



Obytný súbor Nová doba,  
pohľad do dvora krátko  
po výstavbe, 1935

Housing complex  
Nová doba, view to the  
courtyard shortly after  
the completion, 1935

Photo Foto: Josef Hofer, Archív hl. mesta Bratislava

## UNITAS AND NOVÁ DOBA: A (FORGOTTEN) CONTRIBUTION TO POLITICALLY ENGAGED THEORIES OF HOUSING

### UNITAS A NOVÁ DOBA, (OPOMENUTÝ) PRÍSPEVOK K ANGAŽOVANÉMU MYSLENIU O BÝVANÍ

Štúdia analyzuje okolnosti výstavby, urbanistické, architektonické a konštrukčné vlastnosti obytných súborov Unitas a Nová doba v Bratislave – dvoch najvýznamnejších diel „*ľavicového stavebného funkcionalizmu*“ na Slovensku. Opisuje situáciu v oblasti bytovej výstavby v Československu, legislatívne nástroje na riešenie nedostatku bytov, jednotlivé modely bytovej výstavby pre nemajetných, ako aj rozličné architektonické riešenia sociálneho bývania. Uvádza stručný prehľad vývoja názorov na sociálne bývanie od čias rakúsko-uhorskej monarchie až po prelom dvadsiatych a tridsiatych rokov 20. storočia. Približuje celkovú dobovú spoločenskú situáciu v Bratislave so špeciálnym zreteľom na oblasť bytovej výstavby. Charakterizuje postoje miestnej ľavicovej avantgardy a architektov vo vzťahu k bývaniu pre nemajetných. Približuje profesionálne a osobnostné predpoklady architekta Friedricha Weinwurma, ktoré podmienujú jeho angažovanie sa v oblasti sociálneho bývania. Analyzuje jeho argumentáciu vo vzťahu k bytovej otázke a jeho názory na jej riešenie. Pozornosť pritom upriamuje nielen na architektonický a stavebný, ale aj ideologický a spoločenský rozmer argumentácie. Upozorňuje na príbuznosť Weinwurmových názorov s európskou avantgardou, najmä s jej predstaviteľmi z nemeckého prostredia.

Štúdia sa podrobne zaoberá dvoma obytnými súborami – Unitas a Nová doba. Opisuje okolnosti vzniku jednotlivých stavebných družstiev, ich personálne zázemie a spoločenské postavenie. Približuje proces navrhovania obytných súborov a ich následnú realizáciu. Analyzuje

urbanistické, konštrukčné, dispozičné a materiálové riešenia a hodnotí ich v kontexte dobovej situácie. Upozorňuje pritom na ich výnimočnosť a ojedinelosť nielen v domácom, ale aj v širšom regionálnom kontexte. Zameriava sa na dobovú reflexiu týchto stavebných podujatí, rovnako ako na ich neskoršie prijímanie verejnosťou. Pokúša sa nájsť odpoveď na otázku ich limitovanej publicity v medzinárodne relevantnej dobovej architektonickej tlači. Analyzuje možné vplyvy, ktoré podmienujú vznik obidvoch diel a ich akceptáciu zo strany orgánov mestskej správy aj širšej verejnosti. Súčasne sa usiluje osvetliť, prečo možno v prostredí medzivojnového Československa považovať výpoveď Friedricha Weinwurma na tému bývania pre nemajetných za výnimočný príklad angažovanej architektúry.

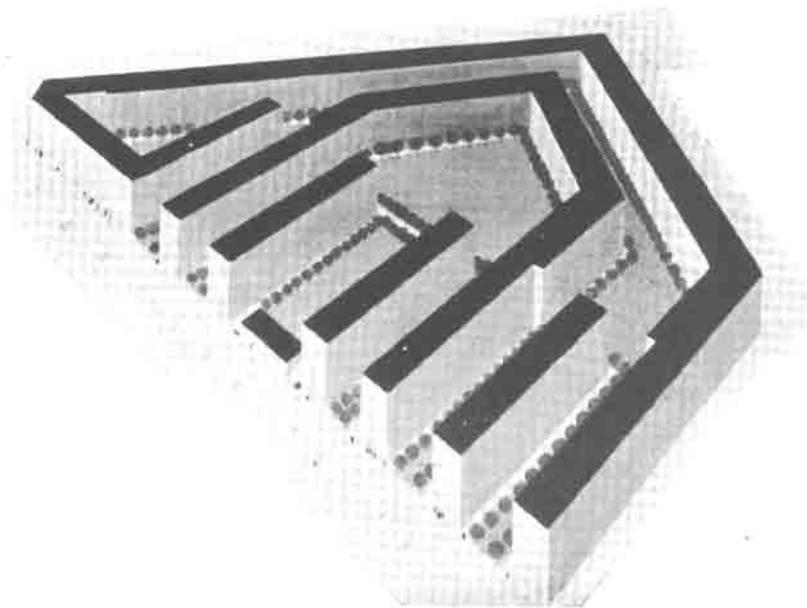
Štúdia argumentuje dôvody, pre ktoré možno realizáciu obytných súborov Unitas a Nová doba sprevádzanú explicitne formulovanou predstavou o architektúre a stavebnej výrobe ako o priamych nástrojoch na realizáciu zmeny spoločenského usporiadania, považovať za prelomové v kontexte myslenia o sociálnom bývaní na Slovensku aj v širších regionálnych súvislostiach a prečo možno tieto diela považovať za prvý konzistentný príspevok slovenskej architektonickej scény ku kľúčovej téme európskej avantgardy na prelome dvadsiatych a tridsiatych rokov 20. storočia.

Štúdia sa dotýka aj dlhodobého využívania obidvoch obytných súborov a zmien, ktoré podmienujú. Poukazuje na problémy pamiatkovej ochrany diel sociálneho bývania v kontexte ich fyzických vlastností aj ideologických súvislostí.

The present study analyses the circumstances of the construction, and the urban, architectural and structural qualities of the Bratislava residential colonies of Unitas and Nová doba, two of the most important works of '*left-wing architectural Functionalism*'<sup>1/1</sup> in Slovakia. In addition, it aims to present the social situation in the era along with the professional and personal orientation of the architect, Friedrich Weinwurm, which underlay the creation and the final appearance of

both building ensembles. Attention will be paid to the contemporary reflection of these two construction efforts, as well as their later reception by the general public. At the same time, it is hoped that an explanation will be found as to why, in the context of interwar Czechoslovakia, it is possible to view the contribution by Friedrich Weinwurm to the theme of housing for the poor as an exceptional instance of 'politically engaged architecture'.

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Source Zdroj: Unitas, almanach stavebného družstva Unitas, Bratislava 1931

Housing complex Unitas,  
general plan, F. Weinwurm  
– I. Vécsei, 1930  
Obytný súbor Unitas, návrh  
zástavby, F. Weinwurm  
– I. Vécsei, 1930

*“Costs of approx. 25,000,000 crowns, every day around 500 – 600 men at work, wages of around 8,000,000 crowns and completion within 7.5 months of working time”*<sup>12</sup>. Such was the summary of the course of construction of the Bratislava residential complex Unitas, in the article published in the magazine *Nová Bratislava* (New Bratislava), immediately after its completion in the spring of 1931. Yet with this laconic summary, the authors also noted the key factors in the construction: the speed of completion, the low price, and the jobs made available for working-class applicants. Along with the austere listing of facts, characteristic of the entire presentation of the project, there was nonetheless an extensive text by the architect himself, Friedrich Weinwurm, offering an essential argumentation on behalf of the project based on universal humanistic values. In it we may read that the shortening of construction time, the implementation of prefabrication or even the increasing height of the buildings *“is today a matter of course, since it makes it no longer*

*necessary to address any of the technical problems”*. Now, in Weinwurm’s view, attention could be concentrated *“only on the human individual and his society, his way of living, working and being”*<sup>13</sup>. The path to fulfilling a happy human fate lay, according to the architect, in the rational comprehension of facts, in planning and efficient organisation. In addition, he added, a decisive role was played by the *“planned organisation of manufacturing and consumption”* and *“standardised mass production”* that would allow its products to become generally available. Another basic factor that in Weinwurm’s interpretation influenced the *“new path”* of architecture was a changing view of society itself. *“No longer is importance assigned to the fate of the individual, but to the fate of society, which is conditioned... by the laws of economics and the organisational relations of person to person, person to labour and person to the surrounding ruling forces”*, which is why *“collectivism”* should be viewed as an unavoidable *“principle of social organisation”*<sup>14</sup>. These conditions *“of our new era”* should, for Weinwurm, be reflected in the first rank through an architecture *“determined by the purpose... striving for the purity of the technical organism..., economical... and refusing unnecessary ornament”*<sup>15</sup>.

Realisation of the Unitas residential complex, accompanied by this explicitly formulated sense of architecture and building construction as direct instruments for the implementation of changes in the wider social order, marked a significant shift in the context of views on social housing in Slovakia, even in the wider regional implications. At the same time, it is the first consistent contribution by the Slovak architectural community to the mainstream of the European architectural avant-garde in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Winfried Nerdinger, in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue *L’Architecture Engagée*, took as his point of departure the assumption that politically engaged architecture, like political art, is marked by an *“enlightened, ethnically motivated stance, a clear expression of the emancipated utopia and the sense that the given work could influence matters across all of society”*. The intent of engaged architecture, in this sense, is a *“structural change and the implementation of a new social order”*<sup>16</sup>. Precisely such impulses, that is to say

the striving towards an essential change in how society is organised, lay behind the professional and even the wider social activities of the architect Friedrich Weinwurm. His work on housing for the poor, his theoretical texts arguing for the need for a change in architecture, construction and all of society, his activities in left-wing social organisations including cooperation with the Communist Party, were all characteristic manifestations of the architectural avant-garde across Europe as a whole, yet at the same time they reflected Weinwurm's immediate reaction to the situation around him. The architecture that Friedrich Weinwurm created was thus not an autonomous act, but was closely tied to the European architectonic discussion as well as to the new circumstances of the local situation.

#### The Social and Legislative Framework of Housing Construction in Czechoslovakia

During the 1930s, the Czechoslovak Republic was confronted with the repercussions of the Great Depression, which made themselves evident in all spheres of life. Among them were high unemployment, stagnation in the field of construction, and a notable housing shortage. One of the tools intended to address these problems was the legislative promotion of housing construction. In April 1930, the Czechoslovak cabinet accepted the Building Construction Act, no. 45/1930. Along with the original Construction and Housing Policy Act from 1921, in which the state agreed to contribute direct financial construction for cheap housing without any further specifications or suggested



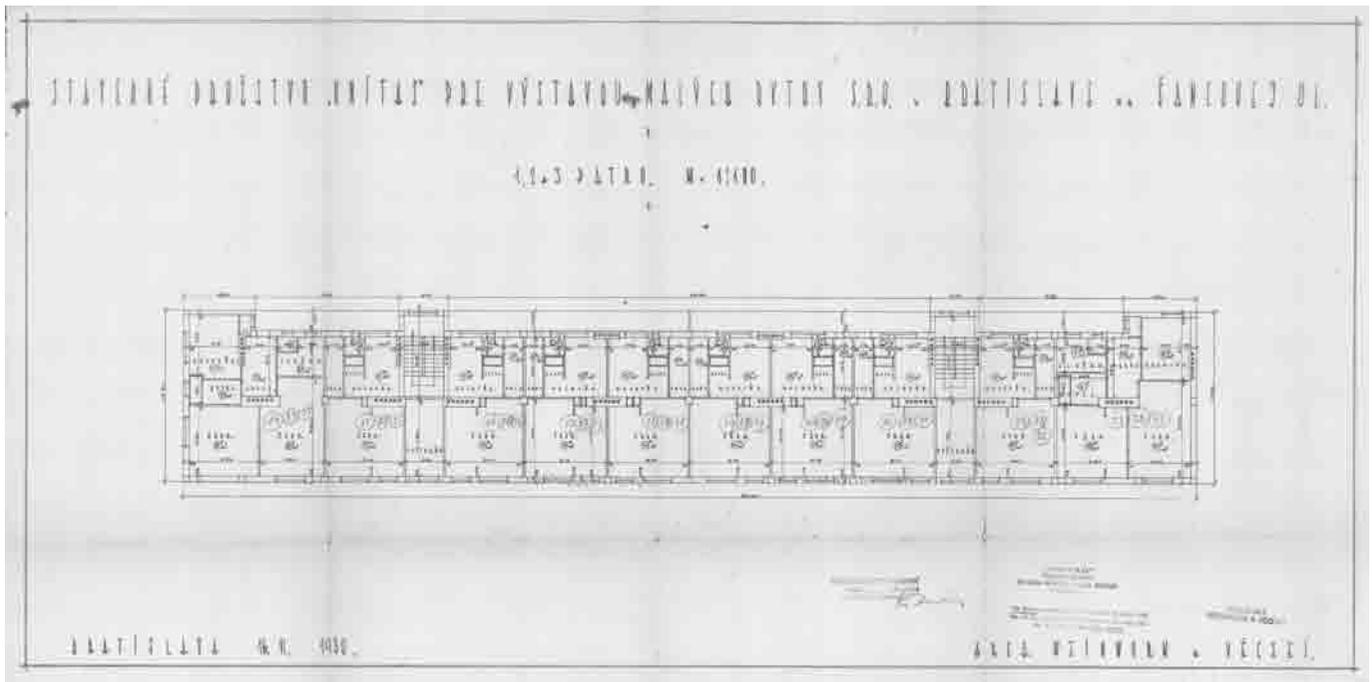
Housing complex *Unitas*, model of the first stage, F. Weinwurm – I. Vécsei, 1930

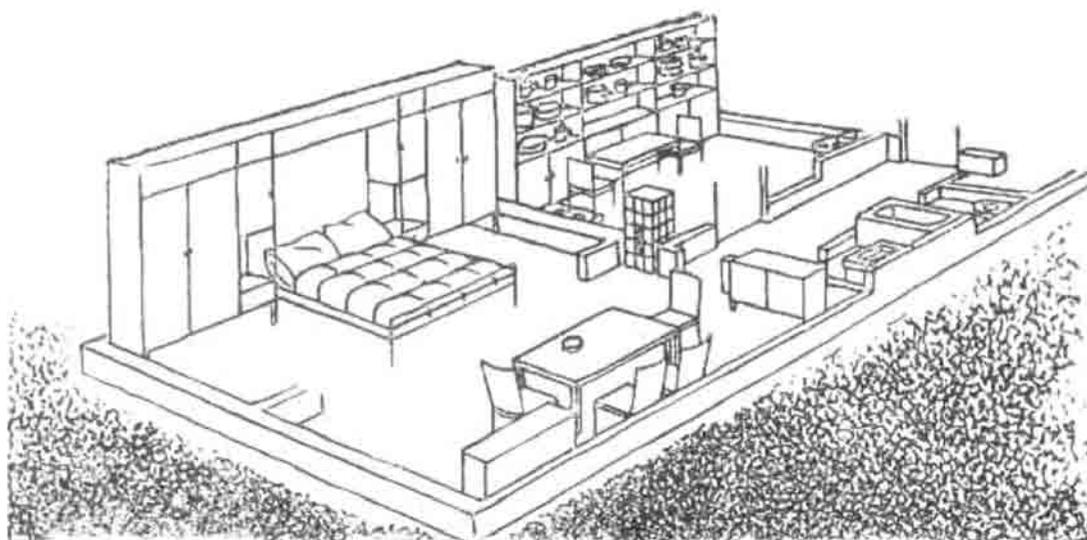
Obytný súbor *Unitas*, model prvej etapy, F. Weinwurm – I. Vécsei, 1930

floor areas, a new, and differently conceived, legislative instrument was now available. The act set the conditions for state guarantees for construction loans, tax relief for buildings with small apartments and studios, various fee waivers and – most importantly – for the first time defined the individual size categories of apartments, including “small” and “minimal” sizes. The category of “small” was now defined as a unit where the area of the living spaces did not exceed 80m<sup>2</sup>; the “minimal” category was defined as only one room with kitchen, in which the area ranged in size from 30 to 40 m<sup>2</sup>. This system gave greater support to municipal authorities and housing cooperatives than to private individuals, with a higher percentage of the loan backed by a state guarantee, of up to 50 % of all costs<sup>77</sup>. This legislative measure immediately became a significant motivation for the construction of public and cooperative apartment buildings, and with the benefit of hindsight can be regarded as one of the essential initiatory measures behind social housing in interwar Czechoslovakia.

Nonetheless, to find the very first attempts at addressing the question of housing for the poor in the territory of the former Czechoslovak state, it is necessary to turn back even further in history, specifically to the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Shaken by the rise of its many nationalist independence movements, the Hapsburg realm was no longer capable of laying any serious foundations for a genuine new housing policy, but at the start of the 20th century its authorities did attempt a number of experiments intended to launch reforms in this area. Among these efforts was, for instance, the creation in 1910 of a state fund for supporting the construction of small flats. In connection with projects to alleviate the housing crisis in the ‘Donaumonarchie’, it has become common to mention two basic methods of construction. The first method consisted of the building of small row-houses of the English type, where the housing unit was at the same time an individual family residence – a pattern which in Austro-Hungary did not enjoy particularly wide

Housing complex Unitas,  
ground plan of the  
1 – 3 floor, F. Weinwurm  
– I. Vécsei, 1930  
Obytný súbor Unitas,  
pôdorys 1 – 3.  
poschodia, F. Weinwurm  
– I. Vécsei, 1930





Housing complex *Unitas*, interior design of a standard flat, F. Weinwurm – I. Vécsei, 1930

Obytný súbor *Unitas*, návrh zariadenia štandardného bytu, F. Weinwurm – I. Vécsei, 1930

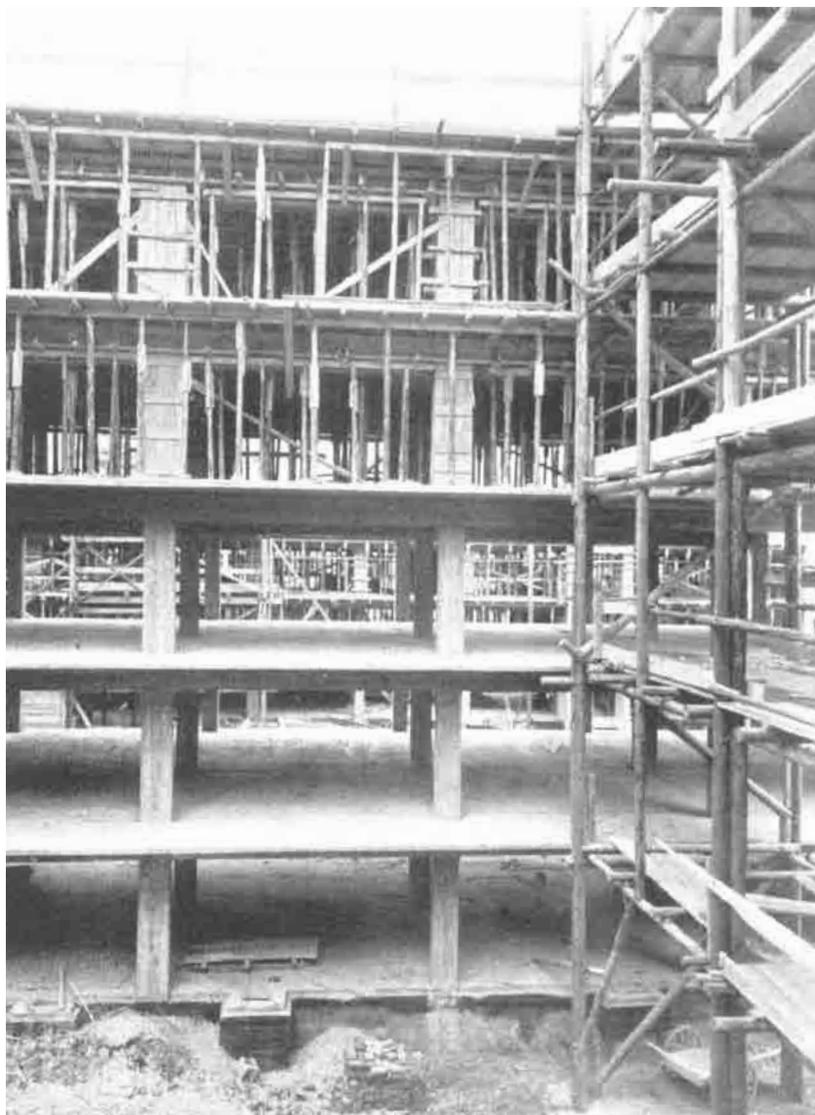
Source Zdroj: *Unitas*, almanach stavebného družstva *Unitas*, Bratislava 1931

success. The second method drew upon the model of the 'social palace' with small flats and a degree of collectively shared facilities, as developed by early (pre-Marxist) socialist thinkers such as Robert Owen or Charles Fourier. And indeed, it was most likely the model of the social palace that prefigured future large-scale public housing construction as it first appeared in the former Hapsburg lands, in the explicitly demonstrative social housing programme of 'Red Vienna' (Rote Wien) realised between 1919 and 1934<sup>18/</sup>.

In Bratislava at the start of the 20th century, both the ideas of the individual row-house and the 'social palace' found acceptance within public housing policy. The first small row-houses were built by local factory-owners for their employees – yet these houses were originally intended for white-collar workers, master craftsmen or supervisors. The chief exceptions were the 'Masaryk Colony' (Masarykova kolónia) in Trnávka, where plans were made in 1930 for the construction of up to 1,000 single-family dwellings for workers, and the notably socialist rhetoric accompanying the construction of the 'People's District' (Ludová

štvrť) in 1931. A model of row houses was proposed even by Friedrich Weinwurm as part of his design of the garden suburb of Schatlerberg, planned for the outskirts of Bratislava as early as 1919<sup>19/</sup>. After 1930, however, housing construction in Czechoslovakia unequivocally moved in the direction of the model of a medium-sized apartment block with small flats – a pattern that enjoyed more advantageous state financial support, and better corresponded to the overall social conditions in the country. Moreover, apartment-building more closely reflected current themes of discussion among architects about the 'minimal dwelling' and collective housing, which in Czechoslovakia were then most often promoted by the Czech left-wing avant-garde.

The legislation from 1930 truly did bring about a wide mobilisation of national as well as municipal political bodies with relation to housing policy, the foundation of housing cooperatives, the holding of dozens of architectonic competitions for buildings of small flats, and (over time) the general strengthening of housing construction, particularly in the largest Czechoslovak cities: Prague, Brno and



Source Zdroj: Unitas, almanach stavebného družstva Unitas, Bratislava 1931

Housing complex Unitas, during construction, 1930  
 Obytný súbor Unitas počas výstavby, 1930

Bratislava. In 1930, for instance, the Prague city council and the Central Social Insurance Office held three competitions for buildings of minimal flats in Prague. One year later, a similar competition for a “block of small-apartment buildings” was held by the Prague cooperative “Včela”, organised by the Communist Party. However, according to architectural historian Rostislav Švácha, the “realisation of these visionary projects came up against insurmountable barriers, from the vacillations of the state regulatory commission... through the insufficient quantity of investments up to Prague’s hilly terrain...”, and thus Prague’s avant-garde architects in the end never received the chance for true realisation of their ideas of minimal dwellings and residential collectives<sup>110/</sup>.

In Bratislava, by contrast, the construction of small and minimum flats was relatively successful at the beginning. The first competition for apartment blocks with small-scale flats was held by the city as early as 1926. After the implementation of the previously mentioned Building Construction Act in 1930, there followed construction of further apartment blocks, some funded by the city council but primarily cooperative, in which a ‘smallest possible flat’ became available to hundreds of Bratislava’s poorest citizens. A definite share in the openness of the public authorities to this trend was undoubtedly the example of nearby Vienna, where the project of social housing had been realised to great success, the relatively strong representation of the Social Democrats in the city council, but equally the phenomenon of cooperative organisation, which then was growing rapidly in Slovakia. At the same time, in the promotion of new forms of construction and modern building the greatest role was held by the city regulatory commission, which included forward-thinking architects such as Alois Balán, Jiří Grossmann, Juraj Tvarožek, Emil Belluš or Weinwurm himself. A significant share in the city’s openness towards modern architecture should also be ascribed to the Munich-trained architect Eugen Barta (1890 – 1972), who from the mid-1920s on served as the city’s chief architect<sup>111/</sup>. In this respect, it is well worth reinforcing the fact that while in Prague, Brno or Vienna, the most complete expressions of the architectural avant-garde’s ideas on the modern residence were manifested in special villa dis-

tricts, such as Prague's Baba Colony, Brno's Nový dům or Vienna's Werkbundsiedlung, in Bratislava they were directly reflected in social housing complexes such as *Unitas* or *Nová doba*.

#### Friedrich Weinwurm and the left-wing avant-garde in Slovakia

Initially, the left-wing artistic avant-garde in Slovakia had only a minimal interest in architecture. Though its texts sporadically touched upon selected areas of architecture, the discipline generally occupied a merely illustrative position in its arguments<sup>112/</sup>. In turn, the community of architectural practitioners in Slovakia had relatively unclear ideological positions, and tended to be more interested in the practicing of their profes-

sion than in issuing directives and manifestos. The sole exception to this state of affairs was architect Friedrich Weinwurm (1885 – 1942). Critics drew attention to the “*clear, pure, inner-directed simplicity*” of his works starting in the early 1920s<sup>113/</sup>. Weinwurm's position as a key personality of the nation's architectural development, as well as his open left-wing convictions and engagement with key social problems, ensured that he emerged as the main link in Slovakia between the artists of the leftist avant-garde and the world of architecture. Nonetheless, at the beginning Weinwurm himself concentrated primarily on the functionality and the architectonic form of his buildings. In 1924, in connection with the commands of “*Zeitgemässe Baukunst*”, he declared that the most important



Housing complex *Unitas*, shortly after completion, 1931  
Obytný súbor *Unitas*, krátko po dokončení, 1931



Source Zdroj: Univerzitná knižnica v Bratislave

Cover of the publication  
Unitas, almanach  
stavebného družstva  
Unitas, Bratislava 1931  
Obálka publikácie  
Unitas, almanach  
stavebného družstva  
Unitas, Bratislava 1931

organisation of living spaces and modern dwellings was the comparison to a machine, in which the exterior appearance is the *“unmistakable result of the interior organisation”*<sup>14/</sup>. However, as the decade drew to a close, his attention turned more strongly towards the search for a means to definitively eliminate the housing crisis. Likewise, even his vocabulary became more radical, with openly Marxist arguments starting to predominate. It was during this period that Weinwurm began to participate actively in “progressive actions” in which he became closer with both artists and politicians of similar views. In 1931, he founded, along with art critic Antonín Hořejš and the Bauhaus-trained architect and typographer Zdeněk Rossmann, the monthly journal *Nová Bratislava* (New Bratislava), which critically reflected from a Marxist position

social events in Slovakia, with a special emphasis placed on social questions and public housing. Along with another Bauhaus graduate, the photographer Irena Blühová, the editors participated in an extensive sociographic research project of Slovakia, publishing their results not only in *Nová Bratislava* but in other left-wing publications as well. Thanks to direct contacts with the Russian avant-garde, they promoted Russian Modernist art and architecture, with publications of the writings of Russian Constructivists in Slovak translation, or organisation of lectures and discussions. In contrast to the majority of the representatives of Slovakia’s avant-garde at this time, Friedrich Weinwurm had at his disposal not only an enthusiasm for the political Left and a conviction of the inevitability of revolutionary change in social conditions, but also an extensive range of experiences in practical designing. At this point, he had built, along with his partner Ignác Vécsei (1883 – 1944) nearly fifty architectural projects, which had been favourably received by both domestic and international critics<sup>15/</sup>. The greater part of this oeuvre, in fact, consisted of single-family houses and apartment blocks. In his view of “how we are to live”, Weinwurm could rely on a highly concrete knowledge of housing problems<sup>16/</sup>. When he was contacted towards the middle of 1930 by the newly created Unitas construction cooperative with an offer to design a group of residential blocks with small flats, he finally had the chance to give his ideas a full-scale material form.

#### A Major Experiment: Unitas

Unitas, a ‘cooperative construction company for building small flats’, was founded in April 1930 at the initiative of the secretary of the Bratislava Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the financial law expert František Vaverka (1896 – 1949). Among the board members were a number of leading figures of the city’s public life, such as the head of the Slovak Agricultural Committee, František Vodička, or the socialist and founding member of the Communist Party Eugen Singer. *“Through joining together in work as the principle of Unitas, we drew our strength from the exalted idea of a work for society as a whole”*, chairman Vaverka later wrote of the cooperative’s beginnings. Without doubt, it was he who chose as the

architect for the realisation of the “*great work of Unitas*” Friedrich Weinwurm, a “*man of democratic and social feeling... contrasting strongly with the traditionally aristocratic tendencies of current society*”, who in the end became the driving force behind the whole undertaking<sup>17/</sup>.

For construction of the residential complex, the cooperative purchased a site of former warehouses on what was then the outskirts of Bratislava, between the city ring-road and two main radial avenues. At the time, the area represented one of the major potential development sites of the city. The buildings were planned, in accordance with regulations, to continue in the form of closed urban blocks around courtyards, as realised on the opposite side of the ring-road. Nonetheless, Friedrich Weinwurm and his partner Ignác Vécsei from the beginning started work on a half-open urban structure, more closely resembling Berlin’s *Hufeisensiedlung* by Bruno Taut and Martin Wagner than the older construction in the vicinity. *Unitas* was conceived as an almost symmetrical structure of parallel rows, in which each second row created a half-closed courtyard in the direction of the centre of the plot, with an outline of U-shape. Inside the rhomboidal-shaped plot, a group of building-rows was supposed to arise, open to the street but inwardly converging on the central, half-enclosed court. Here, the architects managed to combine in a single design the new ideal of destruction of the traditional urban block with the principle of common semi-public spaces, regarded as an essential component of collective housing. In *Unitas*, these spaces were planned for a variety of uses, from vegetable gardens through recreation up to children’s playgrounds. Of the original plan, a total of eight apartment buildings were eventually realised; these being precisely the free-standing rows that Weinwurm viewed as the “only just urban plan for minimum flats” and which he vehemently promoted even in the city regulatory commission<sup>18/</sup>.

An important component of the conception of the residential complex was the choice of a building type with open galleries. Weinwurm was convinced that the gallery-form was, in terms of “*the layout and hygienic qualities of construction, the only possible one at this time*” as well as being the “*most economical construction solution*”<sup>19/</sup>.

Cover of the first issue of the journal *Nová Bratislava* with the image of *Unitas* photographed by Jaromír Funke

Obálka prvého čísla časopisu *Nová Bratislava* s fotografiou *Unitasu* od Jaromíra Funkeho



Source Zdroj: Archív rodiny Jaromíra Funkeho

At the same time, the choice of a gallery-type block reflected an increased conviction of a future shift in social arrangements, of the dissolution of the traditional family and the gradual shift from the traditional home to residences of hotel-like type, which Weinwurm shared with the project's initiator František Vaverka. The fact that the entire ensemble used only one type of apartment block also reflected quite faithfully the principle of standardisation. Weinwurm regarded *"standardisation in the relationship of person to person as an exceptionally crucial factor, as it is grounded in each individual having no other demands than the other"*<sup>[20]</sup>. This spirit of egalitarianism eventually manifested itself in the design of standardised furniture intended for all the flats constructed.

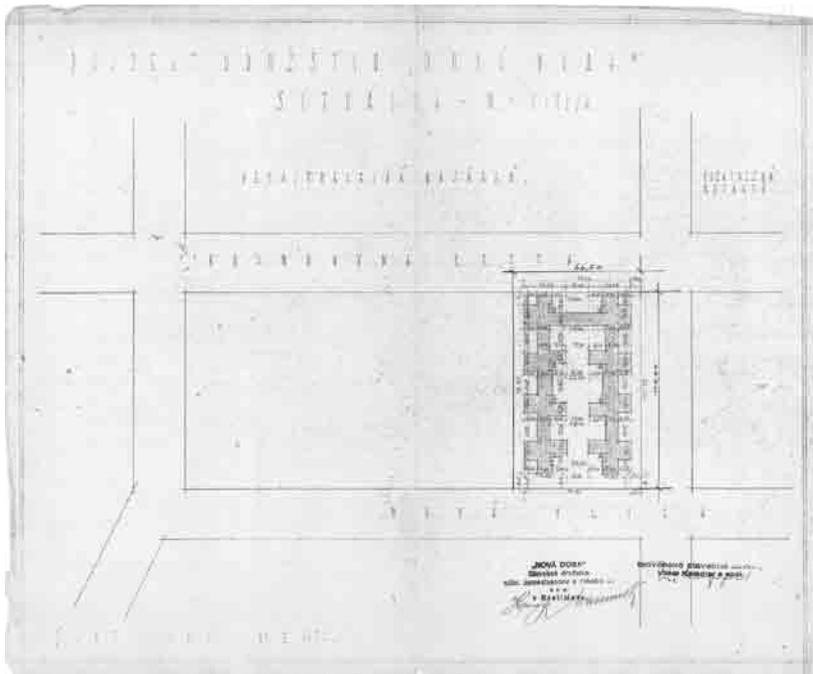
As part of the construction of the buildings, the architects used a great number of new products and technologies. One feature particularly worth mentioning was the load-bearing frame using a reinforced-concrete skeleton and the recently patented joint chimney blocks, which allowed for

openness and flexibility in the interior floor layouts. Evidence of how the structural essence of the building was a key component of the overall concept is also provided by the fact that it was "fully employed" on the surface treatment of the facades, where the architects used stucco *"of hard stand in two colours"*<sup>[21]</sup>. This was a question not of expressive coloration, as has been the case with the buildings since their later repainting in the later 20th century, but of the strong visual contrast through the use of sand-grains of different shades and granularity<sup>[22]</sup>. Tied to the idea of modernisation of construction was the use of the principle of unification; particularly noteworthy in this respect is the staircase railing, created through the clever folding of a single element of steel piping.

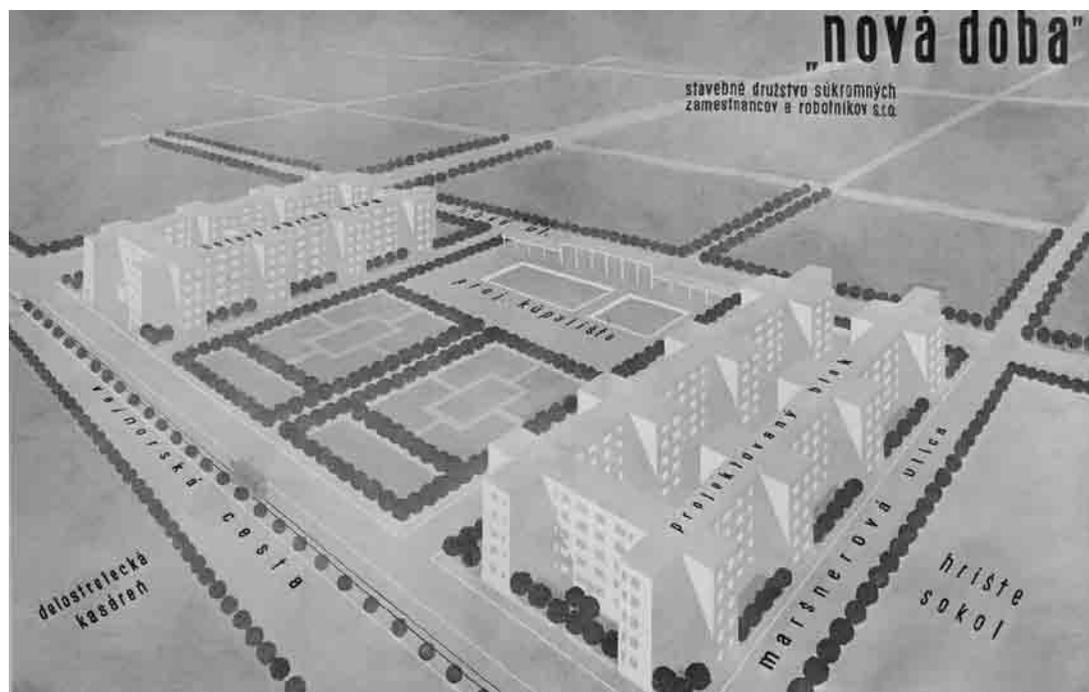
Realisation of the Unitas complex was accompanied from the outset by the reputation that it was a *"massive sociological experiment"* that could not be realised to its full, *"because the nervous system of our conditions is a bit too weak to withstand such a courageous blow"*<sup>[23]</sup>. Was this only a forlorn hope of contemporary critics, or was Unitas truly planned as a breakthrough achievement of a new concept of human co-existence? It is hard to say. The urban concept, along with the hundreds of rented flats concentrated in identical gallery-type blocks, the furnishing of the individual blocks with shared laundry areas, small shops for basic items and even a library with public reading-room all indicate that the complex was planned from the outset for communal life. Further evidence is provided by other activities of the cooperative, which shortly after the completion of the buildings founded for the residents "their own credit and grocery cooperative" or even the very name of "Unitas" itself. Moreover, a spirit of socialist co-ownership suffused the publication that the cooperative issued about its achievement shortly after completion. Contributing further to the spread of the reputation of Unitas as an experiment in the solution of the housing crisis through a new organisation of society were the arguments of Weinwurm himself, presented in the same issue of the magazine *Nová Bratislava* that published the complex of Unitas, extensively urging the need for collectivism as a tool for social organisation. As a result, it is hardly surprising that even the chief spokesman for Prague's architectural

Housing complex Nová doba, site plan of the first stage, F. Weinwurm – I. Vécsei, 1932

Obytný súbor Nová doba, situácia prvej etapy, F. Weinwurm – I. Vécsei, 1932



Source Zdroj: Archív Národnej banky Slovenska



Source Zdroj: Nová doba, 2. Etapa. Bratislava 1936

Housing complex Nová doba, general plan, F. Weinwurm – I. Vécsei, 1935  
 Obytný súbor Nová doba, návrh zástavby, F. Weinwurm – I. Vécsei, 1935

avant-garde, Karel Teige, mentioned (however briefly) Unitas as “collectivised housing”<sup>124/</sup>.

The construction of apartment blocks of minimal flats by the Unitas cooperative, as well as the response provoked at the time, formed a product of the current situation par excellence. Both of them reflected the ideas and yearnings of Bratislava’s avant-garde, and participation in spreading the information about this undertaking was regarded in its circles as an expression of the highest good. Attesting to this spirit are the contributions to the first issue of the left-wing magazine Nová Bratislava, in the avant-garde Prague journal Žijeme and even in the introductory issue of the very first professional architectural journal published in Slovakia, Forum. The Constructivist aesthetic of Unitas also appealed to one of the chief figures in modern Czechoslovak photography, Jaromír Funke. The photograph of the façade of one of the apartment blocks, where Funke applied his Bauhaus-trained vision and compositional

diagonals, was even used on the cover of the first issue of Nová Bratislava.

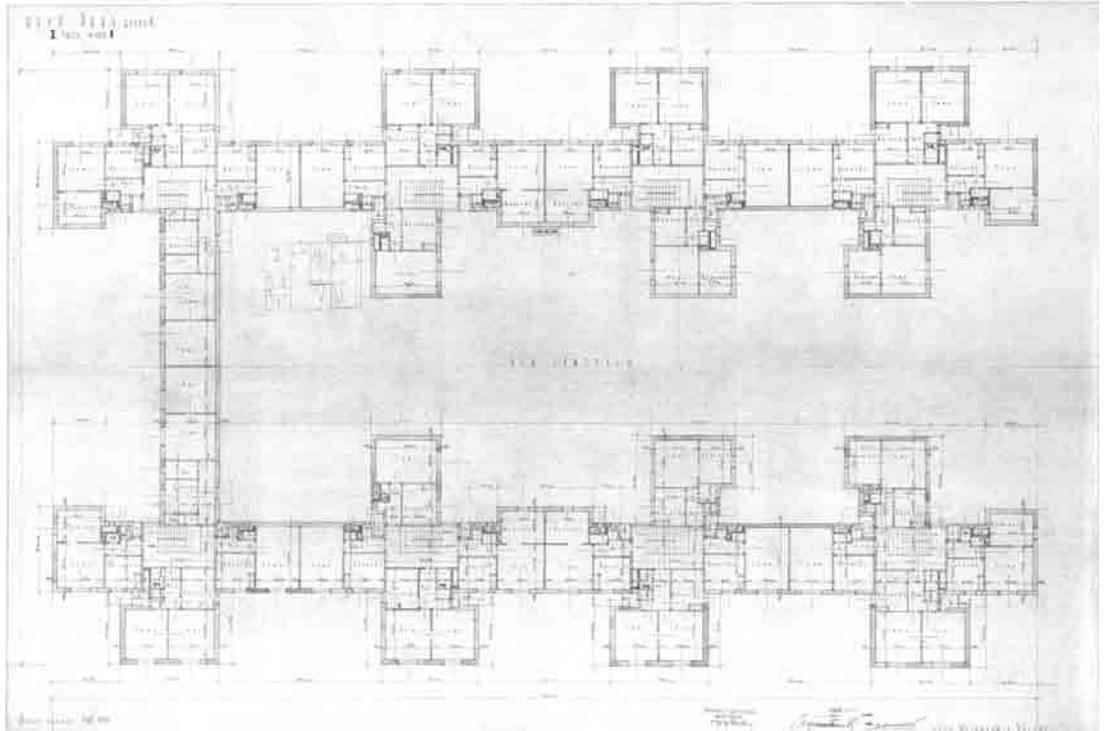
The most important crystallisation of the efforts for the new human dwelling: Nová doba

*“We build to ensure the disappearance of the slums and hovels, in which even today millions of workers still live...”*

*We build to ensure that future generations will be happier, will grow up aware of human dignity and human rights...*

*We build to reinforce the principle of equality and fraternity.”*<sup>125/</sup>

The success of Unitas encouraged Slovak socialist activists as well as architects to another daring enterprise, the construction of an even more complete and in the end notably larger residential complex. In 1932, several leaders of the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Workers’



Source Zdroj: Archív Národnej banky Slovenska

Housing complex Nová doba, ground plan of the 2nd floor, F. Weinwurm – I. Vécsei, 1935

Obytný súbor Nová doba, pôdorys 2. poschodia, F. Weinwurm – I. Vécsei, 1935

Party created the housing cooperative for private employees entitled, significantly, 'New Era': Nová doba. Its chairman was Social Democratic member of parliament Ján Bečko, and members of the board included among others the leading Slovak labour organiser, founding member of the Hungarian Social Democrats and likewise Czechoslovak MP Ferdinand Benda, or the Slovak regional party secretary Jozef Och. Several members of the board were also active in socialist educational groups, such as the 'Workers' Academy', the 'Association of Socialist Academics' or the 'Association for Economic and Cultural Relations with the USSR', in which Friedrich Weinwurm was also active. Hence it was only natural that he should be the architect selected for the next effort.

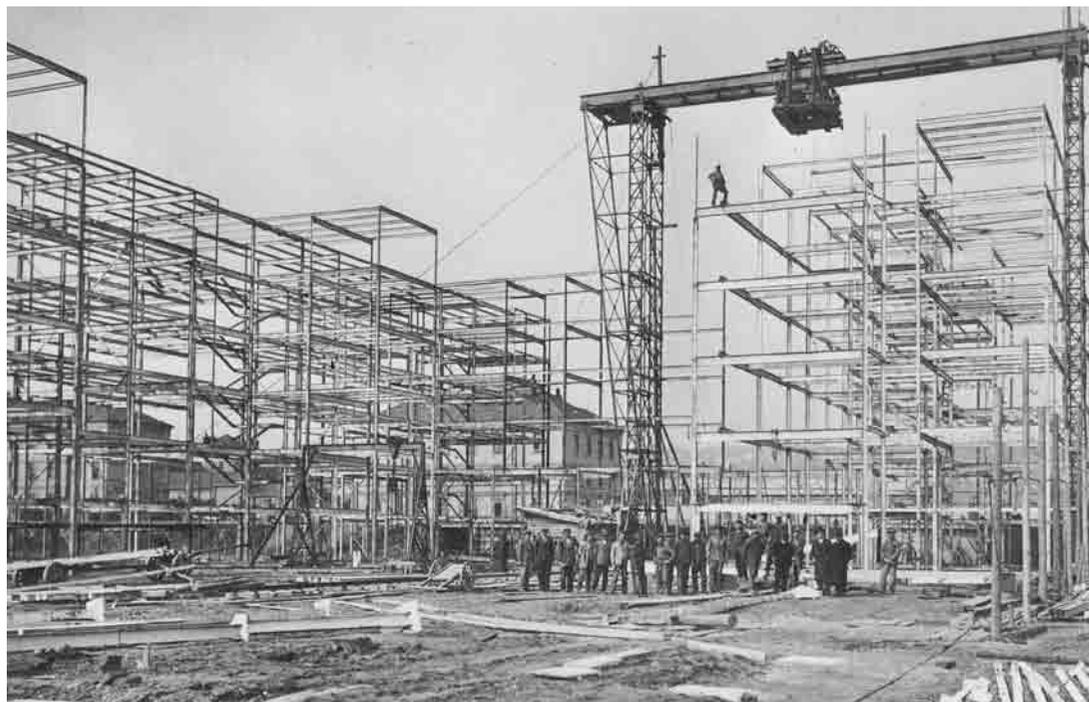
This residential complex was planned to arise not far from Unitas, on one of the major radial

boulevards, Vajnorská ulica. The original plan assumed the construction of 162 small and minimum flats along with shops, storage and even workshops in the parterre. Weinwurm designed the blocks as two parallel rows at right angles to the main street; however, at the urging of the building office, the planners had to supplement the paired buildings along the street side to create a coherent street frontage. While this intervention prevented the full use of the row plan, on the other hand the formation of a semi-enclosed block of U-shape reinforced the collective impression of the overall whole. In Nová doba as before, the architects strove to implement innovative ideas not only in the general plan but also in the layout and construction of the buildings. To reflect the builder's requirement for a wider range of spatial categories of flats, from studios up to two-room apartments, they conceived the blocks as staircase sections

with four flats per floor. Ingenious arrangement of the flats on each individual level resulted in direct sunlight and ventilation for all rooms, as well as preventing unwanted visual contact between adjoining apartments. The greatest innovation, however, was the steel load-bearing structure, the first ever used in Slovakia for a residential building. The assembled steel skeleton was intended not only to speed up construction, but with the unification of the individual structural components to lower building costs as well. In contrast to *Unitas*, however, the architects no longer needed to make an explicit demonstration of their revolutionary new design; in the words of Weinwurm, these blocks were primarily to meet the “*cultivated requirements of the human dwelling*”<sup>126</sup>. However, attesting to the importance to which the architects and the builder assigned to this innovation is the large quantity of photographic documentation of the steel skeleton in the course of construction and immediately after completion, which later

accompanied nearly every single publication of the building.

By 1935, shortly after completing the apartment blocks, the cooperative decided to expand its building plans to include yet another block, which finally allowed the architects to apply the original idea of an open row pattern. The pair of additional buildings was situated so as to create, in conjunction with the original structures, two parallel semi-enclosed areas separated from one another by areas of greenery, intended for the recreational and sports use of the residents. The same urban conception was retained even in the realisation of the third (and at the same time final) block, dating from the start of the 1940s. Though in each stage there were slight changes in the interior layouts, the materials and the technology, the external form of all three residential blocks remained almost identical. A more sweeping change came only in the load-bearing structure, with steel girders replaced by a reinforced-concrete skeleton – not



Source Zdroj: *Nová doba*. Bratislava, 1933

Housing complex *Nová doba*, 1st stage during construction, 1932  
Obytný súbor *Nová doba*, 1. etapa počas výstavby, 1932



Photo Foto: Josef Hofer, Archív hlavného mesta SR Bratislavy

Housing complex  
Nová doba, shortly  
after completion of the  
2nd stage, 1936

Obytný súbor Nová  
doba, krátko po výstavbe  
2. etapy, 1936

because steel was a poor choice, but because the economy-minded architects naturally responded to the sharp increase in the price of steel.

Realisation of the Nová doba complex, similar to its precursor Unitas, attracted strong interest among critics of the time. Nonetheless, the most consistent attention was paid by Antonín Hořejš, who himself edited both publications on this noteworthy building project. The ethos of building a just society, as echoed in the texts, presented Nová doba as the outcome of the “*eternal desire to find a form of the residence that would provide the working man with the greatest possible joy*”. In parallel, the authors did not omit to stress “*alongside the great programmatic social goal, the new program of technology*”<sup>[27]</sup>. The wider social

ramifications of the overall plan were, moreover, from the very beginning an essential component, as again made clear by the cooperative’s own name. After completion of the second stage of construction, even the ever-critical Hořejš spared no praise for the completed work and wrote: “Nová doba is, so far, the most important crystallisation of the desire for a new human habitation. It is the outcome of a harsh, though not bloodstained revolution in thought and architectural practice, it is the reflection of an enormous shift in the interest of architecture from the individual to the collective.”<sup>[28]</sup> Not only the intriguing architectural conception, but also the method of organising construction work and its financial backing drew attention even in the wider context of national

housing policy. Representatives of Czechoslovak government ministries pointed to *Nová doba* as an example “*even for large Prague cooperatives*”, and the capital even sent an “*official committee*” to study the local situation and provide a “*model for the construction of similar buildings in Prague*”<sup>129</sup>. Attesting to the wide renown achieved by the project is the fact that even the new right-wing political regime that gained power after the creation of the independent Slovak state in 1939 quickly laid claim to the universal social message of *Nová doba* and did nothing to prevent the realisation of the last stage of construction in 1941 and 1942. Indeed, *Nová doba* paradoxically was used throughout the war years as a backdrop for the ostentatious military parades of the Slovak Army. A somewhat darker paradox of the era, though, is given by the realisation that the majority of the personalities who made the complex’s construction possible were either severely persecuted or directly executed by the pro-Nazi authorities of the fascist Slovak state.

*Unitas and Nová doba as politically engaged architecture – or, how could a social housing experiment appear in Bratislava?*

Following the social changes brought about by the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, society in Bratislava was very complex and dynamic through the 1920s and 1930s, marked by sharp discontinuities in terms of the personnel occupying leading posts in city government or other influential institutions. No less complex was the structuring of the architectural community, composed of strong personalities with widely differing education, ethnicity and social background. It was precisely the weakening of the traditional pre-1918 social structures that accentuated the dynamism and openness of this setting, making it inclined to accept external inspiration more quickly and effectively than more tradition-bound societies.

Bratislava was not a typical industrial centre, yet nonetheless it contained in its bounds the highest concentration of factory workers in all of Slovakia, which contributed to the stronger impact of the Great Depression and mass unemployment on local society. As the main

political and cultural centre of the Slovak part of the Czechoslovak Republic, Bratislava also naturally attracted a progressively minded social elite. Such an environment led to a leading role being assumed by socialist-minded political parties and organisations. Likewise, Bratislava attracted representatives of the artistic avant-garde, architects not excepted, who had in the regional capital the greatest hope of finding work. Nonetheless, Bratislava’s situation within the overall context of interwar Czechoslovakia should not be idealised; indeed the reverse is true. The city existed in permanent struggle with its second-ranked position in the state, and the local elites were continually seeking out strategies to compensate for this innate handicap. Among the vital and productive instances of such strategies belongs, without question, the strong acceptance of the cooperative model for housing construction.

As should be visible in the publications accompanying the construction of both residential complexes, the local discussion on social housing was also relatively advanced. Representatives of the socialist Left, influential figures of the local economy and architects all had relatively similar positions regarding a solution to housing problems. And it was most likely the reason why they were able to react so quickly to the possibilities created by the Housing Act of 1930. We should recall that even in Prague, the national capital, the first competitions for buildings with minimum flats may already have been held in 1930, but only came to realisation by the midpoint of the decade.

Another factor shaping the situation reflected in the history of *Unitas* and *Nová doba* was the close proximity of Vienna and its traditional role as an example for urban development. The highly developed program of Vienna’s social housing construction, as promoted by the Austrian Social Democrats with thousands of rental flats completed throughout the 1920s in the form of traditional courtyards, was certainly known not only to Bratislava’s architects, but also to city government officials and heads of building cooperatives. What is, however, notable is that these extensive and highly visible structures had no influence whatsoever on the form of the realisations in Bratislava. Quite by contrast, in Bratislava

the progressive left-wing program of cooperative housing construction was combined with avant-garde ideas of standardisation, unification and series production, as well as modernist concepts of city construction that abandoned traditional blocks and even traditional streets. Bratislava's examples of social housing from this era are, in formal terms, much closer to the residential complexes realised during the same period in Berlin or Frankfurt, confirming the relatively strong influence of the German cultural scene in Slovakia during the first half of the 20th century. And indeed, one of the most important bearers of this influence was none other than Friedrich Weinwurm, with his studies at the technical universities in Berlin and Dresden, experience with Heinrich Tessenow and great admiration for the cooperative-social heritage of housing construction represented by his former Berlin classmates such as Martin Wagner, Bruno Taut or Ernst May.

#### A forgotten contribution

Even within a relatively wide cultural-geographical context, the *Unitas* and *Nová doba* residential complexes represent the first full-scale example of a housing estate of small flats, conceived in conformity with Functionalist principles and making use of innovative construction, modern row planning and realisation through cooperative construction, then viewed as the most progressive form of financing residential construction. It is no wonder that both projects attracted the attention of the Social Democratic party and allied political forces, who used them for their own publicity and even during construction viewed them as prototypes for public housing for the wider masses. With all this in mind, it is thus somewhat surprising that the realisation of both complexes did not attract greater international attention. Most likely, this circumstance was the result of Bratislava's peripheral standing in the Czechoslovak state and its architectural scene, but also the altered political situation in Germany, where after the Nazi seizure of power the political climate shifted along with inevitable changes in the editorship of the architectural press – among other things, depriving Friedrich Weinwurm of his original contacts with *Wasmuths Monatshefte*. Nonetheless, a highly significant

factor in the neglect of this unique contribution was the inattention of Prague's own avant-garde scene, and its continual disregard of activities in Slovakia. Neither *Unitas* nor *Nová doba* found their way into a single selection of modern Czechoslovak architecture for presentation of the state abroad. Highly illustrative of this blindness is the inability of even such a personality as architect and typographer Zdeňek Rossmann, then one of Karel Teige's close associates, to ensure adequate publicity for *Unitas* in Czech publications – even though Rossmann himself prepared both of the volumes published about *Unitas*, created their cutting-edge visual form, and had a clear personal interest in making these works known. Insufficient personal contacts on the part of Weinwurm or Vécsei with Prague, and the absence of direct links to French, Dutch or Swiss architectural scenes in the end denied this revolutionary achievement the chance to achieve an appropriately broad international reputation.

Moreover, the importance of *Unitas* and *Nová doba* later became marginalised even in their domestic context. Both of the architects met tragic ends during World War II, and the Social Democratic Party, the main backer of cooperative housing construction, found itself after the 1948 Communist coup attacked as revisionist and an enemy of the state. For all their revolutionary aims, the principal forces behind these undertakings remained linked to the “bourgeois” First Czechoslovak Republic, and the Communist authorities deliberately ignored their highly left-wing social legacy. Nonetheless, the principle of cooperative housing construction remained a vital force, representing a genuine alternative to state housing production up until the fall of Communist rule in 1989.

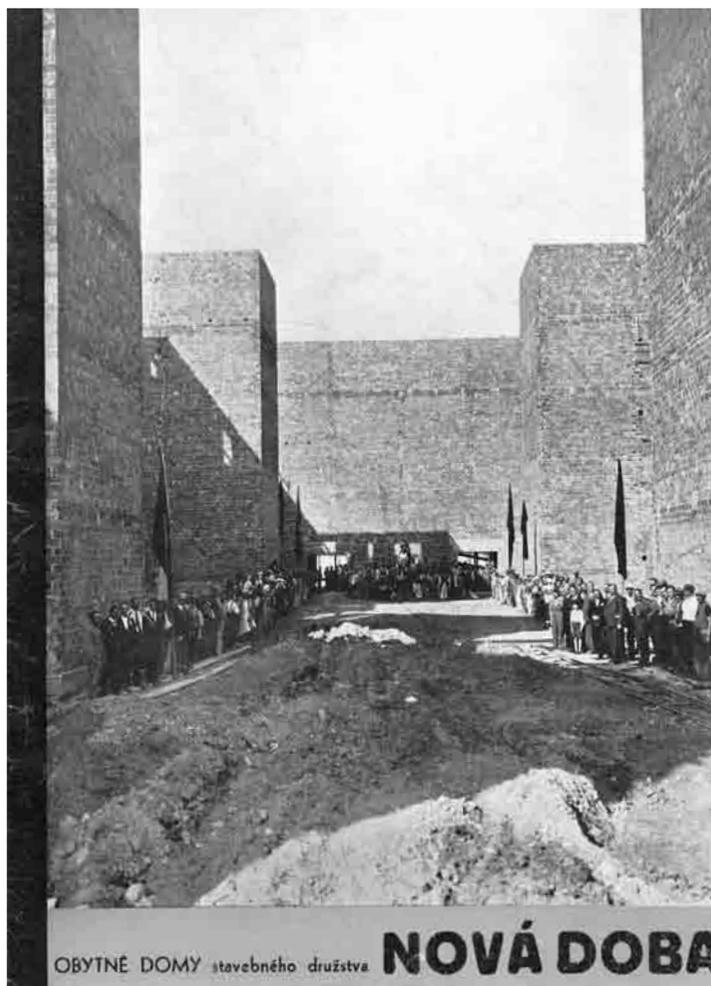
#### In conclusion

The *Unitas* and *Nová doba* housing complexes survived the second half of the 20th century almost unscathed. The forced egalitarianism of Communist rule benefitted the continuation of this social experiment, and its vitality was ensured by the residents themselves. Up until the start of major shifts in the real-estate market, occurring in Bratislava only in the century's final decade, both complexes were inhabited by their original

tenants or their descendants who, in conformity with the original concept, continued to make use of both the interior and exterior shared spaces. As a result, both complexes long retained their original collectivist atmosphere. Changes in ownership relations and the personal finances of several inhabitants, along with rising expectations for personal comfort have most strongly influenced the buildings' exterior appearance; social individualisation and the discrediting of socialist principles by Communist rule in turn led to a loss of interest in the use of the shared spaces, public reading rooms or clubs. Though both complexes have been protected as national landmarks since 1985, later changes of windows, insulation of the exterior or repeated attempts to build atop the flat roofs reveal that the question of protection is more than unclear. Nonetheless, in comparison with housing estates from the second half of the 20th century, the row structure, semi-public courtyards and small shops at ground level, have survived surprisingly well over time. Indeed, arguably, it is precisely these relatively non-ideological elements that can best ensure the viability and preservation of this significant product of politically engaged cooperative-socialist housing construction, both now and well into the future.

*The study is based on the research supported by the Slovak research and development agency in frame of the project APVV-0375-10 Differentiated typology of modernism: the theoretical basis for maintenance and conservation of works of modern architecture and by the Scientific grant agency of the Ministry of education of Slovak republic and the Academy of Sciences in frame of the project VEGA2/0171/10 Values of modern architecture in Slovakia: specification and possibilities of protection.*

Cover of the publication *Nová doba*, Bratislava 1933  
Obálka publikácie *Nová doba*, Bratislava 1933



Source Zdroj: Archív architektúry oA ÚSTARCH SAV

## NOTES POZNÁMKY

- <sup>1</sup> The German architectural historian Winfried Nerdinger has proposed, for designation of a specific tendency within the framework of Functionalism characterised by a desire to change the social order through architecture, the term “left-wing architectural functionalism”. NERDINGER, Winfried: *Zwischen Kunst und Klassenkampf – Positionen des Funktionalismus der Zwanziger Jahre*. In: *Prager Architektur und die europäische Moderne*. Hrsg. T. Valenta, U. Winko a J. Fabian. Berlin, Gebr. Mann Verlag 2006. 151 pp., here p. 129.
- <sup>2</sup> *Unitas*. Nová Bratislava 1, 1931, 1, p. 16.
- <sup>3</sup> WEINWURM, F: *Wohin führt der neue Weg?* Nová Bratislava 1, 1931, 1, p. 9.
- <sup>4</sup> WEINWURM, 1931, p.10.
- <sup>5</sup> WEINWURM, 1931, p.10.
- <sup>6</sup> NERDINGER, Winfried: *Architektur und gesellschafts-politisches Engagement*. In: *L'Architecture Engagée. Manifeste zur Veränderung der Gesellschaft*. Ed. W. Nerdinger. München, Detail 2012, p. 6.
- <sup>7</sup> Originally, this law was understood as a temporary device to remove the housing shortage and alleviate unemployment, and was intended to last only up to the end of 1932, which unquestionably led to the increased speed in the construction of apartment buildings. Nonetheless, financial support for housing construction continued even in the following years. In 1934, it was amended by the cabinet directive no. 160/1934 and repealed – paradoxically only after World War II under Communist rule – by directive no. 40 from August 31, 1954.
- <sup>8</sup> POSCH, Wilfried: *Wohnbau und Siedlungswesen in Österreich*. In: *Österreich. Architektur im 20. Jahrhundert*. Ed. A. BECKER, D. STEINER, W. WANG. München – New York, Prestel 1995, p. 73.
- <sup>9</sup> The garden suburb of Schatlerberg was planned for Bratislava in 1919, with the holding of the architectural competition. Among the competition entries were designs by architects S. Theiss – H. Jaksch, B. Hübschmann, L. Kreibitz, E. Steiner, E. Szőnyi, F. Weinwurm. Weinwurm later worked on the joint design by Szőnyi and K. Madlmayr. The project was never realised. *Viz. Messerschmied: Pressburger Kunstbief*. *Prager Tagblatt, Morgen Ausgabe* 44, 5. 12. 1919, 285, pp. 2 – 3. Also note *Kunstaussstellung. Tageszeitung Republik* 2, 19. 11. 1919, 260, p. 2.
- <sup>10</sup> ŠVÁCHA, Rostislav: *Od moderny k funkcionalizmu*. Praha, Victoria Publishing 1994, p. 347.
- <sup>11</sup> Correspondence documenting the constitution of the city regulatory commission in late 1923 and early 1924. Office of the City Notary, regulatory commission, file no. 2560 / 1923, Archive of the City of Bratislava. MENCL, Václav: *Ako sme začínali. Pamiatky a príroda*, 1976, 3, p. 39.
- <sup>12</sup> *Viz.* e.g. OKÁLI, Daniel: ‘Umenie’. *DAV* 1, 1925, no. 1, p. 1 – 7.
- <sup>13</sup> LEWEKE-WEYDE, Gizela: *Dario Rappaport – Fritz Weinwurm*. *Grenzbote*, Donnerstag, 23. 10. 1924, p. 3.
- <sup>14</sup> WEINWURM, Fritz: *Zeitgemässe Baukunst*. *Moderne Welt* 6, 1924, 10, p. 19 – 20.
- <sup>15</sup> Weinwurm’s oeuvre was regularly published not only by journals in Prague and Brno, but also by Budapest’s *Tér es forma* and Berlin’s *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst und Städtebau*.
- <sup>16</sup> ‘The Path of the Future – How We Shall Live’ was the title of Weinwurm’s contribution to the volume *Obytné domy stavebného bytového družstva Nová doba*, published in 1933 in Bratislava.
- <sup>17</sup> This was Weinwurm’s characterisation of architect Eugen Rosenberg, who after World War II achieved renown in Britain as the founder of the company *Mardal-York-Rosenberg*. ROSENBERG, Eugen: *Architekt Bedřich Weinwurm*. *Salon* 4, 1926, no. 6, unpaginated.
- <sup>18</sup> WEINWURM, F: *Kleinstwohnungsbauten “Unitas”* in Bratislava. *Forum* 1, 1931, p. 53.
- <sup>19</sup> WEINWURM, F: *Kleinstwohnungsbauten „Unitas“* in Bratislava. *Forum* 1, 1931, p. 53.

- 20 WEINWURM, F.: Das Mensch und seine heutige Wohnung. In: *Unitas*, almanach stavebného družstva *Unitas*, Bratislava 1931, p. 31.
- 21 WEINWURM, F. – VÉCSEI, I.: Technický popis družstevných domov „Unitas“. In: *Unitas*, almanach stavebného družstva *Unitas*, Bratislava 1931, p. 42.
- 22 For more about examination of the original material composition and the colour of the stucco, see SZALAY, Peter – PILNÝ, Ivan – CEBEAUEROVÁ, Daniela: Architektonicko-reštaurátorský výskum povrchov obytného komplexu *Unitas* v Bratislave. *Pamiatky a múzeá*, 2012, No. 4, p. 45.
- 23 HOŘEJŠ, Antonín: *Unitas. Žijeme*, 1931, Obrázkový magazín dnešní doby. *Orgán Svazu čsl. díla*. Praha 1931 – 1932, p. 232 – 234.
- 24 TEIGE, Karel: *Nejmenší byt*. Praha, Václav Petr 1932, p. 103.
- 25 Pre vás. In: *Obytné domy stavebného družstva Nová doba*. Ed. A. Hořejš, Bratislava 1933, unpaginated.
- 26 WEINWURM, Friedrich: Človek, jeho byt a jeho kultúrne potreby. In: *Nová doba*, 2. etapa. Ed. A. Hořejš, Bratislava 1936, p. 6.
- 27 *Obytné domy stavebného družstva Nová doba*. Ed. A. Hořejš, Bratislava, 1933, unpaginated.
- 28 HOŘEJŠ, Antonín: *Nová doba...* In: *Nová doba*, 2. etapa. Ed. A. Hořejš, Bratislava 1936, p. 10.
- 29 BÉNYEI, Fedor: *Nová doba a bytová kríza*. In: *Nová doba*, 2. Etapa. Ed. A. Hořejš, Bratislava 1936, p. 18.