

19th -Century Visions of Prague

Guiding UNESCO Historical Preservation and Urban Development in the City Today

By Noah Pacina | Art History and Visual Studies | March 22nd, 2023

Research Questions

What concerns remain at the heart of the preservation and urban development debate in the context of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Historic Centre of Prague?

In what ways did Antonín Langweil revolutionize 3D model creation, and therefore offer UNESCO and Czech authorities a critical glimpse into a snapshot of Prague in the early 19th century?

What priorities are at the forefront of the discussion around UNESCO historical preservation in Prague, and are these priorities being addressed by Czech authorities? How does this impact the future of the World Heritage Site?

Keywords

Historical Preservation

Urban Development

Heritage Studies

Introduction

The Historic Centre of Prague today, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, remains a gem of Europe, layered with history and intrigue. The way in which the architecture provides visitors to the city snapshots of its life and times throughout history remains a notable highlight.

Within this project, I am concerned with relevant historical preservation and urban development concerns as they exist in the context of the Historic Centre of Prague. To this end, I will discuss the Langweil Model, a 19th century papier mâché model of the City of Prague as it was known in the early 19th century.

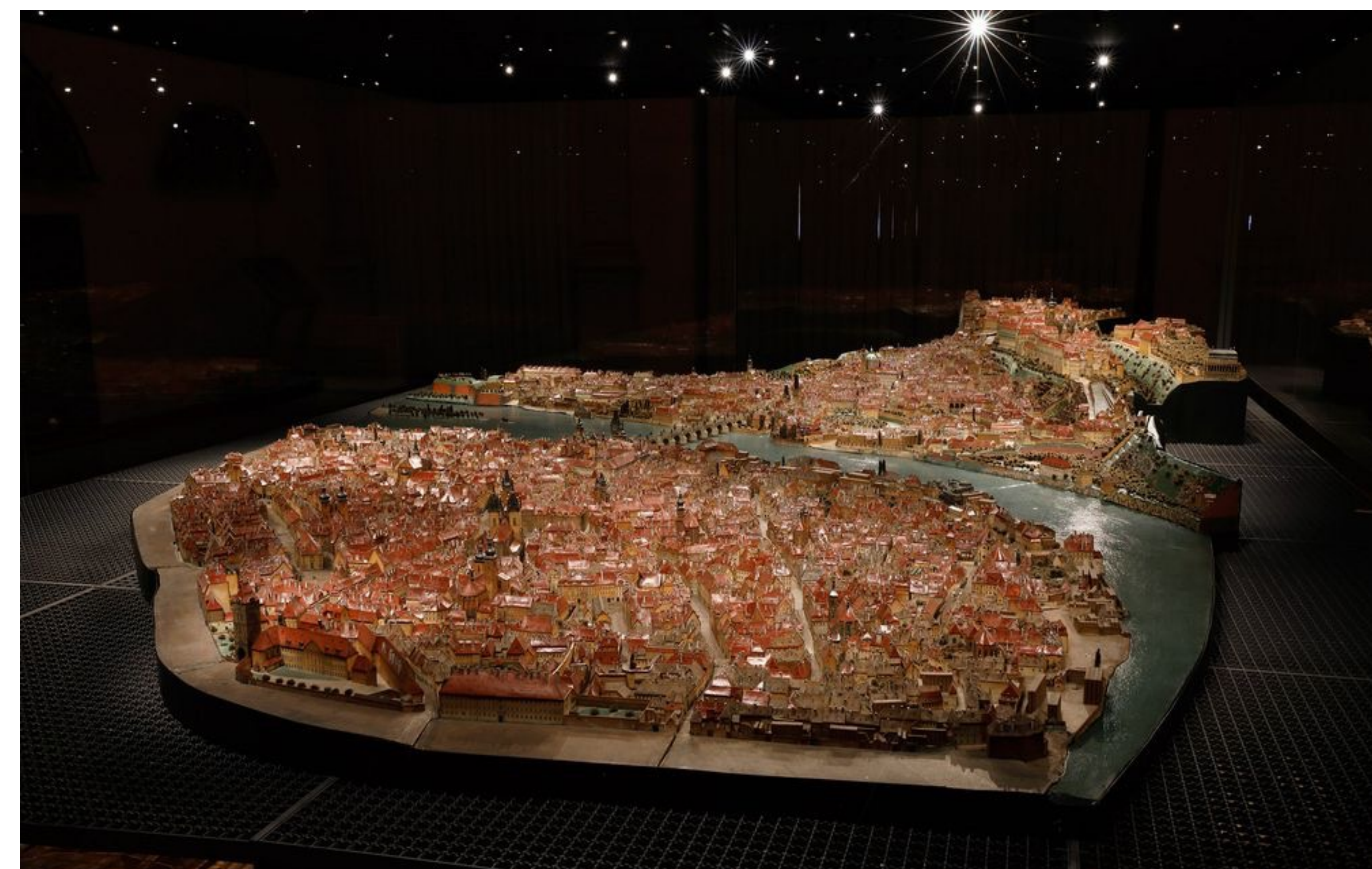


Figure 1: An overview of the Langweil Model as seen at the Museum of the City of Prague, photograph, no taken date. Source: <https://www.kompoceskuz.cz/clanek/21890/den-a-noc-s-antoninem-langweilem>

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My objective is to contextualize, through the framework of heritage studies, the way that its creator, Antonín Langweil, represented the city, and the way his perspectives of the city inform the way Prague is historically preserved and continually developed today.

To achieve this objective, I will unpack the creation of the original Model, and how a virtual version of the Model influences decisions made by UNESCO and relevant Czech authorities when it comes to balancing the necessity for sustainable and thoughtful urban development and critical historical preservation concerns.

Antonin Langweil and his Influences

Antonin Langweil was a 19th century Czech lithographer. He was born in 1791 in the small town of Postoloprty, at the time located in Bohemia.

He studied the technique of lithography in Vienna in his 20s, eventually bringing his knowledge home. He struggled in his career, however, having opened a business in Prague's Old Town Square, but was forced to close it due to lack of business.

Briefly, he worked in a lithography workshop under JF Schönfeld. He was hired as a University library assistant after declaring bankruptcy, which remained his job for the rest of his life, dying relatively young in 1837.¹

When the plaster models of Symphorien Caron, a visiting Parisian sculptor, were on display in Prague, Langweil was inspired and wanted to explore the medium on his own.²

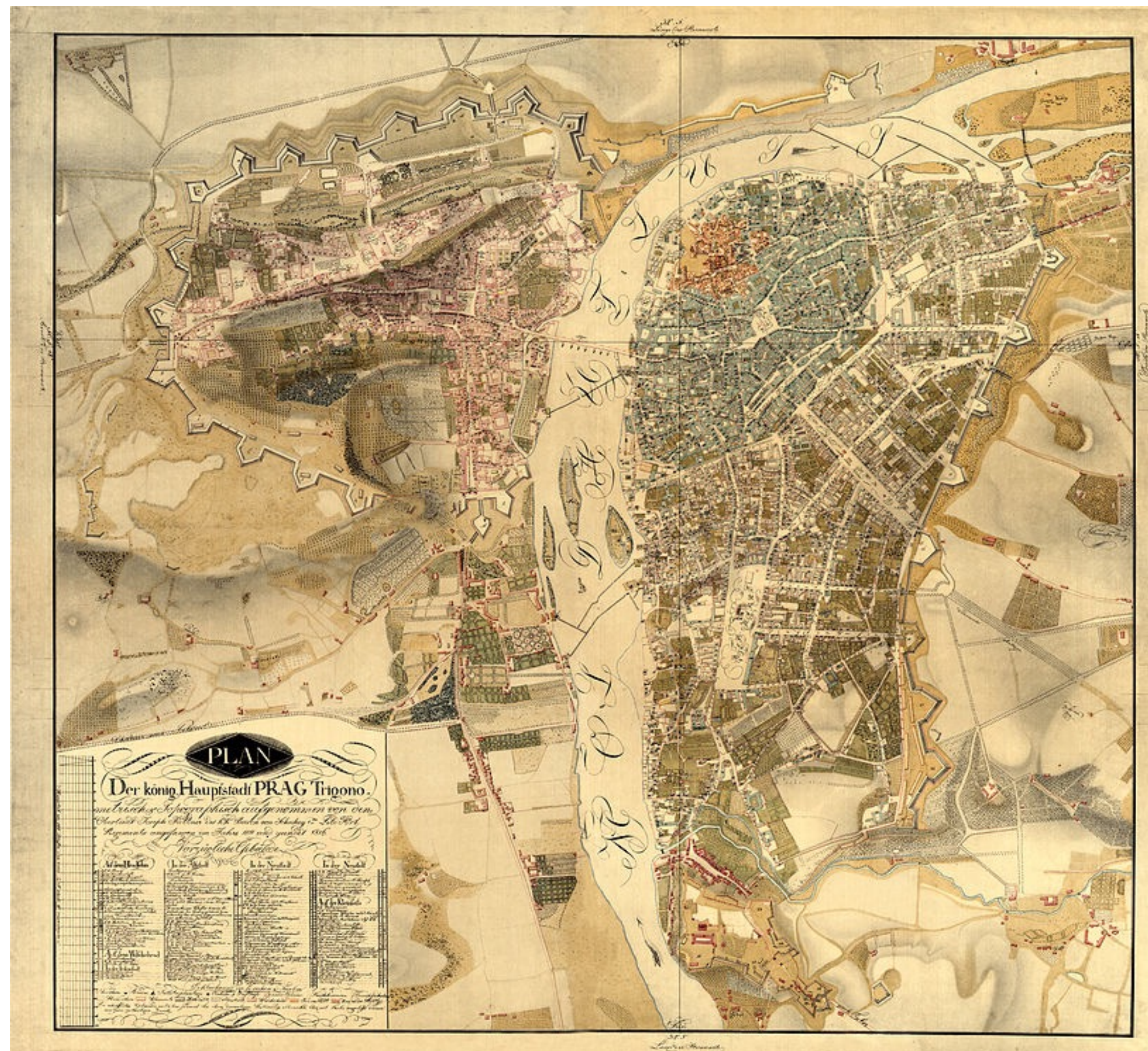


Figure 2: Map. Source: Josef Jüttner, *Ceština: Plán Prahy vytvořený Josefem Jüttnerem v letech 1811 - 1816*, 1816, Public Domain image. <https://www.uiozto.cz/40350677/juttneruv-plan-prahy.pdf>



Figure 3: A close-up of Old Times Square in the Langweil Model, photograph, no taken date. Source: DENÍK / Jiří Kubiška https://prazsky.denik.cz/kultura_region/langweiluv-model-prahy-fascinuje-divaky-a-slouzi-odbornikum-20170329.html



Figure 4: A close-up of Lesser Town in the Langweil Model, photograph, no taken date. Source: <https://www.kompoceskuz.cz/clanek/21890/den-a-noc-s-antoninem-langweilem>



Figure 5: Prague Castle as seen in the digitalized Langweil Model, screenshot, no taken date. Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-3D-reconstruction-of-the-Langweil-model-of-Prague-1-8-approximately_figL268015729

The Langweil Model

The model is entirely hand-made, constructed of papier mâché with hand-painted details. It is made up of 52 sections, measuring around 20 square meters, and was constructed over a period of 11 years.

Due to a lack of external funding, and Langweil's continually declining health, the project remained unfinished, with some sections incomplete.

Langweil created the model according to the Jüttner Plan of 1816, a very ambitious example of geodetic mapping using early surveying techniques we are familiar with today. This plan was based on a trigonometric network he devised, and therefore was a highly precise document.

Josef Jüttner was an artillery officer in the Army with a great understanding for terrain and mapping.³ Based on this expertise; he devised a scale of 1:4,320 to ensure accuracy.

Langweil, using his experience from lithography and the intricate and detailed craftsmanship required for that practice, he expertly modelled the exteriors of 2,500 Prague buildings.

Preservation and Development Today

A virtual 3D model was recently created, utilizing detailed photography, and computer algorithms to make Langweil's technical marvel a virtual resource.⁴

UNESCO and the City of Prague's restoration and infill projects within the existing boundaries of the model are guided by this newly accessible virtual model.⁵

It appears that the city, regarding proposed projects and their impact on the heritage aspect of the World Heritage Site, have not followed established protocols.

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