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Art East Central. 2023, vol. [3], iss. 3, pp. 183-188

ISSN 2695-1428 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/AEC2023-3-12>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79020>

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Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20231222

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Keywords

architectural history; modernism; historicism; urbanism; historiography; postmodernism; Czechoslovakia

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Matthew Rampley

For anyone interested in the history of Czech architecture, the five volumes reviewed here are an important landmark, all the more so given that they are published in English as well as in Czech. They are the result of a project on the theme of Czech Architecture and Politics that was funded by the Czech Ministry of Culture. It culminated in an exhibition staged at the Academy of Art and Design in Prague in 2022.

As Jindřich Vybíral, editor of the first volume in the series, states, the project's purpose was to inject the study of architecture with renewed intellectual energy, replacing the traditional focus on formal analysis, style and gathering of circumstantial facts with a focus on the intertwining of architecture and public policy. As such, the volumes explore a number of topics that are seldom discussed in architectural histories of the Czech lands, or at least are often analysed only in the form of individual case studies. Hence, the first volume examines, for example, the nineteenth-century cult of the Middle Ages, triumphal arches, and workers' housing, alongside the predictable subjects of the National Theatre and nationalism. The second volume, on Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1945, covers, in addition to the canonical themes of the avant-garde and debates over housing, urban planning in as well as outside of Prague, military and government architecture, and the tensions that arose from architectural policies and practices in Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia. These two territories are usually invisible in architectural histories of this period, as if Czechoslovakia was merely an earlier incarnation of the current Czech Republic, and so their inclusion is particularly welcome. In the third volume, which covers the period of socialist rule after the Second World War, there are essays not only on the perennial theme of housing policy, but also on, for example, heritage policy, building for leisure activities, gender and women's emancipation. The fourth volume, covering the period following the Velvet Revolution, contains contributions on subjects such as municipal architectural policies, squatting and

government and administration buildings. The final volume is the catalogue to the exhibition on the topic as a whole that was held in the exhibition space of the Academy of Art and Design in Prague in 2022.

For international readers especially, these volumes contain a wealth of material that is almost never discussed outside of specialised Czech publications, and they will greatly enhance understanding and knowledge of Czech architectural culture. Some of it covers familiar territory. Much of the volume on the nineteenth century, for example, considers the ways in which architecture became a terrain where imperial and local administrations sought to exert their authority. Architectural debate as a proxy for nationalist conflict has been extensively explored already. Nevertheless, the volume contains a considerable amount of new material and ideas. The Czech avant-garde has long been well respected in terms of its place in the larger landscape of twentieth century, but in comparison with the Bauhaus and other figures in Germany or France, there is still a surprising dearth of international scholarship on it, and the relevant volume here contains material that will be new to many international scholars. One example is the exhibition *For a New Architecture* staged in the Academy of Art and Design in Prague in 1940, the subject of a chapter in the second volume. It has attracted little international attention, yet with a title alluding to Le Corbusier's famous 1923 book *Vers une architecture*, its endorsement of modernist practice was clearly a significant rebuke and act of resistance to the occupying Nazi regime.

The same absence of extensive international attention also holds for architecture under socialism, where, aside from clichés about socialist housing and the denigrated nature of cityscapes due to socialist urban policies, more in-depth discussion is sporadic.¹ A particular strength of the third volume is the overview it gives of the proliferation of architectural and urban theories under socialism, which also points to the active engagement of writers with the ideas of theorists based in western Europe and the United States.² In its exploration of socialist-era prognostications of future urban development, the volume also explores how members of the interwar avant-garde adapted to the new political circumstances and intellectual environment of post-war socialism.

The appearance of these volumes is thus to be welcomed and they will make an important contribution to knowledge. It is not possible, in a single review, to give a detailed account of all the arguments and material presented, since the quantity of material is so large. Instead, the remainder of this discussion concentrates on general issues; for although the volumes are quite diverse in their approach and their subject matter, certain questions are raised by all the volumes.

A striking aspect of the project is the decision to focus on the public sphere and on building sponsored by the state, local authorities, or by bodies that had some kind of relation to the state. This may be pertinent for the years between 1918 and 1989, where the state was all-powerful and actively intervened in urban development and architectural practice. It is an

1) An important corrective to this is the journalism of Owen Hatherley, who has produced important studies of architecture and design in socialist and post-socialist Europe. See Hatherley, *Landscapes of Communism: A History through Architecture*, New York: New Press, 2015 and *The Adventures of Owen Hatherley in the Post-Soviet Space*, New York: Repeater, 2018.

2) Vojtěch Márc, 'Spaces of Expectation: Socialist Architecture and the Politics of the Future', in Rollová and Jirkalová, eds, *The Future is Hidden in the Present: Architecture and Czech Politics, 1945–1989*, 134–90.

orientation towards the public sphere that continues the approach of an earlier publication by some of the same team, *Building a State* (2015), which explored the ways in which architecture was used as a platform in the service of identity formation by the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic after 1918.³ However, it seems to be an unnecessary limitation. Private enterprise was an important driver of building in the nineteenth century; one of the major challenges for the current-day Czech Republic, for example, is dealing with the legacy of derelict factories and other buildings from the industrial revolution. Likewise, the profiles of many city centres, from Wenceslas Square in Prague to the Upper Square in the small town of Znojmo, were changed by the creation of commercial buildings. Between the wars they included, for example, the Baťa shoe stores or the *White Swan / Bílá Labuť* department store in Prague (1939). This omission of private and commercial building is most glaring, perhaps, in the final volume, on the post-socialist era, in which so many of the issues that have been central to discussions of recent and contemporary architecture – rampant commercialism, the privatisation of space and the decline of the public sphere, the impact of migration, non-plan, spectacle, the loss of modernist utopias – are almost completely absent.⁴ Yet these topics, spelt out by authors such as Mike Davis, Reyner Banham and Edward Soja in relation to the United States and now pursued by a younger generation of scholars, are just as relevant to central Europe.⁵

The apparent reluctance of the contributors and editors to look beyond the state and municipal authorities as the primary agents is important because it impinges on the putative ambition of the volumes to engage with architecture as a *political* practice. Surprisingly, it is not very clear what is meant by ‘politics’ in any of the volumes. There are forays into ‘political’ subjects, such as gender, squatting and social inclusion / exclusion, leisure as a form of resistance, and these chapters provide illuminating and thoughtful discussions, but they do not add up to a consistent picture. There is also lurking in the project a rather traditional narrative of Czech identity and statehood, which is about overcoming adversity and attaining autonomy. The title of the final volume: *The Rule over Your Affairs Once Lost Will Return to You* embodies that dream of autonomy, yet, as numerous historians and commentators have observed, such sovereignty never was achieved. The dictatorship of the Socialist Party was superseded by the much more insidious power of global capitalism and private finance, and architecture provides a vivid illustration of that process. Czech cities do not have the vast developments of skyscrapers and other powerful symbols of the intertwining of architecture and the capitalist economy, but they have been put under pressure by the proliferation of out-of-town shopping malls, for example, which have hollowed out city centres and turned many of them into ghost towns. If politics is to be the central theme of the book, it would have been helpful to have a proper discussion of the tensions between public and private

3) Milena Bartlová, ed. *Building a State: The Representation of Czechoslovakia in Art, Architecture and Design*, Prague: UMPRUM, 2015.

4) Some 20 years ago a remarkably perceptive short study of Tallinn was published that examined precisely these issues in relation to the changing character of the post-Soviet capital of Estonia. See Andres Kurg and Mari Laanemets, *Tallinna Juht: A User's Guide to Tallinn*, Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2002.

5) Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, London: Vintage, 1992; Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000; Reyner Banham, *Non-Plan: Essays on Freedom, Participation and Change in Modern Architecture and Urbanism*, London: Routledge, 2013; Kenny Cupers, Catharina Gabrielsson and Helena Mattsson, *Neoliberalism on the Ground: Architecture and Transformation from the 1960s to the Present*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020.

spheres, or of the debates that have arisen in the Czech context in this regard. Especially for international readers, it would have been useful to see some analysis of the ways in which the specifically Czech historical experience had impacted on the shape of such debates, in comparison with elsewhere.

It is always possible to bemoan omissions, and this can sometimes be unfair, since no publication can cover all territory, but there are some curious absences that suggest unexamined assumptions about the meaning of 'Czech' in this project. The first volume, dealing with the nineteenth century, includes a useful chapter on the German Bohemians (although not on German Moravians).⁶ Yet the German minority almost disappears entirely from the picture in the following volume, as do most other minorities. Despite the fact that Jews left a visible mark on the built environment, in the form of synagogues, factories and private villas (the best known of which remains the Villa Tugendhat in Brno), there is no mention of Jews in Czechoslovakia (or in the so-called 'Czech lands' before 1918). It is mentioned in passing that the architect Ernst Wiesner was referred to by the Czech-language press as the 'German architect,' but it would have been helpful to state that this was because he was Jewish, something which gives a clue to attitudes towards Jews in many quarters of Czech society.⁷ A further omission is the Roma. As a significant minority they were subject to numerous planning rules and measures to 'domesticate' them. The socialist regimes were particularly keen on the forced relocation of Roma communities, concerned at their putative anti-social behaviour. Such racist 'antiziganist' policies were not limited to socialist Czechoslovakia.⁸ In the late 1990s, Ustí nad Labem in north-western Bohemia came to international public attention because of the wall that the local council had built to confine the Roma community.⁹ It was, at least, demolished, but it highlighted an ugly aspect of Czech society and politics that has a direct relevance to questions of architecture and the built environment. One might wish that a book dedicated to the relation between architecture and politics would hopefully have approached this issue and the situation of other minorities, most especially given that the question of national identity and imagined community is a central part of its narrative.

At times, too, the volumes are a little descriptive when more exposition and interpretation would have been welcome. The considerable literature on socialist urbanism is discussed, for instance, authors are mentioned, and individual books are listed. However, we never learn in much detail what the specific ideas and arguments were. This project would have presented the ideal opportunity to present a body of thought that is little known outside of the Czech Republic. Moreover, the authors seem unwilling to exercise critical judgement, and questions of significance are seldom addressed. The fourth volume, for instance, include extensive interviews with municipal architects in Český Krumlov and Mnichovo Hradiště. They are part of a section on municipal architects, but the rationale for this choice is missing and leaves the reader somewhat puzzled, especially as the substance of the interviews is rather inward-looking and often focuses on rather mundane issues.

6) Jan Galeta, 'The Architecture of the German Bohemians', in Vybíral, ed., *Síla i budoucnost jest národu národnost: architektura a česká politika v 19. století / The Strength and Future of the Nation is National Identity*, 528–66.

7) Jan Galeta, 'Urban Development Strategies in Brno and Moravská Ostrava', in *ibid.*, 336.

8) The term 'antiziganism' has been coined as an alternative to 'romaphobia'. See Jan Selling et al, eds, *Antiziganism: What's in a Word?* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.

9) Ray Furlong, 'Czechs Pull Down Gypsy Wall', *BBC News* 24 November 1999.

Český Krumlov is UNESCO-listed, but this is not really examined thematically (maybe it would be possible to have had a comparative analysis of other urban Czech UNESCO sites and their role in the cultural and social politics of the Czech Republic). There is also a separate section on the ‘Litomyšl Miracle,’ but the ‘miracle’ requires elaboration (what was miraculous about it?) as does its wider significance.¹⁰ The volume also contains a section on the Research Institute for Construction and Architecture (VÚVA, *Výzkumný ústav výstavby a architektury*). The authors evidently regret the fact that this socialist institution (founded in 1951) was closed in 1994, but the reader will not learn why. Beyond information about its various administrative reorganisations during its 40-year existence, we learn very little about its contributions, the kinds of research that were pursued, and the ideas and insights that emerged as a result.¹¹

One final observation might be worth making. The volumes have been published in bi-lingual editions, but maybe the logic of this decision has not been fully thought through. It implies that the project team are trying to reach an international readership, which is a laudable aim. However, the books contain sometimes detailed discussions of individuals, places and topics that will be mostly unfamiliar to international readers, without framing them in ways that make them more accessible. In other words, while the team have gone to the expense of translating the volumes into English, they have still been written primarily for a Czech audience. This is a pity, because the value of a project of this kind would have been considerably magnified if consideration had been given to the readership.

Despite such critical observations, it is important to conclude on a positive note. Although closer and more reflective analysis would have strengthened and underlined the ambitions of this project, the volumes, as a whole, do achieve the goal of the project, which is to move away from the affirmative, positivistic paradigm that still dominates so much writing on Czech architecture. Not only should they be added to the library of anyone engaged seriously with architectural history, they will also provide a platform for future debate and research.

10) Cyril Říha, ‘The Litomyšl Miracle as an Exemplar of a “Political Thing”’, in Říha, ed., *The Rule over your Affairs Once Lost Will Return to You: Architecture and Czech Politics after 1989*, 362–80, 184–248.

11) Marcela Hanáčková, ‘The End of VÚVA’, in Říha, ed., *The Rule over your Affairs Once Lost Will Return to You: Architecture and Czech Politics after 1989*, 362–80.



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