

Thoughts on Recent Czechoslovak Architecture

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Although the 19th century was rich in many art forms, and a transitional period for a new architecture, it was not very successful in creating its own architectural style. The past became a model from which one could select any style according to choice without really understanding their principles. The new materials and construction remained hidden behind pseudo-historical façades. Art was considered far above the low character of the work. Nevertheless, even during this period, we find talented architects, such as architect Zítěk, designer of the National Theatre and the Concert Hall in Prague, both buildings in the new Renaissance style, whom we could consider above the mannerism of his colleagues.

New designs had to adjust quickly to the changes in industrialization and the sharp increase in population, particularly in the cities, which required new living standards. Industry, which was responsible for these changes, was expected to assist in resolving the new problems. At first, the architects concentrated on formality, but later they developed a true synthesis, using new techniques. Search for a new formal expression and the execution of space concepts were stimulated by the development of new materials and new methods of construction, and also influenced by the deep social changes. New schools and fundamental theories were forerunners of a new style developing without any definite regulations or final results. Successful solutions were found in the synthesis of given requirements and their perfect expressions.

Reacting to the previous eclecticism, groups of architects emerged at the end of the 19th century who were searching for new architectural expressions to better reflect their period. In their works we find the new ornamentation of free lines and flower motifs expressed in the new structure and the clear solids. In Bohemia, this effort for a new style is called "secession", from Vienna's example. In this period, also, the Prague City Hall was designed by architect Bašánek.

Gradually, the simplification of decoration led to racial elimination, and architecture sought inspiration in geometric forms. Walls were made plain, without any paneling, and openings made with right angles. This evolution was represented by an eminent figure characterising the new Czech architecture, architect Kotera, a student of Professor Wagner of Vienna. His main contribution was the Museum of Hradec Králové (1909-1912), which still shows some evidence of the style prevalent at the turn of the last century, but with materials well-organized, and a strong appreciation of construction and scale. Some of architect Kotěra's later well-known buildings are the City Hall in Prostějov and the Urbánek House in Prague. Also worthy of mention from this era is Wenkel's Department Store, by architect Gočár in the city of Jaroměř, a work of great architectural purity.

After the First World War, Czechoslovak architecture, in addition to its own development, was influenced by international *avant-garde* tendencies. The results from this period were not always works that would survive; nevertheless, they showed a healthy tendency to bring architecture in Czechoslovakia to a very high level. Relatively speaking, there was much accomplished during this period. Influenced by Holland's group, "De Stijl", all individual emotions were rejected in artistic creative works, which were expressed in elementary geometrical forms with pure lines and planes. Other influences came from the French architect Le Corbusier and also from the Bauhaus School in Germany, directed by architect Gropius, who advocated that artists and architects join hands with technology and accept the realistic conditions of modern times.

The well-known architect Gočár, in his early works, is searching for his own formal expression, as is seen in Wenkel's Department Store, the House of the Black Angel in Prague, and the Legion Bank. Later, he changes to an architectural style with simpler forms, such as the church in Prague Vršovice and many of his projects in the urban planning of the city of Hradec Králové. Among the works of architect Janák, we should mention the Juliš Coffee House in Prague, the Hlávka Bridge, and the Adria Building; under his direction were developed the housing projects at Baba in Prague which exemplify the modern architecture so well executed in the housing project Weissenhof in Stuttgart. Individual projects were prepared by the young *avant-garde* architects and the results of this villa-like quarter indicate the strong influence of Le Corbusier. Architect Novotný, influenced by Dutch architecture, as his Stenc House in Prague and the Home for the Aged in East Bohemia show,

oriented himself to functional architecture as simply expressed in the building of the Mánes Society in Prague. Architect Fuchs, aligned to the Dutch group "Stijl", has his principal projects mainly in Brno, including Hotel Avion, Vesna, and the Crematorium, where he used directly coarse concrete and plank forms. Architect Havlíček, designer of the Pension Building in Prague, the first high-rise building in the city's panorama, was a famous member of the international group CIAM; following Le Corbusier's example, he brings revolutionary projects for the city's reconstruction, such as the reconstruction of Prague's Center with series of tower sky-scrapers. Architect Tyl is known for the Fair Palace in Prague, the Passage of the Black Rose, with its glass and concrete vaulted ceiling, and the YMCA House in Prague. Architect Fragner's Insurance Building in Prague is noteworthy and his electric power plant in Kolín is a good example of an architect's collaboration during construction with industrial objectives. Bat'a's Department Store in Prague deserves mention; it was designed by architect Kysela, one of the better buildings of this period, emphasizing the open façades almost entirely of glass.

In the field of urban planning, the development of the city of Hradec Králové was outstanding, thanks to the encouragement of Mayor Ulrich and strict adherence to plans by architect Gočár. Beyond the circumference of the original historical town core rise new, modern quarters with clearly thought-out concepts and well-placed public buildings which do not compete with the dominance of the old city. Many of the principal buildings were designed by architect Gočár himself and even today serve as a model for urban planning.

Another example of the application of technical progress is the construction of the new sections of Zlín, the city built around Bat'a's enterprises under the direction of architect Karfík. While old methods from the 19th century were still being used elsewhere, architect Karfík introduced the first standardization and unification of construction elements. Normal concrete skeleton and steel forms with the same construction surface were used for all public buildings. Even family houses were submitted to standard fabrication. From an urban planning viewpoint, the town was planned with buildings surrounded by many open and green spaces. The final results can be criticized, but the main concept cannot; this was many years in advance of its time.

The Second World War interrupted the evolution of architecture in Czechoslovakia. After a brief postwar period devoted primarily to reconstruction a political break was apparent, whose consequences were

detrimental to artistic and architectural activity in the country. The previous evolution toward selection and organization was suddenly interrupted and architecture changed into a political propaganda instrument. Many well-known architects from the prewar period are content to conform, others are removed, and architectural projects and planning are in the hands of unknown figures, whose servility more than meets the requirements. Thus, error accompanies reaction toward what is known as "the national tradition". Consequently, the illogical folkloric and Renaissance elements are pasted on to the banal and technically imperfect buildings.

Notwithstanding, there are works which succeed in being dissociated from the great amorphous mass. Noteworthy are the Children's Hospital in Brno, designed by architect Rozehnal, and several works completed during the restoration of historical projects, especially the renovation of the West Wing of Prague's Castle by architect Rothmayer, who established the previous works of the Yugoslav architect Plecnik. This restoration, which is reminiscent of monumental architecture, was executed with exceptional understanding of the use of materials. Paralleling this work are the restorations of the Ballroom and the Riding School in Prague's Castle and the entire City Hall in Prague by architect Janák, and also the delicate renovation of Strahov Monastery by architect Sokol. Among the new plans, we find the proposed project for the Church at Prague Pankrác by architect Sokol, with a delicate tendency to neo-classicism, and many invigorating plans by architect Krise. Many architects tried to compromise by qualified monumentalism (which at least shows some respect for true values), thereby checking the misdirected activity of that period.

Since 1957, Czechoslovak architecture has been trying to resume the interrupted pre-war evolution, opening the door to the free international style. Obstructing these efforts are the limited freedom, poor organization of creative ideas, political and bureaucratic selection of architects for nationalized projects, lack of materials, and inexperience after many years of isolation. A good average has not yet been achieved, and individual buildings suffer from lack of attention to details. Positive results are unusually found in competitions and major projects. These projects begin to indicate new vigor in their floor plans as well as in their elevations. We must wait for further realizations to prove whether this is the correct road to follow.

More formal freedom has been permitted to the urban city planners; this, from another point of view, yielded to the complicated conditions

of modern evolution. The construction of cities and entire counties was not possible without prepared plans, because of the interdependence of the different problems. The sudden economic changes in Czechoslovakia very often located industries quickly and almost accidentally, without preliminary study. Urban and county studies were often started without serious or sound basis, or they were quickly abandoned by hasty official decisions. Many projects remain unapproved, stability in resolving urban problems is lacking and the approved plans are not respected. It is regrettable, because many of these projects were executed by able and conscientious designers, many of whom were of high caliber. Among the more important works is the new urban plan for the City of Prague, developed under the direction of architect Novotný.

Those works actually realized are not very gratifying. For example, in Prague, there is not one residential development which could be representative of the new construction. Dwelling quarters are composed mainly of disconnected elements; the unfinished dwellings and the continuous oversprawling give a very bad impression. Lacking are the green areas, children's playgrounds, roadways, lighting, and many other similar amenities. Likewise, the problems of the old sections of the city in outlying areas are not being solved; neglect is leaving many areas in ruins. The later years seem to bring a better perspective, with interesting solutions in urban planning, many from competitions, which promises healthy recovery.

One of the main technical problems is the industrialization of construction sites. The possibility of fabricating standardized materials and transporting them to the construction site in large quantities fundamentally changes the architectural problems. There are two systems: delivering the prefabricated units to the site, which permits quick installation, and delivering the raw materials to the site, to fabricate and install directly at the site. In Czechoslovakia, the prefabrication of large, heavy units is most used, but other more successful systems are being tried; however, they still lack final solutions. The shortage of suitable building materials and the incomplete solution of details remains a major problem. Rapid machine assembly is often in conflict with slower hand-preparation and technical planning, and the execution of the work and its final completion. Lacking also is collaboration with the architects; functions are reversed so that the architect is often subordinate to the workmen, which results in dreary structures, heavy and amorphous forms, where paint and various surface materials are applied to cover the mistakes.

Successful industrialization of construction projects requires the unification of building products and construction methods; however there is no workable concept, one that could be accepted officially.

Reinforced concrete is generally used for large construction projects; steel construction is very seldom used, for economic reason, and then only in the more important public buildings where there are large spans. A successful example, from the technical viewpoint, is the metal tubular-rib dome in Brno's Exposition Hall, designed by Professor Lederer. The Exhibition Pavilion in Brussels is also worthy of note. The shortage of steel determines the character of the construction; it often prevents freshness, lightness, and the possible use of a better available style of construction. The use of light panel sections and synthetic materials for the enclosure are desirable.

A very important part of current architectural activity in Czechoslovakia is the renovation and reconstruction of historical buildings and monuments. Unlike the prior maintenance of the status quo in merely *preserving* historical monuments, there is a tendency to give new life and function in reconstructing the historical edifices, in the cities, as well as in the entire country, expressing their individual character and also today's requirements. The historical core of the cities is often the key to contemporary planning of the total future city. These historical studies are valuable treasures for urban planning. In reconstructing the historical city centers, the idea was to have the ground planning, the silhouette, and the spacious open view create a single architectural and urban entity. Equally important was consideration of scale. Thus, the historical core became the permanent city center, which then had to be connected functionally and organically to the city's structural areas. Adjoining the tempo of the newly created areas, the city core should be a place of peace and quiet with only pedestrian traffic. Every effort is made to retain the city core as part of the daily life by adding dwellings, shops, and restaurants next to the public buildings.

To apply this theory everywhere, of course, was not practical. Many Czechoslovak cities in the previous reconstruction were so badly damaged that any attempt to restore their original character was not realistic. The determining factor was the artistic evaluation of the city as a whole; most places were declared historical reservations depending on their condition and on the number of original historical values that could be preserved.

Generally, these projects were assigned to the Federal Office of Reconstruction of Historical Monuments, which performed quite a few

interesting architectural-historical studies and analysis. It is regrettable that its architectural intervention was chiefly passive, and lacking in really artistic, creative, and sensitive values. Many of the improvements in the cities, as a whole, lean heavily towards the romantic, rather than to the clear expression of the present day.

Looking back at all Czechoslovak architectural activity in recent years, we are embarrassed to learn just how far this was really carried out. Many buildings remain as undesirable witnesses of a period which, by all indications, belongs to the past. Likewise, we should give credit and respect to those few individuals who regardless of difficulties, succeeded in maintaining true values, which we hope will again be the primary goal of architectural endeavors in Czechoslovakia. The expectation is that Czechoslovak architecture will again draw closer to the world's present-day activity.