

# An Attempt to Capture the Indistinct

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Česká architektura v mezicase.  
Od perestrojky k novým  
pořádkům  
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In recent years, Czechoslovak architecture of the socialist period has garnered increasing attention. A notable example is the monumental collective project *Paneláci*<sup>1</sup> (Prefab Buildings, 2014–2017), which documented housing estates in Czechoslovakia from 1945 to 1989. Among the contributors was Karolína Jirkalová, the author of the reviewed publication, who has drawn on her experience to explore Czech architecture in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Her text is an adapted version of her PhD dissertation, defended at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague under the supervision of Cyril Říha, a theorist specializing in urban studies and contemporary architecture.

At the core of Jirkalová's research is a critical question: what truly happened to architecture, its discourse, and its building practice in 1989? Was this year a turning point, or does it mark a 'transformation interim,' a period where the old had ceased to apply, yet the new one had not fully emerged? The introductory section makes it clear that the author's choice of topic and methodology aligns with a growing 'social demand', as evidenced by the emergence of similar research in recent years.<sup>2</sup> This convergence of inquiries underscores the timeliness of the subject and its relevance both to the professional community and a wider audience.

To address the question she posed, Jirkalová needed to explore the interconnection between architecture, politics, and society. For practical reasons, her focus was limited to the Czech part of the Czechoslovak federation. Jirkalová drew significant inspiration from the work of architecture historian Hubert Guzik<sup>3</sup>, who studied continuities in architecture. She notes that many phenomena often attributed to the 1990s actually had roots in the preceding decade, while some aspects of state socialism persisted well into the late 1990s. Jirkalová's research spans the period between 1986, marked by the XVII Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and 1994, when the last prefabricated apartment blocks were constructed, cooperative housing ceased, and several key institutions in construction and urban planning were dissolved (the Research Institute of Construction and Architecture or the Office of the Chief Architect in Prague). Her interdisciplinary approach combines methods from art history, economic and social history, sociology, and discourse analysis. The effectiveness and insights of her approach will be examined in the following text.

The book is divided into four sections: *Obraz města* [Image of the City], *Sny o bydlení* [Dreams of Housing], *K čemu si společnost „vydržuje“ architektky* [Why Society 'Keeps' Architects], and *Začarovaný mocenský kruh* [The Vicious Circle of Power]. Through these chapters, the reader gradually uncovers the prevailing ideas about urban residential environments, the visions for housing and their key proponents, the role and self-perception of the architectural profession, and, finally, the paradox that despite the comprehensive focus on mass prefabricated housing, its numerous shortcomings remained unresolved.

The first section, "Image of the City", outlines contemporary expert discussions that criticized the realities of construction and the broader concept of modernist urbanity from various perspectives – topics that would later become recurring themes in subsequent decades. These opinions appeared in professional journals (*Architektura ČSR, Československý architekt*) as well as in popular science magazines (*Technický magazín, Umění a řemesla*). The author observes that a shift in architectural discourse became apparent by the late 1970s, with criticism emerging over poorly planned redevelopments (p. 27) and the imposition of prefabricated buildings in historic city centers. Contributions by the leading Czech postmodernist theorists, Jana Ševčíková and Jiří Ševčík, also gained prominence. Jiří Ševčík, who taught at the Faculty of Architecture at the Czech Technical University in Prague, was likely the most influential figure in reshaping architectural discourse during this period.<sup>4</sup> The functional zoning of cities, as defined by the Athens Charter (1933), began to give way to the idea of multifunctional urban spaces. By the mid-1980s, preservationist tendencies became evident – not only concerning urban areas and architectural structures but also the surrounding landscape. Economic constraints tied to the recession and foreign exchange restrictions aligned with growing environmental concerns and efforts to preserve architectural heritage. The Institute of Construction and Architecture, operating under the Ministry of Construction and Technology, played a significant role in this shift. As a departmental research institute, it was not directly involved in design or project implementation but contributed to rethinking architectural concepts and frameworks. Jirkalová notes (p. 36, n. 100) that the Institute's activities and role warrant further detailed examination, as it appears to have been a key player in shaping expert opinions and influencing political decision-making.

In relation to expert knowledge, the book uncovers more evidence of Czech architects' awareness of contemporary global debates (p. 36), supported by specific examples. However, a distinctive characteristic of the period was the absence in the works of Czech authors of bibliographies and references to sources of inspiration. Why was this the case? Was it a fear that acknowledging foreign influences might devalue the work for ideological reasons? Jirkalová seems motivated by a desire to demonstrate the permeability of the 'Iron Curtain' through the exchange of ideas, thereby emphasizing how Czechoslovak professional discourse was less isolated than commonly believed. However, this practice warrants a more nuanced evaluation. While it may affirm Czechoslovak science as part of the broader Western (global) intellectual sphere, it also reveals a tendency to adopt foreign ideas without properly citing sources – thus raising questions about the ethics of such practices. I would argue that this lack of proper attribution may have had significant consequences in subsequent decades, potentially influencing the perception of scientific integrity

in post-revolutionary Czech academia and affecting the broader culture of research ethics.

The second sections, “Dreams of Housing”, stands out as the most methodologically accomplished part of the book. Here, the author effectively integrates perspectives from multiple scientific disciplines, as outlined in the introduction. In addition to drawing on Jiří Musil’s seminal work *Lidé a sídliště* (People and Housing Estates), Jirkalová cites numerous sociological surveys conducted during the 1980s by the Institute for Public Opinion Research and the Institute of Construction and Architecture. The housing issue played a pivotal role in the post-1989 transformation, with attitudes toward real estate ownership undergoing significant change. Over time, apartments evolved from being mere homes to becoming tradable commodities. This area remains underexplored, and only through the foundational texts of sociologist Olga Šmídová<sup>5</sup> do we have at least a fragmentary understanding of this process.

The third section, “Why Society ‘Keeps’ Architects”, examines the profession’s evolving status and role. During the 1980s, architects were primarily tasked with designing projects that could be executed within the constraints of available materials. Construction companies (often in collaboration with concrete precasting plants) held more influence, while the preferences of future residents of housing estates were largely disregarded. There were exceptions, of course, with some architects resisting the suppression of their creativity and striving to assert their vision within the limits imposed on them. However, the rehabilitation of the architectural profession began only after the revolution, marked by a rejection of the recent past and a renewed focus on the ideals of interwar architecture. This shift coincided with institutional changes: at the end of 1989, the Civic Forum of Architects was founded, the Union of Czech Architects was dissolved,

and the Community of Architects was newly established, the latter including in its board figures from activist associations of the late 1980s (Miroslav Masák, Josef Pleškot, Viktor Rudiš, Alena Šrámková, and others). The new era’s ideal emphasized unrestrained creativity, free from ideological constraints, while also aiming to restore public trust by demonstrating that architects contribute to cultural enrichment and creation (p. 112). However, the vision of ethical unity within the profession quickly eroded. The focus shifted from social responsibility to ‘a narrower definition of the architect’s role as someone concerned solely with their own commissions, detached from broader societal concerns’ (p. 117).

The final section, “The Vicious Circle of Power”, revisits housing policy and explores issues of standardized construction, investment, and decision-making authority. Fundamental questions arise: who truly held decision-making power? How did the dynamics between state-owned enterprises, investors, experts, and other actors shift during the 1990s? The absence of regulations and standards created opportunities for economic elites, who were quick to exploit the vacuum left by the sharp decline in construction activities between 1990 and 1991.

I commend Karolina Jirkalová for undertaking such an ambitious project and for addressing various methodological and thematic challenges with courage. While in some areas she raises questions without providing definitive answers, her work holds promise as a foundation for future research – not only by others but also by the author herself. In closing, it is worth emphasizing the commendable editorial efforts of the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, which ensure that selected graduate works can appear in print. These publications are further distinguished by the exceptionally well-executed graphic design by Anežka Hrubá Ciglerová and Richard Wilde.

1 SKŘIVÁNKOVÁ, Lucie, ŠVÁCHA, Rostislav, NOVOTNÁ, Eva and JIRKALOVÁ, Karolina (eds.). 2017. *Paneláci 1: Padesát sídlišť v českých zemích*. Prague: Museum of Applied Arts; SKŘIVÁNKOVÁ, Lucie, ŠVÁCHA, Rostislav, NOVOTNÁ, Eva and FLEKAČOVÁ KOUKALOVÁ, Martina (eds.). 2017. *Paneláci 2: Historie sídlišť v českých zemích 1945–1989. Kritický katalog k výstavě Bydliště – panelové*

*sídliště*. Prague: Museum of Applied Arts; Also note the English edition: SKŘIVÁNKOVÁ, Lucie, ŠVÁCHA, Rostislav and LEHKOŽIVOVÁ, Irena (eds.). 2017. *The Paneláks: Twenty-Five Housing Estates in the Czech Republic*. Prague: Museum of Applied Arts.

2 For example, the research of the architect and teacher at the Czech Technical University in Prague, Petr Vorlík; see VORLÍK,

Petr (ed.). 2022. *Ambice: architektura osmdesátých let*. Prague: CTU, Faculty of Architecture.

3 ZIKMUND, Jan and GUZIK, Hubert Kamil. 2019. *Architektura v přerodu 1945–1948, 1989–1992*. Prague: CTU, Faculty of Architecture.

4 For more on the role of the Mr. and Mrs. Ševčík, see the forthcoming publication

BARTLOVÁ, Milena: *Dějiny českých dějin umění II. 1970–1990. Nemožnost myslet celek*. Prague: Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, in print.

5 ŠMÍDOVÁ, Olga. 1999. Co vyprávějí naše byty. In: Konopásek, Z. *Otevřená minulost. Autobiografická sociologie státního socialismu*. Prague: Karolinum, pp. 171–203.