

The New Synagogue in Žilina, Slovakia: participation as a method of heritage renewal

BY KATARÍNA HABERLANDOVÁ

The *Neolog* [New] Synagogue in Žilina is an exceptional work, and not only through its having been designed in 1928 by the renowned architect Peter Behrens. The present contribution discusses this work by Peter Behrens – an important landmark constructed well outside the major urban centers for 20th-century architecture in a provincial Slovak town. Its most recent restoration, completed in May 2017, lasted a full five years. During this time, many discussions took place among heritage experts, theorists and architects, which eventually formulated the architectonic idea of the reconstruction into its final form. In addition, the realization was greatly assisted not only by the team of architects but many volunteers. The project for the New Synagogue won many awards and is viewed positively as a source of inspiration, perhaps even more so since it overcame several problematic moments regarding its financing, but also in the search for the best restoration methods and met them successfully.

One of the major conditions for assigning heritage status to an architectural work is usually the personality of its author. In this respect, the New Synagogue in Žilina is heritage on the very highest level. Peter Behrens is a name of great repute, and his importance in the history of modern architecture requires no argument – yet the investigation of his works in regions situated outside the major centers of the significant phases of 20th-century architecture is one area that still requires us to pay attention. Among these buildings is, of course, his synagogue in Žilina: a work for which only a few contemporary reflections (texts and photographs) have survived – and not only for the provincial status of the location but equally, as hypothesized by architectural historian Peter Szalay, because the architect himself did not want to draw attention to it in the era when Nazism was growing and spreading through Europe¹.

Yet it is not only because of the architect that the synagogue has become a valued item of heritage. The uniqueness of this structure can be found in all of the areas that we commonly use in evaluating built heritage: from its position in the urban structure of a locality or city, through its unusual architectural form as a synagogue in Slovakia with industrial touches, up to its advanced structural plan, confirming not only the “greatness” of the architect but no less the openness of the clients towards new ideas in architecture and art. In essence, the synagogue is a modern architectural landmark displaying

one of the most consistent ranges of value within all of Slovakia.

In recent years, the Žilina synagogue underwent renovation, a process exceptional even in the composition of its team – the largest collective of professionals in various fields related to the preservation of Modern Movement architecture in Slovakia. These theorists, historians, preservation experts and architects, some with extensive experience and some with only minimal previous involvement in reconstructing modern architecture, launched in 2012 a sequence of theoretical discussions, specific physical interventions into the building, and their subsequent evaluation. Using the shared and highly contemporary language, we could call it a “participatory” guidance of restoration, which emerged as the actual method. Viewed retroactively, the renewal process has occasionally been criticized for its excessive intellectual disunity, created more from intuitive searching for the best restoration method and immediate decision-making than on a scientifically formulated set of methodological principles, as has previously been the case for heritage-protection practice in Slovakia². At the same time, though, this philosophy of restoration is in many ways worth following. The outcome of these five years of restoration work is itself regarded as highly positive: in a relatively brief period of operation, starting only in May 2017, the New Synagogue has established itself as one of the most sought-after cultural locations in the entire town.

Modern, hence less valuable

Though the renewal of modern heritage sites is hardly a question of repairing inert material, we are nonetheless, in Slovakia, often confronted with a situation that seems to take this as its sole approach. There have even been cases where the restoration of modern architecture has led to extremely dangerous precedents. Not long ago, for example, the Heritage Office in Bratislava allowed (as part of a restoration project) the demolition of part of an important modernist structure for purposes of constructing a parking garage below it³. It would almost seem that we deliberately refused to acknowledge that modern architecture is hardly less deserving of the preservation of its authenticity than its earlier forms. For the synagogue in Žilina, it was evident that answering the question of the level of presenting the authenticity of individual historic layers would be severely problematic. Since the end of WWII, the building passed through several functions and many alterations that extensively changed its original spatial concept. Immediately after 1945, preparations were made for its adaptation for cultural use from plans by Lubomír Šlapeta. However, the architect’s aim at turning the synagogue into a concert hall through various changes that accepted the building’s cultural value was never met with understanding. His plans were never realized, and the changes that were eventually made in the 1960s and 1970s launched an entire series of alterations that only damaged Behrens’s original design. These changes primarily affected the internal arrangements of the synagogue and its original spatial orientation, which can be understood as a deliberate attempt — matching the ruling communist ideology of the era — to eliminate all traces of the original sacred function⁴. Even though there had already been discussion about declaring the synagogue a landmark as early as 1953 at the *Conference of Slovak Architects* and that such protection was actually granted ten years later, the main space was wrapped in paneling which, at the start of the most recent restoration work, became known as the “hooding” – i.e., obscuring any reference to the previous stage in the life of Behrens’s work. Once a synagogue, it now served as a university building, including the main meeting hall. Paradoxically, the hooding nonetheless helped to preserve a number of interesting details (e.g. the stucco ornament in Socialist Realist style) from further destruction. It did, however, lead to changes in the building’s exterior appearance: new openings were broken through the façade and several original ones bricked up. On the western side, a new office wing was added. In consequence, the original Purist form of the



01 Peter Behrens, the New Synagogue, Žilina, Slovakia, 1931. View of the exterior. © HÚ SAV Bratislava.



02 Peter Behrens, the New Synagogue, Žilina, Slovakia, 1931. Opening of the exhibition of Dan Perjovschi in Synagogue, 2014. © Dalibor Adamus.

building was damaged to a certain extent, yet the characteristic outline of the building still remained.

Hooded Peter Behrens

The monumental force of the central space revealed after the uncovering of the cupola — once the “hooding” of the interior from the 1970s was removed just after the start of restoration — which had previously served as the university hall and then as a cinema, somehow bound the various persons engaged for restoration to work particularly sensitively with the built substance. At the same time, though, there is a case to be made that the removal of the hooding may not have been altogether positive. This very layer was, for so many decades, an integral and characteristic part of the synagogue, even if far removed from its original function, but associated with so many graduating classes of the University of Transport Engineering, which had been located here. Perhaps even more than the actual act of removal, which in principle could not be avoided — since the main goal of the restoration was to present Peter Behrens’s original conception of the space — what is controversial is the method through which it was realized. Once the greater part of restoration work had been completed on a volunteer basis, the panels that composed the hooding were removed too quickly, possibly contributing to the destruction of certain elements from earlier stages of construction.

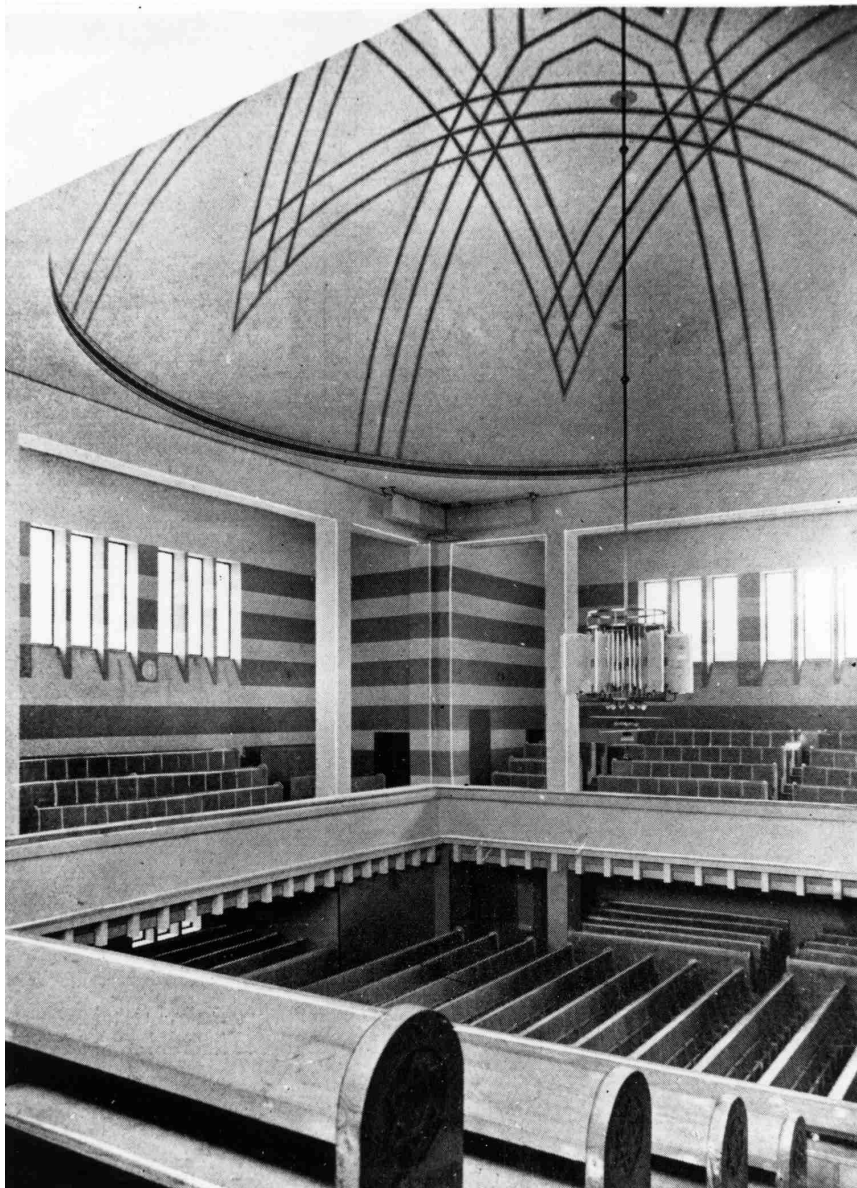
The architectural-historical investigation of the synagogue, which we will discuss at length later, had already been completed at the time of the hooding’s removal. The primary researcher, architect and heritage expert Magdaléna Kvasnicová, only had the chance to look under the hooding in a few selected points, indeed soundings, up until November 2011. This formed one of

the reasons why the plan of renewal, at the conclusion of this initial investigation, was defined only in outline and had been planned for further completion once the hooding was removed. Hence from the very outset, the hooding was regarded as a non-original, disruptive layer, one that was never intended to be preserved. Little attention was paid to the actual method of removing the hooding, not suspecting how, when, and how rapidly it would take place. Though immediately after the completion of the research investigation, the author presented the results of her work to the national Heritage Commission, a broader professional discussion about the restoration only began several months after the hooding was removed.

The authenticity of the modern: a permanent dilemma

Though the hooding in the synagogue interior is now vanished, it is still possible to ask in connection with its removal whether it was, or was not, part of the authentic form of the building and at least deserving of discussion of its retention in some sort of form. In the theory of heritage protection for modern architecture we have some resources to draw upon, since the question of the authenticity of such buildings has been addressed intensively by experts over the past decades. Still, more extensive writings that analyze the value of modern heritage and additionally are backed by experience from realized restorations of similar significance as the Žilina synagogue are, understandably, few. Pavel Gregor, an architect and heritage expert wrote, in 2010, one of the most extensive studies of heritage value in modern architecture. Modernity is analyzed in the context of all heritage structures, not only those currently given state protection in law. Gregor formulates, as we have already

noted, a position in which modern heritage may have its specifics, but definitely not in the sense of being a marginal, less important area of cultural heritage where we need not apply professional methods in its restoration. Additionally, Gregor is critical of the common view of authenticity as one of the values of built heritage, reconfiguring the idea as the “authentic state of the landmark”, in other words an independent category standing outside of the traditional heritage evaluation system⁵. Though aware that the essential portion of the value of physical cultural heritage (including modern architecture) is tied to its authenticity, he argues that the interpretation of the idea is extremely broad. According to some theories, only the original form of a building can be regarded as authentic, yet according to other approaches all of the other layers that have through time shaped a building into its current state are no less worthy of protection. In addition, authenticity included an entire (sub)grouping of values. One of them is the value of the longstanding form of a building, to be judged by the length of its unchanged persistence. From this, it ensures that the longest-lasting visual form of the synagogue, which should be decisive and should be thoroughly reflected in the restoration, was in fact the period when the synagogue served as the seat of the University of Transport Engineering. As the only higher-educational institution of its type in the former Czechoslovakia, the university gradually became a key symbol of identity for Žilina and its wider region. As we can see, this situation, as the result of the given historic conditions in which the building was created and then continued to exist under both Nazi and communist rule, paradoxically condition the perception of certain of its values. This is not a unique situation, yet in the case of



03 Peter Behrens, the New Synagogue, Žilina, Slovakia, 1931. View of the exterior. © HÚ SAV Bratislava.

the Žilina synagogue it is indeed striking. However, we nonetheless need to recall that even such an intellectual standpoint could hardly be used to argue against removing the hooding from the interior. To do so would be to deny one of the most essential motivations for the synagogue's restoration, i.e. allowing us to sense once more the original architectonic conception of space as created by a major modern architect.

Assembling the narrative of the synagogue

We have already outlined the story of the architectural-historical investigation from 2011, required both by the Heritage Office and by the project's investor. This investigation was intended to provide new knowledge of the building, since Behrens's original

plans disappeared from Žilina sometime after the war. As mentioned previously, the author of the investigation was Magdaléna Kvasnicová, though parallel investigations were also carried out by Peter Szalay, restorer Ján Hromada and architect Gabriel Hartl. Together, these investigations brought forth many previously unknown facts concerning the original competition for the synagogue's design from 1928.

Even before the start of research, it was known that participants in the competition included Josef Hoffmann, the founder of Viennese Secessionism and Lipót Baumhorn, one of the most prolific synagogue designers in Central Europe. Alongside the young Slovak-based architects Michal Maximilián Scheer and Josef Zweigenthal, these participants submitted a greatly contrasting

spectrum of designs reflecting the variety of the era's views on architectural work, from highly traditional forms to the most daringly modern concepts. However, the Jewish community of Žilina had, in fact, opened the competition precisely because it wished to replace the original historicist architecture of the earlier synagogue from 1861 with a new – progressive – design. As such, Behrens's design was the clear favorite. Indeed, it speaks eloquently of the wider cultural atmosphere in interwar Žilina that, even though we could not necessarily regard the town as a center of modern architecture and art in a European or even a broader regional context, it was one of the few localities in Slovakia where the economic prosperity of the first Czechoslovak Republic was reflected in the era's cultural life: both the decision of the Jewish community to hold a competition for a new synagogue and the competition's final result are clear proof.

Still, all of the reflections on the possibilities of approaching the restoration of the synagogue developed, in the light of newly uncovered information of the building's history, with great caution. As well, there was also the factor of our knowledge of the building's connection to the tragic fates of Žilina's Jewish citizens under Nazi rule, as well as the no less dramatic changes of the Stalinist 1950s. The assumption that after the removal of the hooding there would be still further discoveries that would reveal more about the structure and historical trajectory of the synagogue was confirmed. Further, and highly essential information was provided with the discovery of the building's original plans⁶.

Initiating the revitalization of the synagogue

In 2010, when the cinema operating inside the synagogue closed, representatives of the Jewish community addressed the civic association Truc Sphérique and Marek Adamov, who along with Fedor Blaščák served as chief initiator of the New Synagogue project. Previously, his association had created the Stanica cultural center, a successful transformation of a disused rail station in a former industrial suburb of Žilina. Almost immediately, the plan emerged to transform the synagogue into a "Kunsthalle". Confirmation was shown by the strong desire to bring the synagogue more prominently into the cultural life of the town and further stimulate it, since, after all, the building is situated in an ideal location for such a purpose. As Matúš Dulla noted in 2004, the site where the synagogue stands is directly within the section at the terrace-break in the town center, close to the former fortifications, which essentially



04 Peter Behrens, the New Synagogue, Žilina, Slovakia, 1931. The interior after conversion into the lecture hall of the Technical Institute of Transportation and Communications. © *Vysoká škola dopravy a spojov v Žiline, výsledky výchovno-vzdelávacej a vedecko-výskumnej činnosti*, Osveta, Bratislava, 1988, 39.



05 Peter Behrens, the New Synagogue, Žilina, Slovakia, 1931. Reconstruction of the interior by Half-white method. © Dalibor Adamus.

created Žilina's own "Ringstrasse" and, at the time when the New Synagogue was completed, could boast a series of important buildings, even notably modern ones⁷. The one disadvantage of the site was its irregular outline, yet Peter Behrens was able to handle this problem with sovereign mastery.

Initially, two main traditional methods of restoring the synagogue offered themselves: the "academic" restoration of the original form, or the deliberate intervention into the space using contemporary architecture. As it happened, both of these variants turned out to prove unworkable, even though it would have in fact been simpler to choose only one of them. To start, there was the fact that the space had not served its original purpose for several decades, and secondarily beforehand something had been "inserted", inspired the eventual choice of the second alternative. Architect Martin Jančok created the first study for this in 2011. On one hand, the space was cleansed of its interior cladding, thus exposing the cupola as the decisive emotive element of the main space, yet on the other it received inserted communication ramps running along the perimeter. The architect presented his plans in spring 2012 during one seminar in the series *(Re)Thinking Architecture: The Modern and the Totalitarian in Žilina's 20th-Century Architecture*, organized by the Department of Architecture at the Institute of Construction and Architecture of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, which also forms the core of the Slovak working group for **docomomo**. Participants included a number of experts who, from this point, expressed their views on the entire restoration process up until its completion in 2017.

To ensure the continuation of regular meetings between experts – theorists, heritage officials and the restoration's authors – an "Expert Committee for the restoration of the Behrens Synagogue" was created.

Questions and themes for discussion were more than ample, as the preliminary restoration investigation began to add further perspective to the findings of the architectural-historical investigation. Exchanging opinions, experience and knowledge among the various professions gradually broke down the conviction that it would be justified to bring something new into Behrens's architecture. Martin Jančok himself eventually admitted that "all the essential architecture is there already"⁸. As the views on the restoration began to move in a different direction, the idea of a traditional restoration of the synagogue into the form of a museum-monument nonetheless was never voiced by any of the authors.

Adaptability, as the basic feature of modernist architecture, remained the greatest priority even in the formulation of the restoration philosophy that the architects aimed to create. The cleansed main space with its now-exposed cupola was divided horizontally on a principle known under the working title *half-white*: essentially, the upper section of the space was restored to its original coloring, while the ground level was covered in plain white paint to create a neutral background for exhibitions. However, the restoration of the original plastering in the upper section of the main space became, alongside the discussion on the reconstruction of the space's original orientation or the return of the Star of David to the roof, one of the most controversial and widely discussed stages of the work. The entire span of cleaning the stucco from the overpainting dating from the socialist realist era, and then the late 1960s and early 1970s, took place much more authentic traces of the synagogue's former decoration, as well as appearing less aggressive. quickly than had been assumed. In July 2013, an international workshop was held, during which Polish and Slovak

restorers, guided by Ivan Pilný, removed the secondary paint layers. Laboratory analyses for the restoration research were undertaken by Daniela Cebcauerová. It was discovered that the Star of David adorning the cupola was originally realized using the technique of metal gilding on a base of ochre paint. Reconstructed on the basis of one surviving photograph, it was retouched using partially transparent ochre paint. Also restored were the bands of color along the walls below the cupola: here, the depth of color was muted after completion, so that the bands of paint would give the impression of forming authentic traces of the synagogue's former decoration, as well as appearing less aggressive.

People and financing

The contribution of volunteers to the restoration was strongly evident for the entire process, and not only in the introductory stage during the "denuding" of the interior space of its hooding. Though volunteer work in heritage restoration is not a new phenomenon for Slovakia – in previous years it has occurred primarily in cleaning and preserving less-accessible castle ruins – it had never occurred on such a scale for a modern landmark of the significance of Peter Behrens's synagogue. For this reason, the coordination of volunteer labor was, at the beginning, the most demanding organizational task of restoration, and its rules and guidelines were created only as it proceeded.

A second vital aspect of restoration was its financing from a wide range of sources. When, at first, the organizers failed to ensure a sufficient quantity of funds from the available grant programs, they announced a public funding drive. In parallel, additional resources were offered by smaller grants or sponsorship donations. Within time, a grant was offered from the Norwegian Funds,



06 Peter Behrens, the New Synagogue, Žilina, Slovakia, 1931. Synagogue today. © Daniela Dostálková.

which secured the completion of architectural restoration in its fullest extent, including the synagogue's exterior surroundings with their public gathering space and the landscaping of the plot. Indeed, the greatest single source of financing was in fact the Norwegian Funds. In total over one million Euro were invested in the restoration. And, regardless of the amount contributed, all donors had their names commemorated in the New Synagogue in a highly original way: composer Marek Piaček created a musical work mentioning the names of over 2800 donors, which is played on speakers within the building's walls. A visitor can hear it by placing an ear to the wall surface, or by purchasing a vinyl disc as a souvenir. In addition, Piaček's composition was performed in an open concert in May of 2017.

The system of combining multi-source financing and volunteer labor created a kind of community of "synagogue-rescuers" of almost three thousand members. As such, it raised awareness in the public about the importance of the building's restoration, and its recalling one of the major historic eras in the 20th century, not only for Žilina, but indeed all of Slovakia. Starting in the spring of 2012, this effort was aided by the first public opening of the synagogue, displaying two site-specific installations by the young artists András Cséfalvay and Jakub Pišek⁹. There then followed an entire series of brief openings for various concerts, workshops, children's events or even a Christmas market. Behind all of these short-term openings was the desire to maintain regular contact of the public with the synagogue during the restoration process, allowing them to experience how – literally in front of their eyes – the original form of the synagogue interior was gradually starting to re-emerge. Moreover, the

short-term openings also served as preliminary tests of the space for various uses and the differing demands that they proposed.

The finale

The approach, organization, expert guidance and actual restoration, along of course with the development presented by the central architectural idea of chief architect Martin Jančok, all attracted great public attention for several years. And in the end, the restoration of the New Synagogue won an impressive series of awards: the Bauwelt architectural prize in Germany, the Orange Foundation prize for community development, and the special Patron of Architecture award of the Slovak architectural prize CE.ZA.AR. In 2018, the New Synagogue was included in the selection of works published in the *Architecture Yearbook 2016/2017*, reflecting the most worthwhile architectural achievements of the given year in Slovakia, including heritage restorations¹⁰.

Since May 2017, the New Synagogue has been open and is fully involved in presenting its new program. Officially, the restoration is complete, yet the adaptability of the synagogue, creating its ever-changing visual environment and inviting creative work with its space, will certainly keep surprising us again and again in the future.

Acknowledgement

The text was made possible also through the financial support of the Slovak scientific agency (project no. VEGA-2/0074/17) and the Slovak Research and Development Agency (project no. APVV-16-0584).

Notes

- 1 Peter Szalay, "New Practice? On the Process of Preservation of Peter Behrens's synagogue in Žilina", in Ana Tostões, Zara Ferreira (ed.), *Adaptive Reuse. The Modern Movement towards the*

Future, Lisboa, Docomomo International/Casa da Arquitectura, 2016, 871.

- 2 Henrieta Moravčíková used in connection with this type of renovation the phrase *opera aperta*: restoration as open work. Henrieta Moravčíková, "Reuse as Activism: Towards Hybrid Strategies of Curating and Preservation of Modern Architectural Heritage", in Ana Tostões, Zara Ferreira (ed.), *op. cit.*, 868-870.
- 3 The partially destroyed landmark was an interwar building designed by the Czech architects Alois Balán and Jiří Grossmann: The Health Insurance Office and medical clinic in Bezručova Ulica in Bratislava. For unknown reasons, the Bratislava heritage office approved the demolition of this structure as a legitimate method of restoration, even though the building was otherwise in good physical condition.
- 4 For more detail about the circumstances of the change in the orientation of the space see Magdaléna Kvasnicová, *Synagoga, Hurbanova 11, Žilina - architektonicko - historický výskum*, Bratislava, 2011.
- 5 Pavel Gregor, "Pamiatkové hodnoty modernej architektúry v štruktúre bodnôt architektonického dedičstva", *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*, n. 3-4, 2010, 221.
- 6 The original plans were found in the archive of architect Lubomír Šlapeta, the author of the plan for reconstructing the synagogue as a concert hall and are part of the architectural collection of the Museum of Art in Olomouc. For more about the find, see Peter Szalay, "Behrens pod povrchom – reštaurátorský výskum Neologickéj synagogy v Žiline", *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*, n. 1-2, 2013, 84-105.
- 7 Matúš Dulla, "Posledná synagoga: vznik a podoba synagogy neológov v Žiline od Petra Behrensa", *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*, n. 3-4, ÚSTARCH SAV, Bratislava, 2004, 205.
- 8 <http://www.novasyntagoga.sk/rekonstrukcia>, accessed on 24-05-2018.
- 9 Peter Szalay, "Behrens pod povrchom – reštaurátorský výskum Neologickéj synagogy v Žiline", *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*, n. 1-2, 2013, 98.
- 10 Katarína Haberlandová, "Nová synagoga/The New Synagogue", in Henrieta Moravčíková, Peter Szalay, Katarína Haberlandová, Laura Pastoreková, Martin Zaiček, *Ročenka slovenskej architektúry 2016/2017 - Slovak Architecture Yearbook 2016/2017*, Bratislava, Slovart, 2018, 52-57.

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(b. Bratislava, 1973). A graduate of the Department of Art History and Theory at the Faculty of Arts in Olomouc. She is now a researcher at the Department of Architecture in the History Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. She is the co-author of a wide range of publications in the field of 20th century architectural history in Slovakia, as well as heritage protection for modernist and industrial structures: *Bratislava- Atlas of Housing Estates* (Slovart, 2012), *Modern and/or Totalitarian in the Architecture of the 20th Century in Slovakia* (Slovart, 2013), *Moderná Bratislava* (PT Marenčin, 2014), *Industrial Heritage in the Eyes of Professionals/Participants: Theory and Methodology for Protection of Industrial Heritage in the Context of Bratislava* (STU, 2016). At present, she is involved in projects investigating the development of urban planning in Bratislava over the course of the 20th century.