

Residence: Prefab Estate; Plans, Realization, Housing 1945-1989

Exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague
Prague, Czech Republic, 24 January – 20 May 2018

In his book *The Magic of Thinking Big* (1959), David Schwartz argues that for successful implementation of ideas it is important “to see what can be, not just what already is”. It was precisely this attitude that could be distinguished behind the original idea of mass housing and the idealistic view of completely changed living conditions of the people and of a new society encouraged the immense amount of mass housing on Europe. It was again thinking big that motivated the initiators of the extensive research project *Prefabricated Housing Estates in the Czech Republic as Part of the Urban Environment: An Evaluation and Presentation of Their Housing and Living Potential*. The project was implemented by the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague in the years 2013–2017 and its participants included three dozen historians of architecture and arts, urbanists and architects, journalists, photographers, a culture theorist, a social geographer, an anthropologist and a demographer. The research resulted in three extensive books, a website with an archive, a map capturing selected residential complexes in the form of a digital atlas, and an exhibition that was held from January 24 till May 20, 2018 at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.

In the past decade, the heritage of European mass housing has become the subject of architectonic and historical research and a theme of a whole range of conferences, journal articles and book titles. It is a phenomenon that remarkably interconnects the European continent, even crossing the former Iron Curtain. It is the European dimension of the reflection on mass housing and the fact that it was conducted in the united European cultural space that enables identifying the common starting points of mass housing development, comparing its development trajectories in the former Western and Eastern Blocs, and revealing the universal spatial or operational models of housing estates as well as the differences in construction technology and the social context of the estates. All contemporary researchers agree that the ideas of the interwar European architectonic *avant-garde*

were the decisive impulse for postwar industrialized housing development. However, the researchers also wanted to identify the local impulses and specifics of this phenomenon.

This effort was pioneered by **docomomo** International, especially its committee on urbanism and landscape, which initiated the first *Trash or Treasure* conference addressing the theme of mass housing development as a potential issue. In 2008, a thematic issue of the *docomomo Journal* with the title *Mass Housing East and West* was published. In September 2011, the *Postwar Mass Housing International Conference* was held at the University of Edinburgh, followed by the monothematic issue of the magazine *Architektúra & Urbanizmus* 3–4/2012, which introduced multiple European research initiatives. Finally, two more thematic issues of the *docomomo Journal* – 2/2014 and 1/2016 presented the latest research on mass housing in a worldwide context.

However, there were even earlier publications with the ambition of mapping the development of postwar mass housing. The majority of them were in the form of guides

or atlases. The very first publication of this kind was probably *The Amsterdam Social Housing Atlas* (Architecture & Natura Press, 1992). Two years later, Stefan Muthesius and Miles Glendinning published a similar title including 400,000 realizations of postwar social housing development in the UK (*Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, Yale University Press, 1994). The history of the French grand estates was presented by Frédéric Dufaux, Annie Fourcaut and Rémi Skoutelsky's book *Faire l'histoire des grands ensembles. Bibliographie 1950–1980* (ENS Éditions, 2003). This approach was taken up in mapping mass housing developments in Slovakia's capital *Bratislava: Atlas of Mass Housing* (Slovart, 2011), which was the very first publication of this kind in Eastern Europe. However, the immediate predecessor of the recently concluded Czech project was Kimberly Zarecor's research, which resulted in the book *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).

The big exhibition

Residence: Prefab Estate; Plans, Realization, Housing 1945–1989 was an extensive and thematically exhaustive exhibition. The main line provided a chronological record of the development of ideas concerning the construction of large residential structures. It started with the ideological prehistory in the form of the renowned analysis of the housing situation in the first Czechoslovak Republic by Jiří Kroha and ended with a critical reflection on prefab estates and an attempt at their humanization in the form of the architectonic exhibition *Urbanita* organized



01 The first room of the exhibition was devoted to the starting points of the prefabricated mass housing in Czechoslovakia. The very famous sociological analysis of the housing conditions by Jiří Kroha was included in the form of the original collages. © Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, Photo: Ondřej Kocourek.



02 Each period of the history of Czech mass housing was illustrated not only by the original drawings, models and photographs but also by the elements of the interior design of the time. © Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, Photo: Ondřej Kocourek.



03 Most fascinating was the part devoted to the prefabricated estates built in 1960s and 1970s, so call "beautiful estates" representing the qualitative peak in the development of mass housing in post-war Czechoslovakia. © Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, Photo: Ondřej Kocourek.

by the journal *Technický Magazín* [Technical Magazine] in the late 1980s. The individual chapters of the exhibition followed the periodization of the construction of housing estates, which was identified and described in the accompanying monograph by the project investigators. The periodization was accurately explained by the brief introductory characteristics accompanied by a time axis, which enabled situating each housing development within a broader social context. This axis constituted a backbone of the exhibition's dramaturgy and held the exposition together. The individual, more or less specific

folds of interpretation developed from this backbone in form of digressions. The main line of the exhibition was physically illustrated by the main exposition material, period photographs, architectonic models, archive documents in the form of architectonic designs and publications of that time. The digressions were filled with historical artefacts from the field of visual arts, housing culture and design.

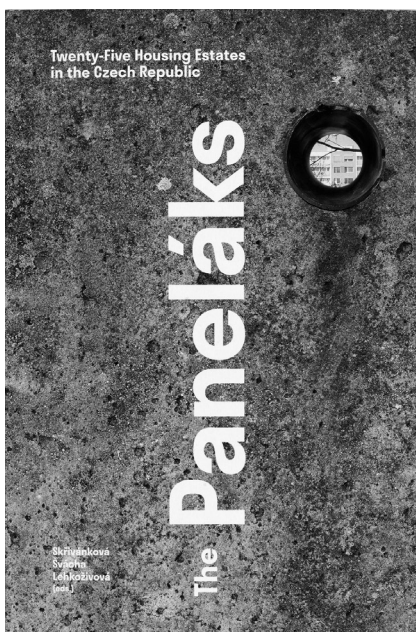
The authors of the exhibition managed to collect a great amount of material. The most remarkable items doubtlessly included the original models of the housing estates and period photographs. The added value of these two media lay in their ability to show both, how the town planning concepts changed and how the illustration tools and the architectonic craft evolved. However, the quantity of the physical and ideological digressions and layers of the exhibits tended to turn the exhibition into a hardly decipherable collection of curiosities. The great variety and multi-layered character of the exhibition is a logical result of the research, which immediately preceded the exhibition and resulted in three huge books as well. The authors' effort to show the phenomenon of prefab estates in all its complexity undoubtedly played a role, too. The exhibition could, therefore, be perceived as a dense hybrid architectonic-town planning-ethnographic reminder of a half-century of mass housing development in socialist Bohemia that enabled each visitor to select their own way of dating.

The three big publications

The exhibition was accompanied by two huge books titled *Paneláci* ("Paneláky" is the popular Czech name for the prefabricated housing structures). The first one, *Paneláci*

1. Padesát sídlišť v českých zemích [Prefabs 1. Twenty-Five Housing Estates in the Czech Republic] (Lucie Skřivánková, Rostislav Švácha, Eva Novotná, Karolina Jirkalová, Uměleckoprůmyslové museum v Praze, 2018) is an atlas in which on its 463 pages, 50 selected examples of prefabricated housing estates are presented by text analyses, original plans and photographs; in some cases, even by analyses of social conditions. The second book, *Paneláci 2. Historie sídlišť v českých zemích 1945-1989* [Prefabs 2. History of the Housing Estates in Czech Republic 1945-1989] (Lucie Skřivánková, Rostislav Švácha, Martina Koukalová, Eva Novotná, Uměleckoprůmyslové museum v Praze, 2017) is a regular architecture historiography of "only" 350 pages that introduces general history, periodization and characteristic features of the postwar mass housing in Czech part of the former Czechoslovakia. A selection of the first book was published also in English under the title *The Paneláks. Twenty-Five Housing Estates in the Czech Republic* (Lucie Skřivánková, Rostislav Švácha, Irena Lehkoživová, The Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, 2017). It focuses on the most characteristic and outstanding examples of prefab estates in Bohemia and could serve as a personal guide for anyone interested in this particular part of architectural heritage. The book series, together with the exhibition, should be understood as an unbiased and comprehensive scientific statement of work on this part of Czech architectural history and definitely as a perfect basis for the further aim of protecting some of the estates as monuments. In that sense I am quite sure that the authors of this great project will remain thinking big.

Henrieta Moravčíková



04 Lucie Skřivánková, Rostislav Švácha, Irena Lehkoživová (ed.), *The Paneláks. Twenty-Five Housing Estates in the Czech Republic*, Prague, The Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, 2017. Book cover.