



**MĚSTO V BOUŘI: URBANISMUS  
A ARCHITEKTURA HISTORICKÉHO  
CENTRA PRAHY 1830–1970, 2022**

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## **CITY IN A STORM: URBANISM AND ARCHITECTURE OF THE HISTORIC CENTRE OF PRAGUE 1830–1970**

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Karel Maier

The relationship between the protection of cultural values of an urban environment and the addition of new construction to it has long been the subject of frequent discussions. Usually, the focus of the debate involves individual projects of new buildings or the reconstruction of extant ones in a historical environment.

In the issue 1-2/2022 of the journal *Architektúra a Urbanizmus*, Rostislav Švácha addressed one of the historical stages of this relationship in the article “The Method of Contrast and Its Decline after 1968”. At the same time as Švácha’s article, Richard Biegel published a book *Město v bouři* (City in a Storm) that deals with the changes in the historic centre of Prague during the time when it changed “from a picturesque historical neighbourhood to an ambitious large city and metropolis of an independent state” (p. 24), i.e., between the 1870s and the 1960s.

The author focuses on the fate of the urban core as outlined by the medieval towns which constituted the conurbation of historic Prague: Old Town, Lesser Town, and New Town. His main interest revolves around the changes that have somehow affected wider neighbourhoods or the city on the larger scale, as such reaching beyond the narrow view of historic preservation as well as the architecture

of individual buildings, towards a broader urban perspective.

The work is based on a thorough research of the extensive body of theoretical literature related to urban development and architecture in the time under review. The clear limitations of time and space allowed the author to carry out a deep analysis of events and projects and the personalities associated with them. Against this background, the author structures the entire comprehensive monograph into distinct time periods. The initial period of 1830-1870, when the historic core of Prague was still enclosed within city walls, is labelled “on the threshold of transformation”. It is followed by 1870-1900 “radical clearance of the centre of Prague”; and the “struggle for the character of historic cities” covers 1900-1918. For historical Prague during the First Republic, 1918-1938, the author uses the characteristic “epicentre of the metropolis”; the following period 1938-1958 is dubbed “in the shadow of totalitarian visions”, and finally the years 1958-1970 are called “the return of modernism”.

The themes of aesthetics, history and transport are witnessed through the individual monitored periods like a sunken river that keeps emerging back to the surface. In addition, several important personalities such

as Max Urban, Bohumil Hypšman and later Antonín Engel also exceed the limits of the individual monitored periods, through their authority ensuring a continuity of ideas. Similarly, the stratification into individual periods does not mean that the events in which the changes took place or the opinions expressed by the participants and the styles they used to express themselves were homogeneous for the individual periods. The progress of the renewal and redevelopment of the former ghetto within ten years after the beginning of the 20th century, where the “storm” conveying the prevalent architectural style from historicism to art nouveau to modernism was most evident, vividly describes the diversified range of approaches to development in this historic environment.

By comparing the individual periods, the author shows how the initial routine regulation following the extant Building Code at the time of clearance (1891) was already gradually moving towards the artistic and architectural approach of the first third of the 20th century. As a consequence, the focus of urban clearance efforts shifts from making historic urban structures passable by removing traffic obstacles to protecting those parts of the urban fabric now considered the most valuable. However, the very concept of values that deserve protection was undergoing change. For a long time, the protection of monuments was based more on aesthetic perception and appreciation of their age. As the author shows, the assessment of the values of historical buildings based on the feelings and estimations of experts, even the most erudite, caused the demolition of even monuments of great value. This was the case especially in the times of radical clearance which brought great damage to the character of the historic city. At times, the “hidden” values were only recognised at the stage of salvage research works on structures that were already in the process of destruction. A systematic architectural historical survey of monuments and urban ensembles only became a reality by the 1950s, when it became possible to place the topic of monument care and protection on a robust foundation supported by empirical knowledge from scientific research.

The move from one period to another often launched a new delineation of the historical area that deserved protection, mostly in the sense of its extending. In fact, this trend continued even beyond the 1960s, when the time scope of the book terminates. The author

also notes how the commercial centre of the city moved. He estimates that the planning of the clearance initially considered the area between Old Town Square and the Vltava river as the potential business core for the modernised Prague. In fact, the opposite direction, eastward toward Wenceslas Square, proved to be true (p. 286). These general shifts may be inspiring even for considerations of our time.

In the timeframe of the volume, periods of agreement between architects and preservationists alternated with periods of mutual conflicts, often associated with the emergence of a new architectural generation. The author comments that this relationship later evolved into the “separate worlds” of architects and preservation as we experience today. Interestingly, when the author compares the attitudes of individual generations of architects to the values of the historical environment, he concludes that for the representatives of modern architecture in the first decades of the 20th century “the trajectories of seemingly opposing tendencies - the activities of modern architects [...] and the efforts of preservationists - intersected in a remarkable way” (p. 285). Proof of this contention is provided through the example of the competitions for the completion of the Old Town Hall at that time: “Although the modernist efforts [...] were thoroughly radical (as they proposed the demolition of most of the buildings of the Town Hall block), they were characterized by a remarkably greater understanding of urban problems and historical contexts than could be found in historicizing interventions” (p. 285).

The title of the publication suggests that the development of the city was stormy. However, the author distinguishes the time periods and the physical sections of the historical agglomeration where “stormy” changes took place, or when ongoing changes led to heated discussions, from the calmer periods that provided time and opportunity for conceptual considerations and for collection of materials needed for further transformational steps.

The association of the author with the longstanding preservationist organisation Klub Za starou Prahu (Club for Old Prague) allowed a deeper insight into this venerable institution and opinion platform, without which the “storm” in the historical city of Prague would probably have had quite different consequences. Particularly instructive and inspiring are the mentions of the specific currents of

opinion with which the Club for Old Prague agreed in individual periods, and which architectural and urban plans received its support. The observations on how young modernist architects and theorists who worked in the ranks of the Club “opened a completely new stage of access to historic buildings and urban complexes” (p. 201) are inspiring even for our current stage of the “storm”.

The entire book is grounded in thorough research of an enormous corpus of wide-ranging sources. From this background, the author derives broader generalizing knowledge about concepts, processes and actors in the individual observed periods and places of transformations, with all personal judgments strictly on a detailed analysis. Nevertheless, in certain cases the author prefers to recede into the background and prioritize contemporary critiques over his own evaluation, as for example, in the case of the Municipal House (p. 269). Accumulated knowledge of the past lays a solid foundation for the possibility of well-informed further debate on current issues. In this way, the book can contribute to overcoming the current tensions and support communication between the stakeholders of structural changes in the city and those who try to protect its historical heritage.

The study digs deep below the surface of the events and offers compelling explanations for the occurrence of events and the formulation of the city’s resulting image. Still, the analysed processes and behaviour of the actors obviously did not take place independent of political and historical events occurring in other cities of the Habsburg monarchy, or later in the periods of “struggle for the character of historic cities” and the “epicentre of the metropolis” of contemporary Europe. Almost in passing, the author points out how the designs of the official buildings in the young Czechoslovak Republic after 1918 referred to the architecture of old imperial Austria; indeed, all the important architects of the beginning of the Republic were trained in Vienna. Nonetheless the setting of “the storm” in historic Prague would deserve to be generally framed and understood in a wider context at least with other metropolises of Austro-Hungary, or, after its disintegration, international cities from which Czechoslovak architects and preservationists of the time could draw inspiration. The absence of contacts with the West and the stagnation of Prague after 1948 also affected the historical

core of the city: possibly helping to explain why Czechoslovak conservation moved forward and the application of its methods strengthened in the 1950s while historic towns in some neighbouring countries suffered from the “zweite Zerstörung” (second destruction).

With its comprehensive concept, the book is an indisputably significant enrichment of the entire fund of professional works dedicated to the architectural and urban development of modern Prague. High-quality and well-chosen visual documentation allows the reader to verify the statements and judgments in the text with one’s own eyes and compare the historical state with the current form. In consequence, not only experts but also lay people will enjoy reading the book.