



Blahomír  
Borovička

Vzpomínky  
hlavního  
architekta  
Prahy

## HOW PRAGUE ACQUIRED ITS NEW FACE

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**BLAHOMÍR BOROVÍČKA.  
VZPOMÍNKY HLAVNÍHO  
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Many theoretical discussions are underway in the historical sciences on the role of biographies, autobiographies, or ego-document<sup>1</sup>; in good measure oscillating, put simplistically, around the question of the extent and the way that the fate of the individual is related to the general, to the wider society and its collectively acquired experience. In other words, what is the relation between individual and context, between public and private. Of course, another role is held by the matter of how important or influential a personage it is, and the quality of the available personal sources, allowing us to sketch the individual's psychological characteristics or gain access to unique information that would otherwise remain unavailable. Biographical writings and ego-documents are, furthermore, also compelling reading material for a broader public than the immediate scholarly community.

As such, finding in the archives the diary of the person who, as chief architect of the city of Prague, had a central role in the city's greatest construction boom in the 1970s and 1980s is, with only slight exaggeration, a treasure indeed. Precisely such a discovery was what Petr Roubal and Martina Koukalová experienced during their interview in 2011 with Jiří Hruža on the history of the Office of Chief Architect. He told them of the existence of memoirs by Blahomír Borovička (1923–2004), who evidently began to write them intermittently from the Velvet Revolution until his death. In writing them, he drew upon his detailed records and notes kept throughout his entire professional career. Thanks to them, we have the opportunity to look into the internal operations of a unique institution, reflecting and reacting to the political struggles that surrounded each of Prague's major construction projects and

the specific role of experts and managers in the state-socialist planned economy. Blahomír Borovička was not the kind of architect to leave behind an extensive built oeuvre, but rather an architect-manager who remained in the background, his name hardly ever connected to the grand projects for which he deserved credit. And yet these were the projects that forever changed the face of the city: the metro system, the massive housing estates encircling Prague, the Palace of Culture (now Congress Centre), the North-South Motorway, yet equally the controversial (partial) clearance and renewal of Žižkov<sup>2</sup>. It is according to these major plans, buildings, or situations that the memoirs are structured. The published volume also contains editors' notes, an introduction, and as a significant (if hardly extensive) section the appendices, summarising both Borovička's relationship to Prague, a personal if hardly sentimental one, and the debate on the park Stromovka and the proposal to route a section of the North-South Motorway through it, which in spring 1988 sparked a then-unexpected and (for the time) surprisingly massive wave of civic opposition.<sup>3</sup>

Who, then, was Blahomír Borovička and what was the role of the institution that he headed for two entire decades? Blahomír Borovička was born into a family of stone sculptors, whose artistic inclinations shaped him his entire life. His mother Blažena Borovičková-Podpěřová (1894–1980) was one of the first Czech women sculptors, while his father Karel Borovička (1889–1970) was a master sculptor who headed a stone-sculpting works in the small town of Čáslav. Their son graduated in 1942 from the academic secondary school in the town followed by a course in the stone-sculpting school in Hořice, after which he joined his parents' company. In the spring of 1945, he joined the resistance group named after Jan Kozina, was wounded in action and subsequently awarded a medal for bravery. With the war over, he studied at the School of Architecture and Construction at the Czech Technical University (ČVUT) in Prague, where he hoped for an academic career. However, he was called up for military service in 1948 and for part of his term sent to work in the Military Standardisation Institute in Prague, where he found use for his linguistic talents – translating from German, English, French, and Russian. He then worked briefly for the state construction institute Stavoprojekt Pardubice until 1954, when he entered the

Military Construction Institute (*Vojenský projektový ústav – VPÚ*), remaining there for almost seventeen years. VPÚ understandably focused on the construction of buildings for the Czechoslovak People's Army (barracks, training grounds, accommodations, etc.) and the Ministry of Defence, yet also transport infrastructure (Ruzyň Airport, the North-South Motorway, several metro stations), civilian structures (including residential ones), scientific and research facilities (the Na Mazance complex for the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences), industrial and storage buildings, or even military structures in what were then called “developing” countries. Thanks to the exclusive position of the VPÚ, Borovička was able to participate in the late 1950s on the design for the technical university in Cairo. Furthermore, it gave him much opportunity for international travel – outside the Soviet bloc repeatedly visiting Egypt, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, or Lebanon. Clearly this opportunity was a major reason why he remained with the institution as long as he did.

The second half of Borovička's professional life linked him to Prague's Office of the Chief Architect (ÚHA HMP). It was officially founded in 1961, but in personal and productive aspects was grounded in the two previous urban planning bodies. The office's first director was Jiří Voženílek, a major architect of interwar socialist design and the father of construction prefabrication, who lost his position after his disagreement with the Soviet occupation of 1968. Thanks to Borovička's pragmatism and respect to more experienced urban designers and architects, Voženílek and several others in unfavourable political standing at the start of “normalisation” were able to remain at their work.

The institution of the Office of the Chief Architect (Útvar hlavního architekta – ÚHA) began to appear in Czechoslovakia at the start of the 1960s, in most larger cities and not only regional capitals (Prague, Brno, České Budějovice, Hradec Králové, Karlovy Vary, Liberec, Olomouc, Ostrava, Pardubice, Plzeň, Ústí nad Labem and Zlín). These specialised design institutes worked on urban planning for the respective city, preparing full-scale masterplans along with detailed plans for specific localities. Most of them were closed after 1989 or transformed into a section of the municipal government; currently, many Czech cities are creating them anew and their importance is growing.

1 Most recently, viz SIXTA, Václav. 2023. *Možnosti historické biografie. Teorie biografie a historická věda*. Prague: Faculty of Art, Charles University, 226 p.; WOHLMUTH-MARKUPOVÁ, Jana. 2022. *Soukromá válka Huga Vavrečky. Mikrohistorie z rozhraní soudobých dějin (1945–1952)*. Prague: Karolinum, 250 p.

2 On this topic, viz ROUBAL, Petr. 2021. The Battle of Žižkov. Urban Planners' Transition from Heritage Protection to Neoliberal Discursive Planning. *Journal of Urban History*, 47(3), pp. 495–510.

3 In greater detail, viz ROUBAL, Petr. 2019. Plánování Prahy v 80.–90. letech. In: Kopeček, M. (ed.). *Architekti dlouhé změny. Expertní kořeny postsocialismu v Československu*. Prague: Argo, Faculty of Art, Charles University, ÚSD AV ČR, pp. 333–335.

One of the main tasks facing the Office during the post-invasion crackdown was solving the longstanding and continually growing housing shortage, which reached a critical peak in the previous era. Indeed, addressing the needs of the young generation was regarded as a means to avoid unwanted activation and radicalisation of civil society, leading to the decision for the massive construction of prefabricated estates. Borovička in a similar argument explains the decision by the official focus on Prague as the national capitol: “The reason for the support won from the highest positions in the Party and the government, if not always willingly or enthusiastically, was the political realisation that the situation of 1968 was caused, in part, by the conditions in Prague: insufficient housing construction, poor transport, decaying landmarks, and unfavourable trends in the population regarding composition and average age. It was clear that if the windows were opened in Prague, the wind would blow throughout the Czech lands, and that the city needed, as they said, firm guidance by a Party organ with such a composition that the others would not be able to do much” (pp. 56–57). Borovička himself indirectly reinforces this priority when he notes that “money was really not the first concern, what seemed more important was the social and political access allowing for the path upward” (p. 25). In the chapter titled simply “Flats” (Byty, pp. 124–144), he also draws attention to the adverse effects of housing inaccessibility in the metropolis through labour shortages and other unwanted impacts on the functioning of the urban organism. The plan then proposed for housing construction was, in consequence, highly ambitious: each year would see the completion of eight to ten thousand new flats on greenfield sites. For the plan to meet its stated targets, those responsible undertook “massaging the data to make it fit” – counting even a bed in a workers’ hostel as an independent flat. At the same time, pressure was exerted on the construction of the largest number of minimal-sized units, even though the estates were being created primarily for young families with greater spatial needs.

Also worth mentioning is the actual headquarters of the Office – the Martinic Palace and the adjoining Trčka Houses on Hradčanské náměstí facing Prague Castle, the restoration of which (1967–1973) is also mentioned by Borovička in another chapter, “Life in the Martinic Palace” (Jak šel v Martinickém paláci život, pp.

236–241). The Office headquarters attracted many visitors, even school groups, and was also used for exhibitions.

The memoirs also depict the subtle nuances of power relations. Borovička had a somewhat contradictory status – on one side, the highest-level manager for Prague’s urban planning, capable of negotiating directly with the leading state authorities, yet on the other a place in the hierarchy of municipal governance that, in his words, resembled a “better district appointee”. Officially his position matched that of the head of a National Committee department, yet being a non-Communist Party post it implied higher prestige and respect. His function and the complexities of negotiation are outlined in the chapter “Mayors and Certain Other Gentlemen” (Primátoři a někteří další páni). The mayor of Prague in those years, Zdeněk Zúška (in office 1970–1981), served on the board of the Party’s municipal committee, while its chief secretary was Antonín Kapek. A clear tension existed between them, depicted by Borovička metaphorically: “The mayor was on a higher intellectual level than most of the committee, Kapka not excepted, yet the latter was also a member of the Central Committee, and thus something like the Prague archbishop, historically always second only to the king” (p. 49).

Borovička’s narrative style is factual and calm, focusing on the events themselves without sentiment or emotion, yet we also encounter more than a few points where he comments on the difficulties facing his work with subtle and dry humour. In conclusion, praise is due to the work of both editors – not only in their success in finding this unusual historical source and preparing it for publication in a reader-friendly form (with many commentaries, clarifications, and explanations), but no less in their ability to win the trust and cooperation of Borovička’s widow, architect Jana Borovičková. Through her permission and the helpful synergy of both editors, the memoirs of the former chief architect of Prague have been made available to a wide reading public.