

Ztracená vláda věcí tvých se k tobě navrátí

The Rule over Your Affairs Once Lost Will Return to You

Cyril Říha ed.

ARCHITECTURE AND CZECH POLITICS AFTER 1989 ARCHITEKTURA A ČESKÁ POLITIKA PO ROCE 1989

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In this bi-lingual English and Czech / Slovak collection of texts the team of authors presents experiences and views on a variety of interactions that have occurred in last decades between architecture and society, as represented by the state, the European Union, the architectural profession, local administration, and civic groups. The individual chapters contain statements by the authors, but also interviews with the direct actors of events in individual cities and institutions.

The introductory parts of the collection provide a deep insight into how the state manifests, or fails to manifest, its powers through architecture, spatial policy, and territorial administration. As an example of how political life attached such little importance to architecture and its symbolic meaning, one contribution describes how the post-1989 state simply took over its buildings from the previous regime. Similarly, after the split of

Czechoslovakia the buildings of the federal offices were simply re-labelled for the new Czech state. As the sole exception, the Czech Parliament abandoned the modernist seat of the Czechoslovak Federal Parliament, previously adapted from the Prague stock exchange, moving to the historic building where the Czech assemblies held their meetings under Habsburg rule in the 19th century. Through this process, the book says, the recent practice only continued a long tradition of improvisations and adaptations, since the Parliament of the First Republic, for example, was housed in the Rudolfinum concert hall.

The next sections describe case studies of the Czech towns of Litomyšl, Ostrava and Plzeň / Pilsen to show how the EU policies influenced their architectural and urban reshaping and rebranding. Cyril Říha and Jan Šépka present Litomyšl as an example of the successful revitalisation of a small rural town through

the introduction of contemporary architectural interventions into a historical fabric. However, even here, clashes took place between architects, preservationists and local citizens. Jan Galeta describes the disappointment of Ostrava's citizens when the city failed to win its bid for the status of European City of Culture in 2015, yet eventually the process resulted in the mobilization of its own resources for the revitalization of abandoned industrial areas.

The very profession of architecture was deeply affected by the post-1989 political and economic transformation: the relevant chapters reveal the impact of the "invisible hand of the market" on architectural competitions, research, and the political positions of architects in municipalities.

A certain return to the 19th and early 20th century phenomenon of the "company town" is described in the case of Škoda Auto in Mladá Boleslav. Here the booming branch of the Volkswagen company supplies the citizens, who are identified as identical to the employees of the concern, with almost all urban planning and investments usually considered public domain.

The last chapters revolve around one of the most painful issues of Czechia today: housing. The authors show how the pre-1989 machine of state-controlled housing construction collapsed, being only gradually replaced by market-driven development and a massive shift to owner-occupied housing stock. However, some "phantoms of yesterday" still haunt the present: in fact, the guaranteed unlimited rights of tenure before 1989 were a kind of private housing ownership. The post-1989 changes actually legalized the ownership by privatization. Most people accepted the idea of personal responsibility for their housing and individualised living circumstances, relinquishing any expectations of assistance from the public sphere. Yet again, this situation was not much distant from the previous reality, because the tenants of state rental housing had to perform the maintenance and improvements of their homes by themselves.

Housing estates were almost the exclusive form of state and co-operative housing development before 1989. Later, the "prefabricated tower blocks, or in its urban dimension, the modernist housing estate" became "the embodiment of all the evils of the previous regime" as Karolína Jirkalová notes on p. 484. The same author comments that, despite President Václav Havel's comparison of the buildings

to rabbit hutches, "many people continued to live more or less happily in the panel housing estates, and still do today". The obvious gap between politicians' views and positions or expert opinions on one side, and those of the general public of actual housing users on the other, would probably deserve deeper discussion – not only with regard to housing estates.

On the darkest side of housing issues, homelessness emerged as a new phenomenon in the 1990s when the privatised companies started to sell their accommodation hostels, which had provided housing for those workers with no other alternatives. In parallel, during the same decade squatting first appeared a kind of import from the West. The interviews with immediate actors show that squatting was first accepted as an unavoidable complement of the housing market. By contrast, later squatters were forced out by the authorities for violating what were viewed as the unlimited rights of the legal owners of the properties, even if the property was abandoned and devastated by the owner.

While the title of the collection of texts indicates architecture as a counterpart and opposite player of politics, the topics of the papers themselves move from architecture as works of art and construction towards urbanism: urban space, its arrangement, management, and planning. In the case of housing, it should be said that its spatial allocation deserved more detailed analysis in its urban / spatial context: from the suburban dream and its results in the "grass widows' syndrome", through gentrification of the 19th-century metropolitan suburbs to the shrinking and dilapidated villages and housing estates in the "problem regions" of the North-West Bohemia and Moravian – Silesian regions.

The book tends to focus in description and analysis on the issues and changes of the transformation era of the 1990s and possibly the early 2000s, leaving apart the more recent events and changes that lie at the origins of current problems.

The time has been ripe at least since the 2010s for an open-minded analysis of the interaction between politics and architecture. However delayed, the book is still up-to-date and extremely valuable, bringing stimuli for further debate, which deserve to be extended to the urban and regional scale, and, finally for developing new ideas to revisit the policies of architecture and the built environment.