

# ARCHITECTURE CZ

## The Bohemian Spleen Contemporary architecture in Czechia

The differences between Czechoslovakian architecture before 1989 and Czech and Slovak architecture after 1989 are numerous.

Main difference is the fact that before 1989 new buildings were pictured badly, if at all, and printed badly on miserable paper, whereas after 1989, which means now, they have been pictured well and printed in excellent quality on good paper. As we know very well that makes quite a difference in architectural reception.

The texts which are written for the nowadays good pictures are still not very good, but they are translated automatically into at least one world language, mostly into handy English. That brings forward the cognition of Czech architecture in the so-called West. The so-called West appreciates nothing more than high-quality pictures.

Besides the so-called West, represented by architecture experts, has a high opinion of Czech architecture. This traditionally, Czech cubism, Czech functionalism, the Brno functionalists, Batá city Zlín are well introduced terms in world architecture. Slovakia is traditionally overseen. Poland and Hungary anyway.

From 1989, since Bohemia and Moravia are parts of the West again without being the West, Czech architecture has started to re-infiltrate international architecture. Until then Czech architecture (as Czechoslovakian architecture until January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1993) was labelled as Eastern Bloc

architecture and was therefore hardly recognized. This missing attention included also architects.

The so-called West was unjust against the Eastern Bloc. That was necessary because the West was only able to define itself by the so-called East. Resulting from a guilty conscience the so-called West had a certain willingness to contribute to the prevention of a total blockade of the Eastern Bloc. In the early eighties for example architects from all neighbouring countries of Austria were allowed to take part in the international competition for the new capital of Lower Austria. What a surprise! If I remember right: Among ten teams which were nominated for the second competition level there were two teams from Czechoslovakia, one Czech and one Slovak team. If I remember right the Czech architects who were very young, maybe even students, were awarded the second prize. At that time it was told on the quiet that the jury wanted to award the 1st prize to the Czech project but had to bend to the pressure of pragmatical considerations and to choose an Austrian project.

This approach does not stand against the Eastern Bloc people. They just didn't want to give over this politically enormously important construction to foreigners, wherever they came from. That is an Austrian custom. If I do not err the young architects from Bohemia are identical with the very group of architects who are called A.D.N.S and who succeeded in positioning themselves as one of the



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↑ **Palace EURO**  
architects: Richard Doležal, Petr Malinský,  
Petr Burian, Michal Pokorný  
Photo: Filip Štápal

↙ **Pathway through the Deer Moat - Prague castle**  
project designer: Josef Pleskot, AP Atelier  
structural engineer: Křížtek, Trčka a spol. s.r.o.  
Photo: Jan Malý



leading architectural practices in new Czechia after the downfall. And deservedly so. They belong to the most persevering protectionists of functionalistic historicism as the preference of many young Czech architects for modernism which was predominant in intermediate wartime Czechia is called.

Another exception was the invitation of the SJAL group of Liberec in 1983 to construct a very big condominium within the framework of an international building exhibition (IBA) in West Berlin.

When I visited the finalised apartment house in Alte Jakobstrasse in 1986 I thought by myself: "Really not bad that house, but why so much post-modernism? Czech functionalism exists and one could get a lot of inspiration of it ..."

Understandable, however, I thought. They, the architects from an Eastern Bloc country want to use that rare and honest opportunity to show the West their abilities.

Their abilities, skills and knowledge: everything.

This impression to show everything what a Czech architect knows and is able to do in and on a building, no matter what its purpose is and how big it is, is one of the most outstanding features of present architecture in Czechia.

Another impression is: Nor the building owner, the municipal building clerk, the reviewer or the competent guest from the West should have the slightest doubt that they, the free and young architects of Czechia have a good command of architecture, their handicraft, also internationally. Despite of communism, in which they were brought up and educated.

The results of such convincing efforts lead to the desired and explicitly expressed double target: the connection to a glorious long-established tradition to the Czech functionalism which is adored in the West and the connection to international architecture.

Except deconstructivism, biomorphism and computerism.

Between those two targets resp. the target of a double connection the inherently antagonistic efforts oscillate. Thus, almost 15 years after the downfall, Czech architecture still stands between a revitalised functionalism and the postmodernism which is artificially kept alive, comparable to the notorious maelstrom between Szylla and Charybdis. And unavoidably it ends up in a kind of permanent wave of Czech postmodernism. In doing so the young architects succeed in creating something unique: a postmodern functionalism.

But look out! There are exceptions and not too seldom. Therefore Czech architecture infiltrates international architecture. And it does not only infiltrate! It is put through. It is recognized if it deserves it. And it does deserve it. Like it deserves good pictures on good paper. Out of 269 new buildings which had been proposed for the Mies van der Rohe Award of the European Union in 2003 the jury chose 41 which was already a big accolade. Among those are two buildings from Czechia. Just as many as from Austria which is considered to be the global power of architecture. Even though it's not understandable why. No building from Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, etc.

The two chosen buildings from Czechia, well photographed on excellent paper and

published in an admirably edited catalogue, are the footpath of Josef Pleskot in Deer Gully Garden underneath the Hradcany and the Euro Palace on Wenceslas Square.

The glass office building of Richard Doležal, Petr Malinský, Petr Burian, Michal Pokorný, Martin Kotik and DaM joins two functionalistic building icons from the thirties directly and ideally which is mentioned as an important factor in the explaining text.

The Mies van der Rohe Award has been given to Zaha Hadid for a car park in Strassburg. The trend she represents is not seen as "real architecture" in Czechia. "Real architecture" is a popular term among many young Czech architects for a plain, precise, clear and true position, in short an indigenous functionalistic position, which they want to reach in building. They have a real spleen: They want to improve functionalism.

– Jan Tabor