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# Prague

## Prague eyes – Revitalisation of the Prague riverfront

- DURATION

Completed

- POPULATION 2024

1.328.000 (Growth rate 0,38%)

- URA SCOPE

SOCIETY: STAYING HUMAN

- TOPICS

REVITALIZATION

CULTURAL HERITAGE

CONNECTIVITY

INCLUSIVITY

- MAIN ACTORS

Petr Janda / brainwork

City of Prague (Adriana Krnáčová, Mayor of Prague)

(A)VOID Gallery (Ivo Slavík, co-initiator)

In 2009, Petr Janda stood on the banks of Prague's neglected riverfront, envisioning a transformation. Partnering with cultural promoter Ivo Slavík, he set out to breathe life into this deserted stretch, drawing on the support of the city and public funds. Their dream was bold: to turn the forgotten embankments into a vibrant hub for culture and community. What began as an idea soon took shape through countless cultural events, exhibitions, and open discussions, engaging an ever-growing audience and sparking a bottom-up revolution in urban renewal.

The revitalization of the Prague riverfront became the city's largest post-revolutionary investment in public space—a pioneering project intertwining strong architectural vision with sociocultural renewal. Stretching nearly four kilometres, the transformation encompassed three embankments, preserving the historical essence of the area while infusing it with modern vitality. The project's centrepiece was the reconstruction of 20 historic vaults, originally used for ice storage. These once-overlooked spaces were reimagined as cafes, galleries, workshops, and public amenities, seamlessly blending the past with the present.

Six of the vaults now feature distinctive steel-framed portals with elliptical glass windows.

These organic glass marvels—each 7 cm thick and weighing 2.5 tons—pivot gracefully, blurring the boundary between interior and exterior. The remaining 14 vaults boast sculptural steel entrances, their minimalist elegance a nod to the surrounding historic architecture. This fusion of contemporary and classical design preserves the area's genius loci, creating a unique dialogue between old and new.

Janda's architectural approach emphasized openness and connection. Rather than creating isolated interiors, the vaults were designed to flow naturally into the riverside, maximizing interaction with the river and its surroundings. The revitalized space, nestled in the Prague Conservation Zone and UNESCO World Heritage area, offers stunning views of landmarks like Prague Castle and Vyšehrad Castle. It stands as a testament to the city's ability to honour its historical heritage while forging a new urban identity.

Today, the Prague riverfront is a sparkling public space, alive with activity and creativity. It is a place where history and modernity coexist, not in opposition but in harmony—a symbol of renewal, community, and the enduring power of visionary design.





## Impact

The revitalization of Prague's waterfront has set a benchmark for urban renewal, inspiring similar projects across the Czech Republic and beyond. This initiative showcases how thoughtful architecture, and urban design can reshape both physical spaces and the social dynamics of a city.

A key achievement of the project is the integration of contemporary architecture with the area's historical authenticity. Once closed and inaccessible, the vaults have been transformed into open, vibrant spaces that connect with the river, redefining the riverfront's role as a dynamic hub for recreation, culture, and community engagement.

Previously an uninviting area lacking facilities, the riverfront is now one of Prague's most cherished public spaces, attracting locals and tourists alike with its diverse activities and rich cultural programs against the backdrop of the river and historical landmarks.

Beyond its physical transformation, the project has fundamentally changed perceptions of the riverfront. It has turned the city's attention back to the river, a vital part of Prague's heritage and identity that had been neglected for decades.

The sociocultural impact of the revitalization is profound. It has not only made the riverfront more accessible but has also redefined it as a place where community and culture thrive. The creation of an energetic, inclusive public realm reinforces the idea that urban spaces can and should serve as catalysts for social cohesion and cultural enrichment.

Internationally, the project serves as a powerful example of how to integrate modern architectural innovation within the sensitive framework of a conservation zone and UNESCO heritage site. It demonstrates that contemporary design can coexist harmoniously with historical contexts, enhancing rather than detracting from their significance.

In essence, the revitalized Prague riverfront stands as a testament to the transformative potential of thoughtful urban design. It has turned a once-overlooked area into a celebrated public space, fostering a sense of belonging, community, and pride. Its success underscores the importance of reconnecting cities with their natural and historical assets, inspiring similar efforts worldwide to create urban spaces that are as inclusive and dynamic as they are beautiful.

## Challenge

Prague's riverfront faced a profound challenge: a historically significant area, once bustling as a quay and transshipment point, had fallen into neglect. After the devastating floods of 2002, this vibrant space was abandoned, reduced to a car park and forgotten by its residents and visitors. The riverfront, a vital artery of Prague's cultural heritage, became a symbol of disconnection—a city that had turned its back on its river, losing a crucial piece of its identity.

Abandoned zones like this have a ripple effect. Neglect fosters decay, discourages public use, and erases the community's connection to its cultural past. The closed-off vaults, originally designed for practical purposes like ice storage, were left as reminders of a bygone era, their potential obscured. Without intervention, the riverfront risked remaining an underutilized and forgotten space, contributing little to Prague's cultural or social fabric.

The neglect highlighted a broader issue: the city's failure to integrate its historical and natural assets into contemporary life. This disconnection not only wasted a valuable resource but also diminished Prague's ability to celebrate its rich heritage, weakening the cultural bond between the city, its residents, and the river.

## Solution Proposed

Since its inception in 2009, the Prague riverfront revitalization project has been a transformative journey, evolving from an abandoned quay and car park into a vibrant cultural hub. Once deserted following the 2002 floods, this valuable urban space was reimagined by a group of engaged citizens who saw its untapped potential. Initially, they activated the space through sculptural exhibitions, performances, and music events—first in the open public areas, later expanding into the historic vaults and onto a floating boat hull.

This gradual programmatic activation sparked a cultural and social revival, paving the way for architectural transformation. The vaults, once closed and inaccessible, were redesigned as intimate "shrines" that seamlessly connect with the open riverfront and the Vltava River. This contrast between their original enclosed state and their newfound openness embodies the philosophical core of the project: reconnecting the city with the river.

The revitalization's success lies in its emphasis on authenticity over mainstream appeal, fostering a blend of local and global cultures. Notable components, such as the (A)Void Floating Gallery, have launched numerous internationally recognized projects. Currently, the second phase focuses on additional vault renovations, floating elements, and restoring Prague's river-bathing tradition with a floating pool, further enhancing the city's connection to its waterfront heritage.

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