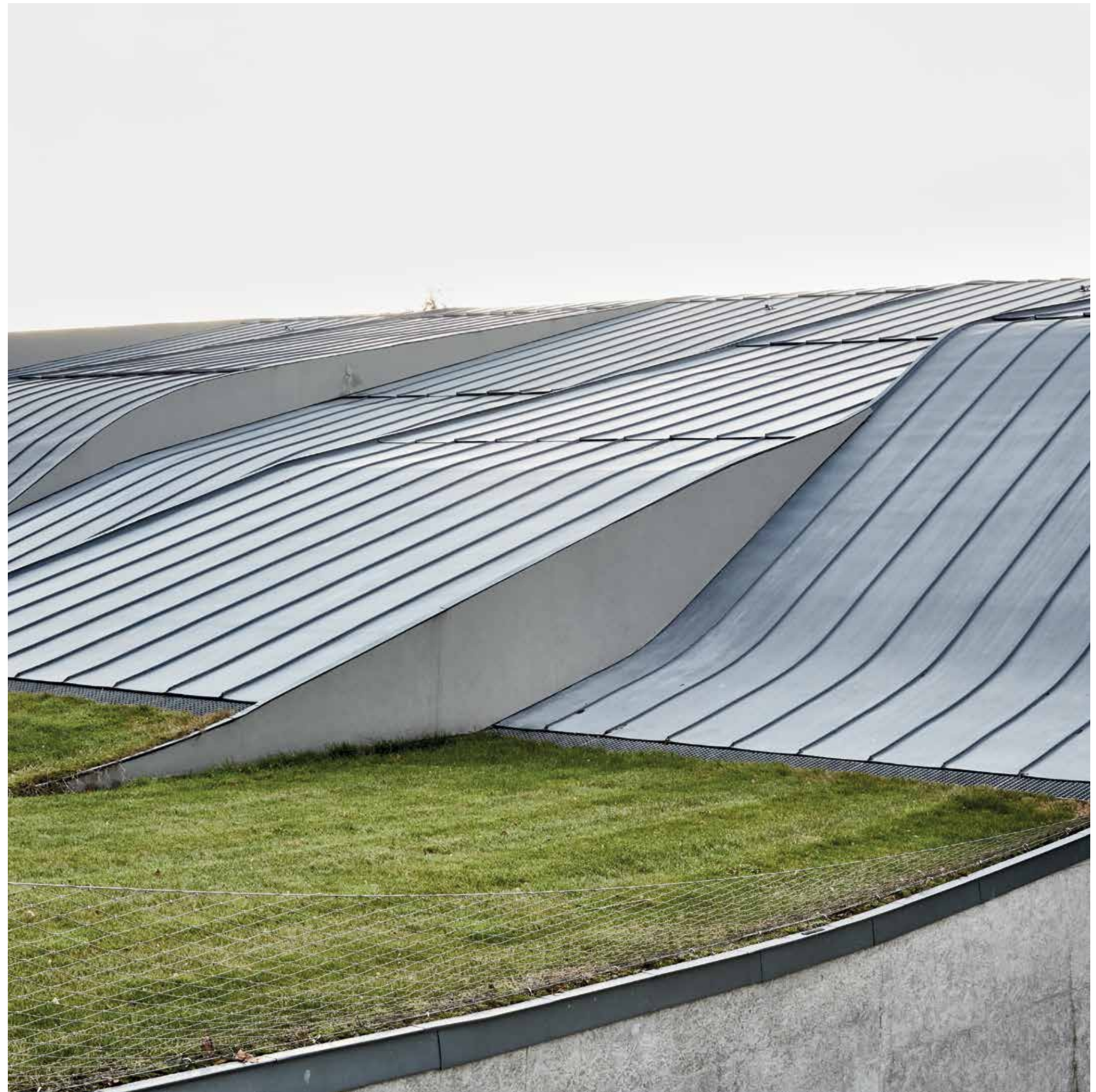
The Piarist order that built the Church of the Discovery of the Holly Cross, which received attention in the last printed issue of SOFFA, also built a Baroque college on the chateau precinct. Designed with a typical square floor plan and a cloister garth, the college building went through a complex renovation that also involved archaeological findings. Today the building houses the studios of the Faculty of Restoration from the University of Pardubice and offers student accommodation. In the past the college was connected to other residential buildings, but once those were demolished, an empty space remained. In 2015 the architectural studio Burian–Křivinka transformed the empty space into a two-storey building partially submerged into the ground. The building connects seamlessly to the surrounding area and its dimensions fully respect the neighbouring Baroque college. Nevertheless, it is a modern structure with a minimalist facade dominated by two wide bands of floor to ceiling windows. The lower ground is a multifunctional space and houses the town's ceremonial hall and the auditorium of the Faculty of Restoration. The upper level houses the Faculty's library.

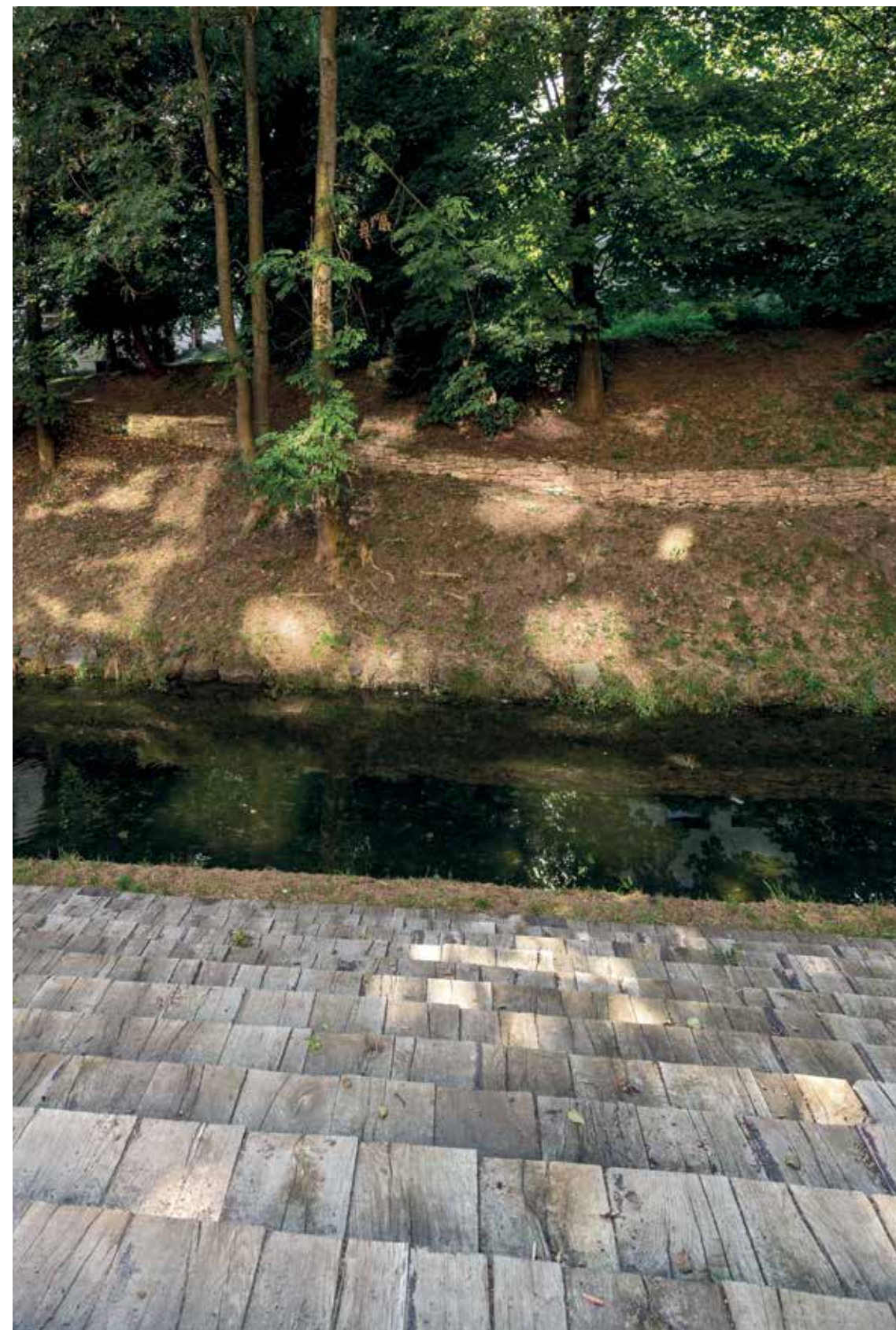


LEFT | CHATEAU BREWERY

In the restoration of the chateau brewery Josef Pleskot was guided by several principles. One was to avoid trying to unify historical elements with modern interventions, instead aiming for the right balance between the old and the new. An example of this is the steel and glass structure of the atrium.

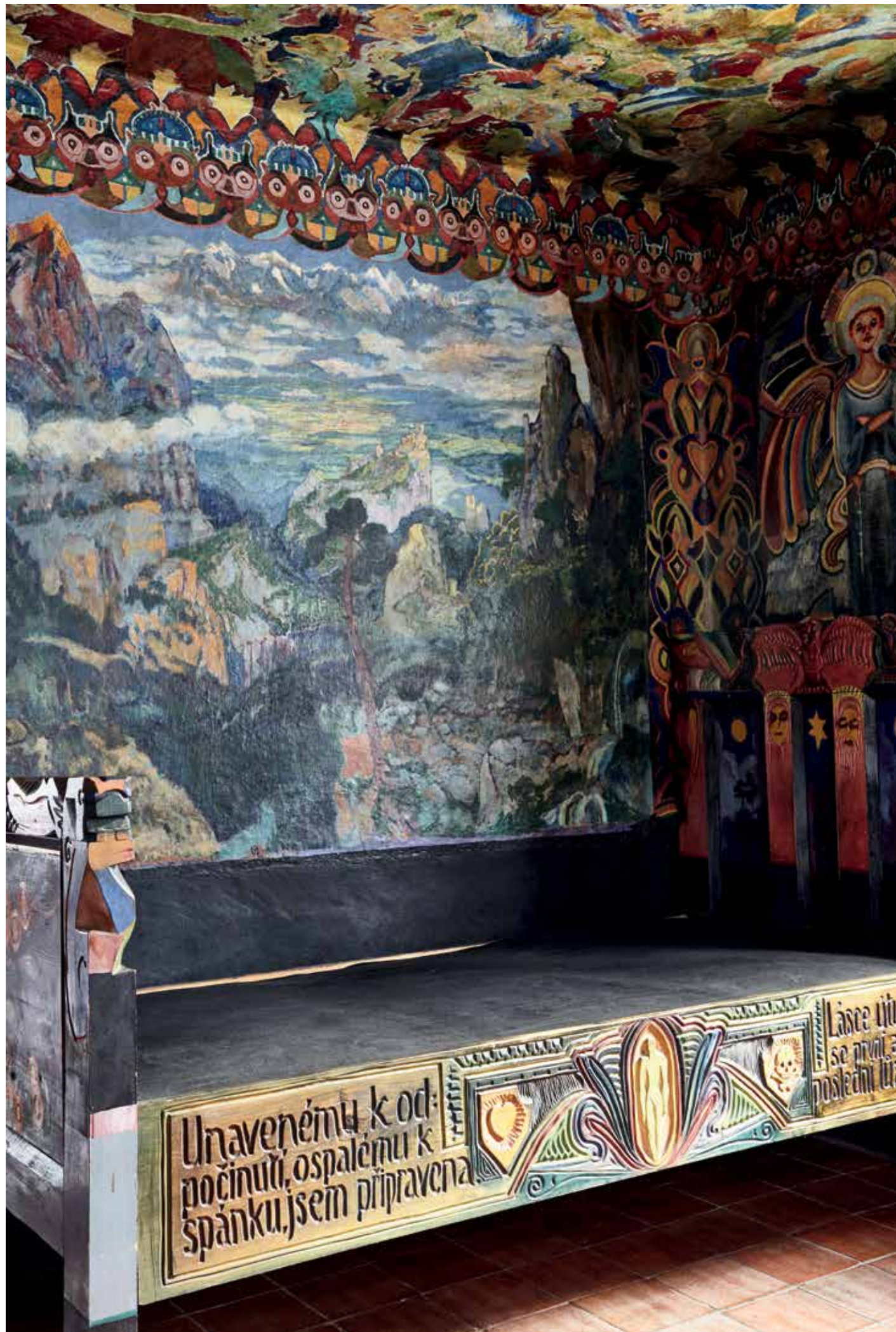
THIS SPREAD | CITY SWIMMING POOL
Connecting seamlessly with the surrounding landscape, the swimming pool hall is also environmentally friendly. The earth that was removed in the construction of the swimming pool was later used as natural insulation.





ABOVE | CLOISTER GARDENS

The prominent Czech sculptor Olbram Zoubek found his second home in Litomyšl. The cloister gardens are adorned with his 'group sculptures' as well as individual expressive figures.



Another building that found a new lease on life during the revival of the chateau precinct was the chateau brewery, located just a stone's throw away from the library. It is here that the world-famous composer Bedřich Smetana was born – in a building that prior to the restoration had been derelict for years and had even once served as a wood shed. The restoration was again led by the architect Josef Pleskot, who has been involved in Litomyšl's Renaissance from the very beginning and has significantly influenced how the town presents today. The original Renaissance structure, which owing to a fire had undergone a Baroque reconstruction, still exudes its industrial character – exposed metal structures and wooden beams tell the tale of the building's brewing past. Today the former brewery is used by the YMCA as its European Training Centre. It is also Litomyšl's cultural and information hub with exhibitions, concerts and even accommodation options.

The 'Litomyšl miracle' is not only about the revival of the chateau hillside precinct. In 1997 the town announced an open competition for the revival of the then dilapidated cloister gardens located behind the Piarist college. The winning design by Zdeňek Sendler did not attempt to restore the historical gardens, but used the open space as a green carpet for walking, running and picnicking. Ornamentation was commissioned to the sculptor Olbram Zoubek, Litomyšl's honorary resident and one of the artists who had restored the *sgraffito* on the Renaissance chateau. According to Miroslav Brýdl, it was through the garden restoration project that the public embraced the notion that contemporary architecture belongs in the town's historical centre.

Below the chateau hillside on the bank of the river Loučná awaits another example of the town's focus on public space. Where regular flooding required that the riverbank be reinforced with stone walls, the town added spacious wooden stairs and a wooden platform to provide residents with easy access to the waterway. Once again the work of the architectural studio of Josef Pleskot, this clever addition to the flood protection system created a serene public space, a small public square floating above the river Loučná.

Water is also the theme of the next example of stunning modern architecture in Litomyšl. The local swimming pool, designed by the architectural studio DRNH and

LEFT | PORTMONEUM

The paintings that cover the walls of the Portmoneum appear chaotic at first glance. The themes depicted on the walls and furniture are ruled by a complex iconography stemming from Josef Váchal's life. They include traditional Christian elements as well as esoteric themes from Eastern religions.



LEFT | COPPER BAR

The Copper Bar lives up to its name – the contrast between copper slabs and grey-black tones makes for an elegant interior. Located in the centre of town on Smetanovo náměstí [square], the bar was opened in 2016 under the archway of a house from the early 1900s.



LEFT AND ABOVE | NEW CHURCH

The New Church rises gently in three planes and culminates in an optical glass cross made by the artist Václav Cigler. The sophisticated and minimalist interior décor is the work of the sculptor and painter Karel Malich.

THIS SPREAD AND NEXT PAGE | WHITE GALLERY
The distinctive gallery and unique depository – named aptly the White Gallery – was built by the son of the artist Ludmila Jandová. Appearing like an apparition in the little village of Osík near Litomyšl, the gallery is currently exhibiting the work of Daniel Pešta, including the outdoor installation *Gravitation Zero II*.





built seven years ago, is an architectural feast for the eye. The zinc roof of the stunning pool hall transitions seamlessly into the surrounding grass area and appears to be the work of nature.

In 2010 the architect Zdeňek Fránek skilfully placed the Church of the Brethren's new house of prayer onto a gentle slope next to a busy road. In doing so he defied the traditional construct of a church as a vertical structure with an obligatory tower and religious ornamentation. Made of reinforced concrete and glass, the aptly named New Church epitomises new Litomyšl not only in its physical features, but also in its openness towards the people – in addition to serving as a place of religious service, it is also a meeting place for various civic groups and associations.

Just a few kilometres southwest of Litomyšl, surrounded by nature, stands the White Gallery. Another splendid example of modern architecture, the building looks like a summer-house inspired by the Villa Tugendhat. The gallery serves as an exhibition space for artists from the 1950s onwards and houses the complete works of the Czech painter and graphic artist Ludmila Jandová. For this second purpose the building was uniquely designed to provide an ideal climactic environment for the preservation of art on paper.

Last but not least, the Portmoneum. It is not a contemporary building, nor does it belong to Litomyšl's second Renaissance, but its uniqueness makes it a 'must see'. In 1920 the amateur book printer and Litomyšl native Josef Portman invited the painter Josef Váchal to his home and offered up two rooms to serve as the painter's canvas. The result is mystical and highly dramatic! Váchal, who was misunderstood in his time, covered the entire two rooms – including the furniture and ceiling – with vivid and complexly themed paintings. The Portmoneum was struck by lightning in the mid 1960s and the resulting fire almost engulfed Váchal's mystical *gesamkunstwerk*. It was saved by another book lover, the Czech publisher Ladislav Horáček, who restored the paintings and transformed the Portmoneum into the Josef Váchal Museum.

Considering the pace at which Litomyšl is changing, we could dedicate another feature to this modern historical town in a year or two and find plentiful material. There is always room for improvement, and Litomyšl's leaders do not rest on their laurels. It is an exceptional town, however, and its residents are rightfully proud of the place they call home.

For more information about Litomyšl go to www.litomysl.cz, www.esclitomysl.cz, www.zamecke-navrsi.cz and www.smetanovalitomysl.cz. ■