



Zdeněk Říhák, Panorama Hotel, Štrbské Pleso, 1967–1970. © Juraj Bobula.

Building High Tatras: dilemma of form Architecture of 1960s and 1970s in the most famous Slovak mountain resort

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The High Tatra Mountains are the most prominent alpine center of recreation and sport in Slovakia. The development of this site dates back to the end of the 19th century. From the architectural point of view, the beginning of the 20th century, the 1920s, the 1930s and the post-war period of the 1960s and the 1970s should be considered the most interesting periods. At that time, the most important architectural works were created in the High Tatras, which in different ways dealt with the fundamental question: how to build in the mountains? Through the built results achieved in the region, it is now possible to study the success of this discussion.

Tourism in High Tatras

The High Tatra Mountains became a center of mass tourism in the 1960s similar to other European mountain resorts. At that time, Czechoslovak society was strongly influenced by the optimistic acceptance of the reforms of state policy. The standard of living of most Czechoslovak citizens gradually improved. In 1968 Czechoslovakia introduced Free Saturday and the number of legally guaranteed holidays was increased. Leisure became an important phenomenon for individuals and for state organizations as well, especially the socialist trade union, or so-called Revolutionary Trade Union, which incorporated the leisure and recreation of working people into its main agenda. However, the citizens of socialist Czechoslovakia, like most of the inhabitants of the Eastern bloc, could not choose their holiday destination freely. They had to restrict themselves to friendly socialist nations or settle for a holiday in their own country, which was the most convenient solution from a financial point of view. For this reason, the Czechoslovak government initiated an evaluation of potential tourist destinations, which eventuated in the so-called "Zoning of the Czechoslovak tourism". The High Tatras, probably the smallest alpine area in Europe with peaks of a maximum height of 2,655 meters, was considered one of the most attractive holiday destinations in Czechoslovakia. In the official zoning framework, the Tatras were Type IV — Alpine resort of tourism and winter sports. Design of any new developments would have to be adequate for this category.

However, it was not the first time that the High Tatras were the center of interest for tourism. Already in the late 19th century the mountains had been the favorite spa of the Hungarian nobility, the bourgeoisie and the intellectual elite of the country. Even when tuberculosis treatment

centers for a broader audience were established in the High Tatras in the 1930s, exclusive sanatoria and small hotels predominated in the resort until the end of the 1940s. In the beginning of the development of tourism in the area, hiking and winter sports had been performed only by the upper middle class and intelligentsia. The High Tatras had been a fashionable place, where the rich and the bohemians spent their holidays. After the nationalization of private property in 1948 the situation changed dramatically. The sanatoria and hotels were opened for the broad audience of the working class. To be on holidays in the High Tatras became a fabled goal for most of the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Hungary and Poland. It was understandable as they were the only accessible alpine resort for the people from the Communist bloc. However, the original exclusive character of the High Tatras that were reminiscent of the interwar period was not compatible with the idea of a modern socialistic resort. It would have to be replaced by the collective spirit and at the least by a declared egalitarianism. Also the international character of the resort's original architecture was perceived as not compatible with the idea of the legendary role of the High Tatras in Slovak national mythology. The High Tatra Mountains were considered the symbol of Slavic pride and strength and, therefore, for political and state reasons, it was decided to give them not only a popular but a national touch. These ambitions dominated the conception of the High Tatras development until the 1980s. Facilities for mass and collective recreation arose as an antithesis to the original building tradition in these mountains. Among them were luxury hotels, mostly of high quality architecture, designed for foreigners and the communist oligarchy, Revolutionary Trade Union sanatoria of a lower standard

01 Eugen Kramár, Ján Šprlák-Uličný, Judge's Tower in the ski resort, Štrbské Pleso, 1966–1970. © Rajmund Müller.



but still good architecture, and holiday homes of a low standard and low quality of architecture built by diverse state enterprises. This type of construction was accompanied by health-resorts and convalescent homes financed by the public health sector with lower budgets but of interesting architecture. A special chapter of building development in the High Tatras for individual recreation started to occupy the lower meadows during the heyday of chalets.

World Skiing Championships

The era of political and social reforms and warming of relations between West and East in the 1960s brought to the High Tatras new challenges in the form of big international sport events. The first of them was the World Skiing Championship which, paradoxically, took place in 1970, at the onset of the era of normalization that followed the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1968. Nevertheless, preparations for the event had already started in the late 1960s and they influenced the architecture of the High Tatras decisively. On one hand, the newest trends in building sport and accommodation facilities were introduced and on the other, the new construction represented intense development that displayed less respect to the natural features. New hotels, shopping centers, apartment blocks, new cableways, sport areas and infrastructure were built. With a total of thirty-five built structures, the World Skiing Championships should be considered the beginning of the era of mass tourism in the High Tatras. Whilst, in the 1950s, around 20,000 visited the Tatra Mountains, in 1970 it was 500,000, and four million visitors a year in the 1980s.

The High Tatras have been a protected national park since 1949, where economic activities could not be realized, and construction regulations barely existed. The increased exploitation of the area by tourism and sports placed an extreme burden on the environment, which, in 1974, resulted in a tightening of protection measures, entry bans or seasonal inaccessibility of certain locations.

The main championship grounds were built at Štrbské Pleso, the highest Tatra settlement. Already the name of the grounds — the Dreamland — indicated the ambitions associated with it. This was also reflected in the architecture of sports facilities (rides of all classic ski disciplines with an amphitheater auditorium, stands for 25,000 spectators, two ski jumps, and a judges' tower) and a hotel that were built between 1967–1970. The authors of the architectural design were Eugen Kramár (1914–1996) and Ján Šprlák-Uličný (1933–1993). At the foot of Solisko Peak they formed a group of fashionable architectural objects of abstract form and dynamic shaping. Their volumes were kept in proportions that the natural environment did not control but complemented. The architect, Eugen Kramár, himself summarized the principles of creation in the High Tatras in the year of the center's completion as follows:

So how to build in the Tatras? With traditional technology... from the materials closest to nature, the site of their own, to complement the dynamics of natural stone with dematerialized glass surfaces and overhanging structures¹.

He used the very same principles when working in other Tatra resorts such as the Čedok travel agency office in Starý Smokovec (1967) or the Eurocamp grounds in Tatranská Lomnica (together with Alexander Valentovič, Arnošt Mitske, Peter Csellágh and Mária Krukovská [b. 1930], in 1974) that were designed for the international meeting of the *Fédération Internationale de Camping, Caravanning et de Autocaravaning*, (FICC'74). It is exactly these buildings that are the most successful works of post-war architecture in the Tatras region.

But let's go back to the sporting struggles of the World Skiing Championships, which are not only written into their history through their architecture, but also as a manifestation of national cohesion and pride. The highlights of the event included ski jumping. At that time, 100,000 spectators were cheering for Jiří Rašek (1941–2012) the Czechoslovak favorite, under the spectacular ski-jump ramp. The fact that he finished second behind the representative of the Soviet Union was more than characteristic of the period shortly after the occupation.

Dreamland has long been a sought-after place for sporting events and recreation, but its maintenance has been minimal. When the tourist industry in the High Tatras was dampened in the 1990s and the Slovak sports associations were unable to obtain any relevant international sporting event for the resort, Dreamland began to deteriorate. Even the privatization of the facilities over the past decades has not brought the necessary investments to prevent the devastation of this extraordinary location². New private owners are mostly interested in new developments and not in improvement of the old structures.

Building Boom

Building of sport and recreation facilities in the High Tatra Mountains represented great a challenge for Slovak society. Especially in the sense of harmonizing often opposing

interests. Environmentalists and architects have tried to enforce the modern principles of building regulations and the planning of the region in the Tatras. The first general plan of the area, the “district plan”, was approved in 1959. It specified the allocation of the built structures, their functions and the system of traffic, which was based on the high-speed Allweg. However, the rate of building, height and shape of the new built-up areas remain unregulated despite the state interests having been clearly expressed. The accommodation capacities that had to be achieved in the High Tatras were set in the five-year economic plans. The required number of beds was still growing. For example, in 1968, the state authorities demanded a doubling of the accommodation capacity, despite the fact that the transport situation was not addressed at all and the 1911 electric railway, along with the increasing number of passenger cars, still transported visitors to the Tatras instead of the planned Allweg. The Slovak government committee for tourism also sought to address the increasingly complex situation by examining foreign experiences. In the 1970s a trip to the Italian, French and Swiss Alpine resorts was organized by the committee and some architects were invited to take part as well. Despite an idealistic determination to avoid the mistakes and adopt the good practices of foreign resorts, the architects’ objections to mass tourism in the High Tatras did not find any response. Their role was thus limited to shaping the requirements of increasing volumes. In the High Tatras, too many national interests were simply pursued. The mountains were to be everything to everyone, a national symbol, a recreation center for workers, a center for international sport, a source of foreign income, and the highest-situated scientific workplace in the country.

Dilemma of Form

Large volumes, a demand for a regional expression, and their own creative ambitions have put architects in front of the dilemma of the formal design of alpine architecture. Although the controversy over how to build in the Tatras has been going on since the 1930s, it intensified in the 1960s and the 1970s when they built most of the accommodation and infrastructure in the Tatras. The architects were divided into supporters of mountain architecture *à la chalet* and advocates of nature-contrasting abstract forms³. Thus, in the architecture of the High Tatras, there were two competing lines of shaping form. One line advocated an abstract, functional and modern technology-based form that contrasted with the surrounding nature with smooth façades, flat roofs and modern materials. In this line, architecture was part of a new perspective on the landscape, as a source of healthy air, sun and eye-catching appearance. Its perceptions were also adapted to its formal side — large glass surfaces, terraces, pavilion-like or at least structured buildings, modern materials and construction, and mostly flat roofs. The second line followed the local or mountain tradition of building. It was conditioned by solid compact forms, traditional materials such as stone and wood, traditional construction (initially true, later on only pretend) and, of course, a sloping roof that eventually became a neuralgic point of

Tatra architecture. In connection with the architecture of the High Tatras, it should be remembered that these settlements were established in a territory that did not have a tradition of original settlement. Before the construction of the first recreational and therapeutic homes there were no traces of rural occupation, nor even individual houses. Settlement was concentrated on the foothills of the mountains and only the pastures and shelters of shepherds and hunters were at the levels of the present settlement chain. The absence of a specific model of previous architecture made it impossible to build on local patterns but also to parody them, as was so often the case in the Alps. In the Tatras, it was basically always a matter of transforming current architectural trends into the mountain landscape or importing traditional forms from another environment⁴. The two lines mentioned were only seemingly contradictory as, in fact, they represented only two variants of one trend, the import of foreign patterns into the High Tatras.

However, the question of “how to build in the Tatras” was not about finding a national or regional style, as was the case in the nearby Zakopane on the Polish side of the High Tatra Mountains. There, Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851–1915), the most prominent representative of Polish regionalism, implemented several architectural works at the beginning of the 20th century, which later served as the basis for local tradition. However, German or Hungarian architects, who were the first to build in the Slovak part of the Tatras, had no ambition to create regional specific forms. Mostly, they took the timber frame construction architecture of the Alpine resorts as a model. Only occasionally did works based on the tradition of folk architecture of northern Slovakia appear. Examples were the chapel of St. Salvatore in Dolný Smokovec (1890) and Téry’s Cottage in the Little Cold Valley (1899) from a native of nearby Spišská Sobota, Gedeon Majunke (1854–1921), or the Hohenlohe hunting lodge in Javorina (1897) by Anton Müller (1848–1932). Functionalist architects who, through their works, entered the image of the Tatras after 1918, drew inspiration from completely different sources than national or regional, nor did they seek to respond to such topics. The only exception was Dušan Jurkovič (1868–1947). He, like Stanisław Witkiewicz, had the ambition to create a regional architecture in the High Tatras. He used not only his own experience with building in the country and state-of-the-art technologies, but also the spirit of this unique place in the design of the cable car stations at Tatranská Lomnica and Lomnický štít (1936–1938). The impressive stone structures are today one of the most authentic contributions to the autochthonous architecture of the High Tatra Mountains. Dušan Jurkovič’s attempt, however, remained without followers.

The mythical role of the Tatras as a national symbol began to be reflected in the local architecture, also under the influence of state ideology, only after WWII. Among the first works that transformed the forms of traditional folk buildings of northern Slovakia was the mountain hotel near Popradské Pleso (Ladislav Bauer, Ferdinand Čapka, 1957–1963). The timber-construction, with its rugged saddle roof, dormers and shingle roofing, is



successful architecture despite the large capacity of 130 beds. It is mainly due to the happily chosen proportion between the roof and the body of the building. Regional motifs, this time of the Spiš Renaissance, found their place in the building of the municipal office in Starý Smokovec (Viktor Malinovský, 1957). The fact that they were also conditioned to some extent by the method of the socialist realism does not degrade the value of this cultivated traditional architecture.

In the same period also emerged works in the High Tatras where architects declared some form of dialogue with the principles of functionalism. Indeed, the functionalist avant-garde has left a number of excellent inspirational impulses in the Tatra settlements. Again, abstraction, technological innovation and experimentation appeared. Thus, both forms of design could fully develop. The ROH convalescent house in Monkova Valley with a capacity of 140 beds (Soňa Kvasničková, Lumír Lýsek [b. 1934], Lýdia Švihrová [b. 1935], between 1958–1964) was a revolutionary building in this sense. Architects, still students at the time of the project, created an asymmetric composition of several volumes, emphasizing abstract forms and distancing themselves from folk or historical patterns.

In a relatively happy period at the beginning of the 1960s, several buildings were built, which represented an excellent basis for further construction. Regardless of their architectural form, they were characterized by respect for demanding climatic conditions, responsible handling of construction and technology, and the use of traditional craft details. It is these qualities that have kept them in a relatively good technical condition to this day.

The growing demand for accommodation in the High Tatras at the end of the 1960s caused the dilemma of the form to be reflected in volumes that were almost double that of the previous ones. Efforts for regional forms have led to the hypertrophy of traditional shapes. There were saddle roofs covering 12-storey buildings and their endless lines competing with the panorama of the surrounding mountains, as can be seen in one of the most luxurious facilities of that time — *Hotel Patria* at Štrbské Pleso (by Zdeňek Řihák [1924–2006], between 1968–1976). At that time, the professional press showed doubts not only about “using this shape (sloping roofs) to cover a 12-storey building”, but also about using elements of timber buildings that “seem false, making them a cheap fashion effect”⁵. Efforts to convey the impression of traditional folk architecture were also reflected in

the interiors of recreational facilities where “Slovak restaurants” in the form of cottages with artefacts that were reminiscent of the pastoral past of the Tatras were created.

The size of the required volumes forced architects to reach for extreme solutions. A number of modern accommodation, sports facilities and service facilities that were created in connection with the World Skiing Championships have also been criticized. Probably the most significant local critic of architecture of that period, Martin Kusý (1916–1989), evaluated them as a failure, which “failed to tighten either the detail, the concept, or the quality of their realization to the level of the world average”. According to him, construction was “marked by haste and makeshift”. He was also not convinced by

*fashionable forms, whether round or pyramidal, in any case without the details of high mountainous harsh conditions as well as without considering the urban landscape consequences*⁶.

However, the works of autonomous abstract forms did not avoid criticism either. The stylized pyramid of *Hotel Panoráma* at Štrbské Pleso (by Zdeňek Řihák, 1967–1970) and the circular *Hotel Park* in Nový Smokovec (by Igor Svoboda, 1966–1969) have been blamed for

*using too many diverse materials and shapes, which produce only architecture for architecture's sake, not being functionally and climatically justified and revealing only the efforts of the authors' self-realization*⁷.

Similar reservations were raised about the last remarkable work of Tatra architecture of that period, the recreation facility of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in Tatranská Javorina (Štefan Svetko [1926–2009], Štefan Ďurkovič [1929–2009], Julián Hauskrecht, František Husovský, between 1975–1977). The dilemma of the form of alpine architecture was solved there in a way typical for those architects: they enclosed the large volumes of the building into powerful figures in the shape of horizontal cylindrical segments.

The professional community may have best accepted more reserved forms that followed the era of the Tatras functionalist architecture. As Jaroslav Vitek (1930–2008), an influential architect of that time and himself the author of several healthcare facilities, emphasized:

*... typical mountain roofs, shapes and materials are not always decisive for successful integration of architecture into the mountain landscape, but also — or above all — the location, scale and discreetness*⁸.

His words were directed towards the sanatorium *Helios* at Štrbské Pleso (by Richard Pastor, 1967–1975), which was one of the highest rated works of that time. The gently modelled ground plan curve of this rather extensive building seems to paraphrase the Alvar Aalto (1898–1976) aesthetics of the legendary vase or the ground plan of the Baker House dormitory at Massachusetts Institute of

- 03** Štefan Svetko, Štefan Ďurkovič, Julián Hauskrecht, František Husovský, Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's recreation facility, Tatranská Javorina, 1975–1977. © Rajmund Müller.



- 04** Richard Pastor, Helios Sanatorium, Štrbské Pleso, 1967–1975. © Rajmund Müller.



- 05** Oľga Ondreičková, Post office and Telecommunications building, Štrbské Pleso, 1969–1970. © Rajmund Müller.



- 06** Milan Krejčí, Gas station, Nový Smokovec, 1966. © *Projekt* 1967, No. 3, 75.

Technology (MIT), Cambridge Massachusetts. This attested to the lessons learned by Slovak architects from their contacts with Finnish architecture. Similarly, the technicist architecture of the telecommunications building at Štrbské Pleso (by Oľga Ondreičková [b. 1935], between 1969–1970) also received a positive response. Both of these projects were created outside the generously funded tourism sector — one in the healthcare sector and the other in transport and communications — and clearly showed that for the improvement of the values of Tatra architecture not the finances but the architect's ability to deal with this challenging task was crucial.

The helplessness of the domestic architectural scene in relation to the question of how to build in the Tatras was also confirmed by the discussion in the late 1970s, in which architects stated that “in the Tatra Mountains should be no experimentation” and that “small objects should clearly have a sloping roof” while large volumes not. Paradoxically, they also agreed that “half-timbered architecture does not belong to the High Tatras” (although it was the first one there) and that, while respecting local materials, it is possible to “cope with the tradition of Tatra folk architecture” [sic], even if that never existed. The atmosphere of the time was characterized by the vague final statement of one of the protagonists: “Construction must be of a unified nature, corresponding to the alpine environment and to the purpose of the building”. The general disappointment over the results of the construction in High Tatras led, at the end of the 1980s, to the belief that “the 20th anniversary of the beginning of construction in the Tatras must become its conclusion”⁹.

No or new dilemmas

Looking back at the architecture of the 1960s and 1970s in the High Tatras shows that, as in other Alpine resorts, its biggest problem was the uncritical pressure to constantly increase accommodation capacities in the absence of any functioning building regulations. Unlike most European resorts, however, in the Tatras at that time the decadent taste of the average visitor could be avoided. At the time, the Tatras still avoided the “uniform regionalist kitsch”, which Friedrich Achleitner (1930–2019) writes about in connection with Austrian Alpine architecture¹⁰. Thus, in the international context, the Tatra architecture of the 1960s and 1970s represents a unique phenomenon of concentrated and, with its aesthetics and individual authorial performances, a remarkable effort. However, the imperfection of the then construction industry, ignorance or overlooking the challenging climatic conditions, coupled with the experimentation of architectural form, have made these exceptional works often problematic buildings. The Tatra architecture of the 1960s and 1970s is, in most cases, in very bad technical condition, very energy-demanding and, therefore, expensive and unpopular with the owners. As a result, massive remodeling is devaluing the original extraordinary creative and imaginative forms. The famous Bellevue Hotel in Horný Smokovec (by Karol Király, 1965–1968), which appeared in several films of that time, was converted into a conventional form, removing all the original elements

of Brussels style. The survival of the most valued Tatra work of the second half of the 20th century, the *Helios* sanatorium, is in the balance with a central section on the verge of collapse. Another symbol of the Brussels Dream, a gas station in Nový Smokovec (Milan Krejčí, 1966), has already met that fate. It was demolished at the beginning of the 21st century and replaced with a standardized facility. The unique Eurocamp area could also not avoid demolition. Its ruins, as a glamorous memento, have welcomed the visitors to Tatranská Lomnica since Fall 2010. Other high-quality 20th century architectural works in the High Tatras have been altered into cheap imitations of Alpine chalets and timber-constructions. The decadent taste of the *nouveau riche* and the “uniform regionalist kitsch” is decisive for private investors who have controlled the region since the late 1990s. Unfortunately, the architectural form is today in the High Tatra Mountains not a dilemma.

However, the pressure of capital and the weak position of official institutions, including the Monuments Board, is mobilizing more and more representatives of the professional community, including **docomomo** Slovakia, and local activists. They strive to popularize this vast architectural heritage to the general public. It is obvious that only with the public's support can remarkable works of modern architecture in the High Tatras be maintained for future generations.

Notes

- 1 Eugen Kramár, “Architektúra v Tatrách”, *Projekt* 12, 1970, No. 5–6, 223.
- 2 Hotel FIS and the sport facilities of Dreamland have been listed since 2004 in the **docomomo** International Register. **docomomo** Slovakia, *Architektúra & urbanizmus* 40, 2006, No. 3–4, xv.
- 3 See for example Lumír Lýsek, “Keď logika podporí invenciu”, *Projekt* xx, 1978, No. 4, 8.
- 4 Matúš Dulla directed the attention to the International Nature of Tatra Architecture. “Dvesto rokov našej tatranskej architektúry — kruh sa uzatvára?” [Twenty Years of Our Tatra Architecture — Is the Circle Closing?], *Projekt* xxxi, 1989, No. 3, 6.
- 5 Pavol Merjavý, “Hotel Patria”, *Projekt* xx, 1978, No. 9–10, 18.
- 6 Martin Kusý, *Architektúra na Slovensku 1945–1975* [Architecture in Slovakia 1945–1975], Bratislava 1976, s. 224.
- 7 Merjavý, op.cit., 18.
- 8 Jaroslav Vítek, “Rozhoduje poloha, mierka, nevtieravosť” [It is the position, scale, discreetness that decides], *Projekt* xx, 1978, No. 9–10, 14.
- 9 “Ako stavať v Tatrách? Beseda”. [How to build in Tatras? Discussion], *Projekt* 20, 1978, No. 9–10, 48–52.
- 10 Friedrich Achleitner, *Region, ein Konstrukt? Regionalismus, eine Pleite? Basel* [Region, a construct? Regionalism, a bankruptcy?], Birkhäuser Basel, 1997, 113–126.

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