Karel Hubáček, Otakar Binar, Ještěd Tower, Liberec, Czech Republic, 1963–1973. © Jaroslav Vebr.

Czech hotels in the late-modernist style set against the landscape

BY PETR VORLÍK

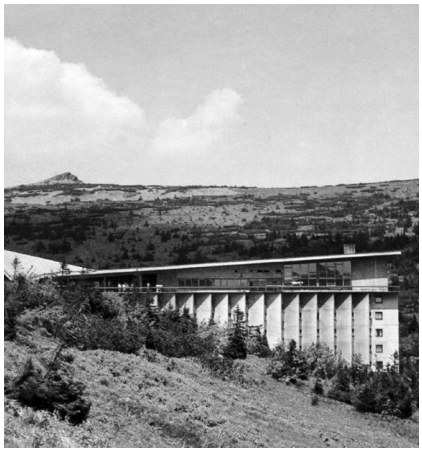
This paper looks at the changes in hotel architecture in post-war Czechoslovakia. In particular, the way in which architects, either with the support of or, in some cases, in resistance to the political dictate, handled the inspirational influences that came from abroad. Namely the Soviet models forced on them, or the ideas that seeped through from the other side of the Iron Curtain that were closer to the Czech modernist environment. The resulting approach of compromises and mixing influences, typical for a small country in the middle of Europe, gave rise to imaginative combinations of the universal principles of the International Style with structural experiments, a return to sophistication and refined craftsmanship, a cautious criticism of Modernism, or an intensive effort to strike a balance and harmony with the poetic character of the landscape.

Introduction

The culture of the Czech lands has always had profoundly mixed features, the product of the country's geographic position in the heart of Europe and the diverse influences and shifting governmental hands to which the country has been subjected. The gems of Czech medieval and baroque architecture are mainly the work of builders of German, Italian, and French provenance and their successors. Architectural works in the 19th century and the early modern era were influenced by the fact that the Czech lands were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Central European system of production, its transport infrastructure, and its market. The National Revival in the 19th century and then especially the foundation of Czechoslovakia as an independent republic in 1918 created a more compact cultural ethos and economy, but international ties remained an important stimulant — many architects earlier and still obtained their education in Vienna or, later, in the Bauhaus, architects of German or Jewish background worked in the country, and some artists had direct experience of having worked abroad in renowned architectural offices (e.g. under Frank Lloyd Wright or Le Corbusier). They traveled extensively (e.g. to the Netherlands, France, the United States, Japan) and maintained active social ties (e.g. through the CIAM congresses, with Le Corbusier, or the Soviet Union). Czech architecture is consequently undeniably composite in nature, inclining towards a restrained austerity, but spiced up with witty designs and tenacious efforts to come up with refined details and compositions. Another characteristic feature of Czech architecture however is its gentle poetics and its ties to the local culture and the context of the landscape, the result of its constant search for its own identity, something crucial for a small Central European country surrounded by bigger powers and continual external pressures. One might think that the post-war inclusion of Czechoslovakia within the Eastern political bloc would have quashed its composite character. But even in the stifling grip of the Soviet Union, most architects managed to find a way to access uncensored information from the other side of the Iron Curtain and sources of inspiration from around the world. The evolution and diversity of late-modern Czech architecture and how it could "bend" to take in foreign influences is eloquently reflected in hotel construction.

A retreat into craftsmanship

After the Communist Party won the elections in 1946 and seized power in 1948 in Czechoslovakia, the centralization of governance and control proceeded at an accelerated pace and soon spread into the field of construction. Architects were corralled into state design institutes and had to abide by the dictates of political planning, while construction itself was unable to keep up with the unrealistic demands for speedy post-war renewal and a solution to the housing shortage. From an artistic perspective the 1950s were moreover marked by the strict rejection of the *avant-garde* and the assertion of the doctrine of socialist realism. The press and artistic work were subject to strict censorship. Architects had to undergo "inspirational" sojourns in the Soviet Union, whose "model successes" sparked strong misgivings among the progressive generation of interwar functionalists. Many of them opted for a different career in the less controlled area of designing operationally complex buildings in the sectors of industry and health or, paradoxically, renovating cultural heritage. Even in this closed environment, however, architects still managed to get



01 Zdeněk Řihák, Labská bouda, Špindlerův Mlýn, Czech Republic, 1965–1975. © The Krkonoše Mountains National Park Administration – The Krkonoše Museum, Jiří Bruník.

02 Věra and Vladimír Machonin, Thermal Hotel, Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic, 1963–1977. © Jaroslav Vebr.

03 Věra and Vladimír Machonin, Thermal Hotel, Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic, 1963–1977. © Jaroslav Franta.

access to international trends and Western literature. The life of socialist realism ultimately proved fleeting, its most ardent advocates devoted themselves to theory and politics, and only several prominent residential complexes were ever built for some favored industrial compounds (e.g. Ostrava-Poruba). But even these structures show signs of attempts to come up with local alternatives that would distinguish them from the Soviet models; in order to achieve the requisite folk aesthetic in their work, architects usually drew on traditional Czech small-town features, or Renaissance or Baroque architecture, and after Stalin's death they abandoned historicisms altogether.

It is nevertheless possible to find little islands of "quiet resistance" in the 1950s, one example being the grandiose international Hotel Jalta on Wenceslas Square in Prague (Antonín Tenzer, 1954–1958)[1]. Tenzer was a gentleman of firm moral principles and an architect who continued to embrace the tradition of the interwar avant-garde, and while in accordance with the post-war critique he abandoned the abstract, technicist, and dynamic forms of Czech Modernism in this project, he had no intention of submissively executing a political commission. Instead, in the heart of historical Prague he drew on his (secondary-school) education in the decorative arts and went for intelligibility and simplicity in his design, static forms, and balanced proportions, quality materials, and a focus on details. The open building plan and the accessible street-level façade contain echoes of his experience designing functionalist hospitals, but the façade is largely solid stone, and there are even some (overtly politically neutral) figural decorations. It is no accident that this sophisticated fusion of elements is reminiscent of an ageless Art Deco. It has an atmosphere that is airy and cozy at the same time, and it strikes an undisguised chord with the interwar functionalist buildings that are part of the variegated mosaic of Wenceslas Square. The note of defiance in the building and its statement of alliance with Modernism and perhaps even Western models are best observed by comparing it with the pro-regime Hotel International in Prague-Dejvice (František Jeřábek et al, 1952–1956), which was built in the typical socialist-realist style of a stepped tower. However, even in that hotel, which was originally designed as luxury lodgings for visiting Warsaw Pact advisors, the architects cautiously stepped back from contemporary rhetoric and prioritized neutral works of art and signs of solid craftsmanship.

Plinth and tower

With the onset of the political thaw in the 1960s things began to turn. Architects re-forged severed ties and many of them traveled abroad to the West and took in late-modernist architecture with their own eyes. The collections of international journals and literature grew, and the level of censorship slackened (but it did not disappear entirely). Nevertheless, the channels by which information was obtained remained largely indirect and there were just a few examples of direct collaboration or professional contact (one being, for example, the UIA congress in Prague in 1967). How Western models were introduced into practice reflected this, as they tended to appear as belated and largely formal borrowings, with no deeper theoretical background. However, the re-espousal of the still vital and famous tradition of Czechoslovak interwar functionalism and the increase in artistic freedom, along with the tendency towards experimentation that arose in response to an ossified state-socialist construction industry gave rise to greater diversity and an unusually broad range of interpretations and variations of the International Style in architecture in Czechoslovakia.

The process of opening up to the world was accompanied by unprecedented growth in services and the construction of new and stately international hotels. Most of them uncritically adopted the tried-and-tested Western "plinth and tower" model, which was especially well-suited to combining grand social spaces and routinely arranged rows of rooms. A typical example of this is the Interhotel Olympic in Prague-Karlín (Josef Polák, Vojtěch Šalda, Milan Rajchl, Jan Zelený, 1964–1971)[2], named for the Olympic complex that was planned in the vicinity but never built. This hotel became the dominant structure in an experimental prefab housing estate called Invalidovna and its austere lines in the International Style are softened with the use of an ethereal white curtain wall, aluminum *brise soleil*,

04 Jaroslav Paroubek, Arnošt Navrátil, Radek Černý, Jan Sedláček, Hotel Praha, Prague, Czech Republic, 1971–1981. © Arnošt Navrátil.

and softly textured ceramic cladding (clearly influenced by the popular Scandinavian look).

However, even the hotel industry was marked by higher ambitions and attempts at a modern but also distinctive domestic identity. In the early 1960s the mood was one of intoxication and pride surrounding the success of the Czechoslovak Pavilion at EXPO 1958 in Brussels (František Cubr, Josef Hrubý, Zdeněk Pokorný, 1956–1958), the optimistic atmosphere of which captured the hearts of EXPO visitors from around the world and earned the pavilion a number of official awards. What came to be known as the "Brussels style" of architecture abandoned the strict social ethos and technocratic approach to construction and placed primary emphasis on dramaturgy, a light or weightless quality, a creative visual diversity, playfulness with color, a decorative aspect (but not kitschy), and oblique or curvy shapes. These features are evident, for example, in the jagged tower structure of the Hotel Continental in Brno (Zdeněk Řihák, Alois Semela, Vladimír Kovařík, 1958–1964)[3].

Other hotel towers from the 1960s in contrast to the playful approach were based more on a serene and solemn experience and hospitable cozy feeling, in the sense of something solid and of good quality. Through the use of high-grade materials and more stable proportions the light, informal, technicist approach of the International Style acquires a sophisticatedly more serious tone, for example, in the Parkhotel in Prague-Holešovice (Zdeněk Edel, Jiří Lavička, Alena Šrámková, 1959–1967)[4] or the Černigov Hotel in Hradec Králové (Jan Zídka, 1966–1975, currently scheduled for demolition)[5], both cases evidently influenced by the strong inter-war atmosphere around them.

It is necessary to note that the political support in smaller towns was usually sluggish. Small hotels there tended to be built in connection with some sports facility, house of culture, or shopping center, and as a reduced and simple rendition of the International Style, with a prevailing use of standardized details and elements (which however sometimes resulted in a surprisingly pure, ungarnished avant-garde appearance).

Context in the foreground

The optimistic and somewhat technocratic, universal combination of glass plinth and tower established itself across the entire spectrum of building types, the objective being to demonstrate how supposedly advanced and competitive socialist Czechoslovakia was. It also gradually made its way into the unique context of the authentic mountain landscape. A typical example of the transposition of the urban lifestyle and "man's victory over nature" is Hotel Horizont in Pec pod Sněžkou (Jan Tymich, Josef Opatřil, Zdeněk Řihák, 1964–1979), where, at the entrance to a national park, on the edge of two mountain valleys, and set in between traditional, sober, wooden buildings the tower was built and assumed for itself the role of a beacon of Modernism.

Even in the case of more ambitious hotel projects, however, horizontal or cuboid shapes began to appear over time (though somewhat exceptionally), tempering the impact of inserting a new structure into an already established setting. One such example is the famous tourist lodge Labská bouda (Zdeněk Řihák, 1965–1975). Built on the site of a 19th-century building that burnt down, it looks boldly reminiscent of a giant rock formation. It is embedded into the ground so that on the arrival side of the hotel it looks to visitors like a traditional low-rise mountain lodge, while on its opposite face it flaunts its full length and height when viewed from a distance and resonates with the grandeur of the surrounding Krkonoše mountains. Vertical sawtooth reinforced-concrete walls form the sides of the hotel-room floors, in a reference to the stepped rocky cliff of the nearby Pančavský waterfall, and they are open in the direction of the valley to provide the visitors with a wonderful view. The robust sawtooth plinth is by contrast crowned with a lighter story on top in which the restaurant is housed in panoramic glass (because of the extreme climatic conditions in the area however the large glass walls were soon replaced with small windows).

05 Zdeněk Řihák, Alois Semela, Vladimír Kovařík, Hotel Continental, Brno, Czech Republic, 1958–1964. © *Architektura ČSR*, 1964, V. Hoštová.

Another hotel that stands out among the Czech late-modernist works that were built with a view to reflecting their local context is the Hotel Intercontinental in Prague (Karel Filsak, Karel Bubeníček, Jan Šrámek, František Cubr, Zdeněk Pokorný, 1967–1974), whose brutalist morphology tactfully takes into consideration the specific scale of its environs – namely, the vertical and horizontal strips of picturesque urban landscape in Prague's Old Town — while its overall volume seeks to reflect the majesty of the Vltava River valley and the row of public buildings along the embankment. Sculpturesque forms similarly help to integrate Hotel Ural into the main square in Pilsen (Jaroslava Gloserová, 1967–1972), Hotel Kamyšin into the space where the lost town walls in Opava used to stand (Jan Kovář, Jiří Horák, Radim Ulman, 1979–1985), and consequently new local Hotel and grocery store Slavia with its modern interpretation of the traditional gable roof and disintegration of the volume into the scenic square of small town Třebíč (César Grimmich, Jaromír Liška, 1972–1983)[6].

In the capital city, however, prominent international hotels still tended to be characterized by an effort to "be noticed" and tried to take advantage of the city's hilly terrain and views of Prague Castle. Hotel Forum (Jaroslav Trávníček, 1979–1988) towers up from the edge of Nusle Valley and complements the horizontal lines of nearby Nusle Bridge and the pro-regime Palace of Culture. By contrast, the gigantic Hotel Praha (Jaroslav Paroubek, Arnošt Navrátil, Radek Černý, Jan Sedláček, 1971–1981, demolished in 2014)[7], with its softly undulating lines and fanning terraces, sought to respond to the contoured terrain of the garden neighborhood of Hanspaulka around it.

Icons with and against the regime

Two structures occupy a special place in Czech hotel architecture: Thermal Hotel and Ještěd Tower — both of them large, multifunctional, highly complex and, of course, connected to the extremely demanding landscape context they are set in.

Thermal Hotel in Karlovy Vary (Věra and Vladimír Machonin, 1963–1977)[8] was built as a giant complex of hotel services, with an outdoor pool, and spaces for hosting the prestigious international film festival. The architects used the fashionable plinth and tower duo and erected the hotel on the site of a series of dilapidated spa buildings that were controversially demolished. The base of the structure housing the festival and restaurant areas was intended in its height, articulation, and sturdy form to fit in with the surrounding historical buildings, while the light and ampler tower in which the rooms were located had to respond to the sky and the scale of the natural and romantic spa valley. The tower also formed the dividing line between the regular part of the town and the spa area.

The long process that the design and construction of buildings typically involved at the time resulted in an interesting conceptual shift. The project that was submitted to the competition still bore features that were typical of the International Style of the early 1960s — the glass curtain walls, the solid side walls, and the fluid curves of the halls and the pool. The more detailed version of the project later offered refinements, reflected the architects' experience abroad (they requested a study trip to England and France), and revealed an effort towards greater distinctiveness in the design. The plinth was turned into an interlayering of right-angled terraces, long, linked lines gently fracturing to follow the morphology of the terrain, accented by trios of cylindrical halls, and the tower's horizontal articulation. The smooth, uniform glass panels in the original study were replaced by the bold dimensionality and sharp contrasts of the bright solid surfaces and the dark recessed balconies. The earthy quality of the materials (exposed aggregate concrete, dark glass, an undisguised steel frame) and the right-angled geometry carefully offset the more sculptural accents, the Japanese-inspired garden arrangement, and the integrated works of art.

This general concept was naturally also applied to the outstanding design of the interior, where the architects imaginatively balanced the modernist use of transparency and openness (glass partitions and façades, an abundance of built-in elements) with the intimacy of the furnishings and the lighting (dark ceilings and light floors, bespoke furniture that was comfortable and enveloping, rich colors and works of art, tableware selected by the architects). The open spatial plan was made possible by the unusual supporting steel frame. Thermal Hotel became a monumental and stately structure, but the guests were nevertheless meant to experience it up close as cozy and welcoming. Despite its austere aspect, its deliberate internationalism, and its departure from the priorities of the regime, Thermal Hotel became an indelible part of Karlovy Vary, a symbol of the film festival and, because of its complex character, one of the most iconic works of Czech architecture (which, unfortunately, was not enough to prevent the recent drastic renovations to the surrounding public space, the garden, and the interior or the closure of the pool and its facilities).

A unique place in Czech architecture is also occupied by Ještěd Tower in Liberec (Karel Hubáček, Otakar Binar, 1963–1973)[9], which was built on the site of a previous Romantic-style hotel that burned down. In the new hotel building, Karel Hubáček brilliantly united two required services – a hotel and a TV transmitter – into one object, which he smoothly integrated into the silhouette of the mountain, essentially extending its natural peak. Construction began in 1966 and after a long series of standard delays and complications it was officially opened on 21 September 1973. The architects, who were out of favor with the new normalization regime, were not invited to the ceremony, despite the fact that the study for the project had received a number of domestic awards and in 1969 the then still unfinished tower won the prestigious international Auguste Perret Prize for the creative use of technology in architecture.

The construction of the elegant and compact tower was only possible thanks to its sophisticated structural design, which required the development of several patents and which combines, for example, monolithic prefabricated reinforced concrete with suspended steel ceilings and a

steel shell, with the finishing touch of a unique oscillation absorber to counter the wind effect. The surface is similarly mixed, formed from stone and concrete cladding, a glass curtain wall, aluminum-steel panels and fiberglass elements (necessary to allow signal penetration). The geometry of the tower is also quite intricate: the wide cylindrical floors in the lower section of the tower transition into a truncated cone in the middle suspended section and then into a fiberglass and steel circular hyperboloid, terminating in a cylindrically shaped structure again at the peak. In addition to the experimental design of the structure and the facing, it is necessary to also draw attention to the tower's composition: Karel Hubáček inventively combined the light technicist morphology of the upper part (silvery paint, white fiberglass, and machinist windows) with an almost naturally raw plinth (exposed concrete, the stone pavement on the ground runs from there in a smooth arc up onto the wall cladding).

The basic theme of duality, of integrating a work by human hands into the natural environment around it, was also reflected in the interior of the tower, where Otakar Binar emphasized a visual openness, breath-taking panoramic views from the windows, and the poetics of "heaven and earth" (the cozy materiality of the floors and interior walls versus the airiness of the furnishings, ceilings, and windows). Experimentation was also applied to the interior – such as the rotational standing ashtrays produced by the wind instrument company Amati, the innovative polycarbonate panels of the bannisters, the ceramic tiling by artists Děvana Mírová, Marie Rychlíková, and Lydie Hladíková, the bespoke furnishings and lights by Otakar Binar, the atypical ceramic Rako tiling with cavetto molding in the corners, the similarly styled ceramic hooks and soap dishes, the light blue bed linen with a white snowflake motif by Karel Wünsch, and so on. Wünsch also designed the restaurant equipment and materials, such as the menus, the logo, the glassware and stemware, and most notably the ceramic dinner service made from an experimental material called Vitral, normally used for high-voltage insulators and employed here for a more robust appearance. The special "honeymoon" suite was also marked by playfulness and levity, with surprising historicizing furniture in the Louis XVI style. The atmosphere of the interiors was embellished with works of art, which unexpectedly in an admired technicist structure were based on Jungian psychological motifs, the closeness of the countryside, nature, and outer space.

The most famous of the post-war Czechoslovak works of architecture, Ještěd Tower, which has regularly come out as the favorite in polls among professionals and the public, even today remains a reflection of the political thaw and the atmosphere of social and cultural ferment that characterized the "golden" 1960s. It represents a unique technical experiment, resistance to the pressure for quantity, a step away from the industrialized approach to construction, a distinctive gesture, and the dream of a generation of architects. The emotional connection it forms between a beautiful landscape setting and a thoroughly executed vision is today the symbol of the town of Liberec and even of the entire region. As a national cultural monument, the tower enjoys the highest level of protection, and since 2007 it has been on the Czech Republic's list of sites to be nominated for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Acknowledgement

The text was written at the Faculty of Architecture, Czech Technical University in Prague, as the outcome of the project *Architecture in the 1980s in the Czech Republic – the Distinctive Quality and Identity of Architecture and Parallel Reflections against the Backdrop of Normalisation* (DG18P02OVV013) conducted under the NAKI II program of applied research and development of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (principal investigator: Petr Vorlík).

Notes

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