



# THE ARCHITECTURE OF POWER AND THE POWER OF ARCHITECTURE

## ARCHITEKTÚRA MOCI A MOC ARCHITEKTÚRY

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### ARCHITECTURE AND CZECH POLITICS IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> THROUGH THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURIES

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It is generally acknowledged that the architecture of the built environment is not merely the outcome of the creative process of the architect in reaction to the assigned functional and spatial requirements of the client, but equally a reflection of a complex network of influences, interests, or other motivations in social actions. Examination of the mutual influence of politics on architecture, and of architecture on politics and societies, represents an exceptionally ambitious theme, if one that has regularly been addressed and investigated in scholarship. The need to draw attention to these connections formed the impetus behind the current exhibition *Architecture and Czech Politics in the 19th through the 21st Centuries*. It forms the concluding results of a 5-year research project realised by instructors, graduates, and PhD candidates at the Academy of Applied Arts, Architecture and Design (UMPRUM) in Prague. These experts from the Department of Art History and Theory focused in their research on the turbulent era of the past (roughly) 150 years, which in a significant way shaped modern Czech politics.

The theme is addressed through concrete instances of buildings with a unique

characteristic, from which the viewer or reader must, on their own, assemble the mosaic of the broader situation. Both as a research project and an exhibition, it is divided into four basic units, corresponding to the most significant historic events, various state formations, and the architectural language corresponding to each. Through them, the researchers hope to indicate how architecture and urbanism in the distinct periods expressed the diverging aims of the given political systems. The period of the “long 19<sup>th</sup> century”, lasting until the outbreak of World War I, is closely linked with the emancipation of the Czech nation within the systems of the Habsburg and eventually the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Here, emerging to the forefront of interest are specifically representative and official buildings, or public structures with the epithet “National” (e.g., Prague’s National Theatre or National Museum), which had the strongest influence on the formation of national identity then underway. After 1918 and the dissolution of Austro-Hungary, a new state emerged, bringing the Czech lands together with Slovakia and currently Ukrainian Subcarpathian Ruthenia into the new state of Czechoslovakia. For its political

self-promotion, the young republic needed primarily governmental and public buildings, or embassies in foreign capitals. At the same time, a parallel question was the increasingly urgent matter of resolving the housing shortage, involving new social construction and the associated needs to plan and regulate cities. Though both matters had been key political themes since the turn of the century, they emerged in full force with the increased urbanisation transpiring in the interwar years. In turn, the 1948–1989 period is characterised as the epoch of “building socialist ideals”: the state-managed planned economy focused, in architectural terms, now on building socialist new towns, mass housing constructions, and the associated question of prefabrication and industrialisation. Another post-WWII change was found in urban planning, where traditional city masterplans were replaced by abstract scientific-technical directive plans. During this period, the link between architecture and politics was particularly close, since the state hoped, in the spirit of building a socialist society, to influence and guide all aspects of architectural planning and construction. The fourth main period of modern Czech history represents the return of democracy after 1989, the division of Czechoslovakia into two independent states in 1993, and the subsequent integration of both into the European Union in 2004. In architectural terms, the main themes of this period included the revitalisation of buildings and public spaces, or the organisation of architectural competitions.

In the words of the authors themselves, the exhibition does not focus exclusively on the most important or most valuable buildings, but equally on examples of political architecture that for each period represent a specific process or phenomenon. The individual periods have, in turn, been examined in detail in four extensive accompanying publications, each titled with an appropriate historical quotation encapsulating the given period: “The Strength and Future of the Nation Is National Identity” (19<sup>th</sup> century), “A Spirit at Work” (1918–1945), “The Future Is Hidden in the Present” (1948–1989) and “The Rule over Your Affairs Once Lost Will Return to You” (1989–). Among the most interesting contributions are those with relevance to the present. Analysis of the current state of Czech housing (respective shares of private, state, and cooperative housing), the competences and authority of town architects, or the current problems of

urban development illuminate the consequences of the present state of these matters and the causes of their origin. As such, the visitor gains not only the historical background, but also the influence of a specific social and political configuration on everyday life right now. It points out many similarities, past and present parallels, that until now have been perceived only subconsciously, if indeed any attention has been paid to their close mutual links. Likewise, it underscores the significant, if currently often obscured, role of architecture in forming national and cultural, or indeed regional and local, identity. Architecture in the political sphere is no mere passive medium, but an active implement for shaping democratic institutions, social changes, and public attitudes.

The architectural design of the exhibition is the work of the young Czech atelier RCNKS Architekti (architects Filip Kosek and Jan Říčný). The exhibition space is divided to match the conception and the research phases of the project, using simple semi-circular wood partitions to guide the visitor through time – crossing the main investigated historical periods. A telling reference to the work of the architect is hidden in the use of semi-transparent paper, evoking the traditional tracing paper used for sketching or printing architectural plans (the authors of the graphic design are Tereza Hejmová and Kristýna Žáčková). Supplementing the main exhibition panels are reproductions of original posters and printed matter, models, archival sound recordings or videos.

In short, the exhibition is unquestionably rich in captivating and worthwhile information, rendered through a high-level visual presentation. Possibly even to such an extent that a visitor without much experience in the topic could gain at least a brief general summary of the individual periods that would illuminate the essential developmental trajectory of architectural language or form, even in the context of both national and international events. Without question, though, it is a valuable contribution to Czech as well as wider Central European historiography, and a valuable guide not only for the public at large, but for architects, urbanists, historians, or even elected municipal officials.