



CAPITALIST REALISM FOR ARCHITECTS KAPITALISTICKÝ REALIZMUS PRE ARCHITEKTOV

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POSTMODERNÍ ARCHITEKTURA
ČESKÝCH BANKOVNÍCH DOMŮ
A SPOŘITELN V DEVADESÁTÝCH
LETECH 20. STOLETÍ, 2022

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Prague: Biggboss

ISBN 978-80-908359-5-5

Czech postmodern architecture is linked to the most turbulent period of the nation's recent history, when the flamboyant forms of the new pluralism appeared against the background of the process of post-1989 political and economic transformation. Today, three decades after the full onset of postmodernism, the requisite time gap has passed for its grounded reflection. Jana Pavlová has seized this chance, exploring the architecture of Czech bank buildings from the 1990s in a robust 500-page publication. As she herself notes, it was the banking institutions and savings banks that "in their specific role became a symbol for the majority society of the optimistic construction of Czech national capitalism, which, however, was shortly afterwards replaced by a hangover. A number of people, especially those who have been negatively affected, still cannot smile when looking at the extravagant façades of the banking houses of the 1990s." (p. 70)

The publication is structured as a combination of three larger studies, interspersed with a catalogue of 23 selected objects. The selection primarily traces the range of manifestations that emerged in response to the

liberation from the strict doctrine of modernism: from the vernacular influences of new regionalism (the Czech Savings Bank in Domažlice, p. 124), through historical reminiscences (the Czech Savings Bank in Zlín, p. 88) and "cosmic" high-tech (the Commercial Bank in Prague's Smíchov district, p. 112) to neo-functionalism (the Czech Savings Bank in Tabor, p. 374). In this sense, therefore, the publication is a valuable contribution to the current state of knowledge in drawing attention to the representatives of a single typological category with all its characteristics. Moreover, it aptly names these objects the "Temples of Money" (*Chrámny peněz*).¹

An appealing part of the publication is the visual complement and its treatment, illustrating explicitly the selected objects and implicitly the atmosphere of the time. The enlargements of archival photographs resemble footage from security cameras on VHS tapes, or a film sequence in which the jingle of money can be heard. Unfortunately, the catalogue of buildings does not include much project documentation and only relatively few of the then-popular axonometric projections.

The first of the separate studies (*The Architecture of Banking Socialism*) describes the process of introducing free-market principles in post-1989 Czechoslovakia. Although the adoption of capitalism and large-scale privatisation were not explicitly part of the agenda of the Velvet Revolution, a strong neoliberal inclination was already visible shortly after the fall of socialism. After all, the appeal to western Thatcherism, as a rejection of post-war welfare state policies, was typical and to some extent understandable for all of the countries of the former socialist bloc.

The idea of constructing a so-called Czech national capitalism, in the framework of market deregulation and privatisation of state enterprises, placed the banking institutions in an extraordinary position. Firstly, independent commercial banks were separated from the central federal bank; secondly, the Czechoslovak authorities initially set such benevolent conditions for the establishment of new banks that, in a period of general economic optimism, they were able to emerge literally overnight.

Already in the mid-1990s, however, there were speculations that no real transformation had taken place and instead the banks were merely financing companies following the principle already known from socialism. As Pavlova notes, "Banks thus became monuments not of the building of Czech national capitalism, but of the experimental regime of so-called banking socialism." (p. 63). The situation where the largest banking houses owned each other through privatisation funds favoured the rise of a clique of influential managers. Moreover, the environment without expert governance opened the opportunities for "tunnelling", purposeful bankruptcies and massive looting of the privatised companies.

In the second extensive text (*Liberated Architecture*), the author summarizes the genesis of postmodernism on an international scale, from its reactionary intellectual roots to its degeneration into a corporate style. She then points out the application of echoes of these ideas in the environment of Czechoslovakia. Pavlová identifies the beginning of the critique of the orthodox modern movement in the reflections of the left-wing engaged Italian groups Archizoom and Superstudio from the 1960s. However, as the author herself acknowledges, similar thoughts appeared already in the British tendency of New Brutalism in the 1950s, when the Smithsons proclaimed the

need to restore an ethical dimension within architecture.²

The purist approach of modernism associated with the work of Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius or Mies van der Rohe gradually began to act in postwar Europe as an inflexible dogma. The sophisticated *Unité d'Habitation* became the inspiration for prefabricated mass housing, the glazed façades started to emerge generically all over the world, and the Athens Charter itself was confronted with strong opposition.

The crisis of modernism opened up space for pluralist reactions: the fantastic-poetic visions of the Archigram group, for the irony and humour with which Robert Venturi wanted to make architecture speak to people,³ for the kindness and acceptance in the queer architecture of Charles Moore, for the urban artefacts that Aldo Rossi found in war-torn European city centres⁴... The unifying feature of the postmodernists was the desire to restore the public role of architecture, especially by referring it to its spatial, historical, or political context.

The beginning of the end for Western postmodernism was, according to Rem Koolhaas, the exhibition *Prima mostra internazionale di architettura: La presenza del passato* in Venice in 1980, curated by the architect Paolo Portoghesi.⁵ It was this moment that Koolhaas retrospectively identified as a clear divergence towards the commercial sphere. Indeed, from the 1980s onwards, postmodernism became increasingly associated with developers' architecture. In an atmosphere of culminating individualism, globalism, and the circulation of financial flows, the postmodern soon came to provide a language for the architecture of *capitalist realism*.⁶

The summary of the international events serves in this case as an introduction to the Czechoslovak scene. The Iron Curtain was not impermeable, and even during socialism echoes of structuralism and the new brutalism were still flowing in. Christian Norberg-Schultz's phenomenological approach began to resonate in the theoretical sphere, which was followed by the debate on the "humanisation" of mass housing estates. In the field of architecture, the SIAL studio based in Liberec had a special position: due to its focus mainly on technical buildings, it remained outside the main interest of the regime and from the 1960s onwards acted as a seedbed of pluralistic approaches. Postmodern tendencies were eventually accepted in the Soviet Union,

but the elements of western architecture had to be shorn of their ideological implications.⁷

After the Velvet Revolution, postmodernism represented to Czech architects the promise of democracy and freedom. The change of regime brought, among other things, a radical transformation of the architectural profession. Architects were no longer rank-and-file employees of state projection institutes, but independently creative personalities that could start to build the brands of their private studios. The major part of their commissions now arrived for buildings that symbolised the new lifestyle such as hotels, car dealerships, entrepreneurs' villas, and shopping malls, as well as representative bank buildings.

In their designs of banks, most architects tried to evoke the tradition of the First Republic's functionalism, which brought them closer to Western trends such as high-tech, neo-constructivism, or neo-functionalism. The courage of the young generation of architects was also manifested by historical references in the form of round windows, contemporary domes, Vračan marble from Yugoslavia, pyramidal skylights, or complicated roof planes. Post-modern banks featured extremely elaborate custom interiors. The dominant foyer space with the counters was often complemented by Hollein-like columns, suspended ceilings with integrated light fixtures, staircases with chrome railings, and author-designed office furniture.

Despite their architectural values, the buildings of the banks did not gain public recognition. Their construction was associated with the bittersweet emotions of building a new democratic state. The gradual decline in public confidence regarding the success of the transformation is also evidenced in the last study by Lukáš Pilka. In the text (How Money Searched for Style), the author describes the change that the graphic design and visual communication sector was undergoing in the financial sphere in the 1990s. The growing disillusionment was addressed by banks' advertising campaigns, which often tried to rebuild the image of banks as powerful protectors or caring family friends.

"Temples of Money" is not the first publication to thematize postmodern architecture in the Czech Republic,⁸ but it is the first to provide reasons for its rapid rise followed by its rapid fall. The publication also provides a valuable analysis of an architectural layer now part of many Czech cities but not subject to monument protection and therefore irreversibly disappearing. While its predecessors, the concrete brutalist monsters, are increasingly being spared and accepted, postmodernism remains misunderstood and unappreciated. In this sense, the publication is therefore above all an attractive (and often amusing) tool for popularising works that continue to fascinate precisely because of their quirkiness.

1 The term was first introduced by Petr Kratochvíl in KRATOCHVÍL, Petr. 1995. *Chrámy peněz aneb Mramory, mramory, kde jsou mé tovary?* *Architekt*, 41(21–22), p. 1.

2 SMITHSON, Alison and SMITHSON, Peter. 1990. The "As Found" and the "Found". In: Robbins, D. (ed.). *The Independent Group. Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, pp. 201–202.

3 VENTURI, Robert. 1966. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

4 ROSSI, Aldo. 1966. *L'architettura della città*. Padova: Marsilio.

5 SZACKA, Léa-Catherine. 2015. Translucent oppositions. OMA's proposal for the 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale. Léa-Catherine Szacka in conversation with Rem Koolhaas and Stefano de Martino. *Oase journal*, (94) [online]. Available at: <https://www.oasejournal.nl/en/Issues/94/TranslucentOppositions>

6 The term "capitalist realism" has been used, particularly in Germany, to describe commodity-based art, from Pop Art in the 1950s and 1960s to the commodity art of the 1980s and 1990s. It originated as a play on the term "socialist realism". Alternatively, it has been used to describe the ideological-aesthetic aspect of contemporary corporate capitalism in the Western world. More recently it was re-used by Mark Fisher in his essay *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* – in the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.

7 For example, URBAN, Florian. 2020. *Postmodern Architecture in Socialist Poland Transformation, Symbolic Form and National Identity*. Abington: Routledge.

8 For example, VORLÍK, Petr, GUZIK, Hubert, BERAN, Lukáš, BRŮHOVÁ, Klára, BYKOV, Alex et al. 2022. *Ambice. Architektura osmdesátých let. Ambitions: the Architecture of the Eighties*. Prague: Czech Technical University in Prague, Faculty of Architecture.