

Preliminary Notes on Cubist Architecture in Prague

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Preface

The following cursory observations arise out of my attempts to learn something about the architecture of Prague in preparation for a visit to the Czech Republic. Such a project leads one quickly enough to claims in any guide to the city that cubist architecture is an important part of the urban landscape, that, in fact, Prague offers a uniquely rich collection of buildings in that style. However, my wish to examine such claims in more detail by exploring just what the label Cubist Architecture means as an analytical term defining some specific characteristics of architectural form (like, for example, the terms *Gothic* or *Baroque*) quickly confronted me with what looked like something of a puzzle. The major histories of architecture I consulted made no mention of that style, and some knowledgeable people I asked, historians of art and teachers of architecture, generally found my question very odd. So what I had assumed would be an issue I could deal with quite quickly turned into a somewhat more challenging assignment. The paragraphs below are the result of my pursuing the issue somewhat further than I had originally intended.

Introduction

From an art historical perspective . . . any analysis of the relationship between architecture and cubism ultimately depends upon the contested definition of cubism itself. Quite apart from the question of whether there was such a thing as cubist architecture, today there is no consensus about the very meaning of cubism, as a style or as a historical phenomenon. Indeed, historians of cubism do not necessarily agree on who exactly was a cubist painter, or to whose work the written statements of the period apply. (Blau and Troy 4)

What exactly is Cubist Architecture? As the above quotation indicates, this question does not admit of an answer until one clarifies what one means by the term "Cubist" or "Cubism." Normally, of course, these terms refer most immediately to the modernist school of painting created by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in Paris in the years immediately before World War I, a style marked by a rejection of realistic detail and an emphasis on fragmented abstract two-dimensional form, often picturing several aspects of an object simultaneously (for some examples please see [Cubism](#)). This sense of the term apparently has little obvious connection with architecture:

I see nothing cubist for example, but nothing at all, in the Duchamp-Villon's celebrated *Maison Cubiste*. . . . And though I have only a very limited knowledge of it, I'd say the same of the so-called "cubist" architecture of Prague. . . . My definition of cubism is resolutely narrow: it has little to do with the geometrising style that sent ripples through the entire Western world of art during the teens and developed into art deco a decade later; rather, it is exclusively concerned with the analysis of the conditions of pictorial representation, and their deliberate subversion, carried out by Picasso and Braque. (Bois 187)

Such a claim would seem fairly common among scholarly historians of architecture, who habitually refer to an alleged line between cubist painting and architecture only to erase it (see Colomina 141 ff) or omit any detailed discussion of Cubist Architecture in their surveys of modern styles.

Given this apparent consensus, an understanding of cubist architecture in Prague would seem to require a more empirical approach. Rather than looking for any clear formal connections between the revolution in painting and developments in Czech architecture or seeking some preliminary precision about just what that term *cubist* refers to and then looking for that in particular examples, we should perhaps derive our sense of what cubist architecture means from what those people who used the term intended by it their theoretical writings, their designs, and their finished buildings. The meaning of the term *cubist architecture* will then serve as a descriptive label for their efforts (cubist designs are designs people called cubist). And in following this line of enquiry, we should probably confine ourselves to the place where the major chapter of this phase of European modernism was being written, that is, to Prague itself, so that our concern is not really *Cubist Architecture* as a permanent and meaningful conceptual category but rather *Czech cubist architecture* as a historical phenomenon, an artistic response to a particular set of circumstances in a particular culture.

Modernism in Bohemia

The development of modernistic styles in art and architecture in Prague was inextricably bound up with the major political issues of the time, particularly with the continuing success of the National Revival, the sustained attempt to rescue Czech language and culture from extinction at the end of the eighteenth century in the face of official policies from Hapsburg Vienna designed to transform Bohemia into a faithful Catholic German-speaking part of the Austrian Empire (after 1867 the Austro-Hungarian Empire). By the end of the nineteenth century, the National Revival had had considerable success in re-creating a Czech culture, building a number of Czech institutions, and fostering a revival of spoken Czech, particularly by emphasizing traditional Czech customs, work habits, artistic styles, folk music, and story telling. Perhaps the most obvious symbol of this success was the Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition in 1895 in Prague, a celebration of traditional rural Czech life (see Sayer 124 ff).

This thrust of the National Revival made a certain view of Czech history an essential aspect of the national identity (certainly in contrast to the Germanic culture of Vienna) and insisted that the true role for the Czech artist was to use his talents in the service of an urgent national need. Such a view inevitably bred a certain narrow parochialism:

This was the great paradox of Czech nationalism. In its blindness and thinly-veiled chauvinism it branded every demonstration of personality as non-Czech, since from the frog's-eye view of its own puddle such manifestations had certainly very little to do with Czech reality. (Mucha 198)

A countervailing pressure among young artists at the end of the century was a turning away from the issue of national identity towards a more cosmopolitan internationalism, with an emphasis on various other priorities: individualism, equality, workers' rights, and ideals of socialist justice. The opening salvo from this camp came in 1895, the same year as the Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition, when a group of young Czech artists published a *Manifesto of Czech Modernism*, a document rejecting an art based on outmoded traditions, "imitation national songs, versified folkloristic baubles," and an exclusive emphasis on national identity (quoted in Sayer 154). From that point on, the story of Czech modernism becomes the struggle between the continuing search for a national style, a Czech identity expressed in and developed by art and architecture, and the influential ideas and inspirations acquired from the vital and changing international artistic scene. In the development of this national identity, how was one to sort out the conflicting demands of the specifically Czech tradition established by the National Revival and the growing demand for other priorities not anchored in that tradition? What room was there for an art which focused exclusively on the individual at the expense of national issues? Should art concern itself with universal social principles rather than a Czech agenda? And so on.

[By a nice irony, as Sayer reminds us, the year 1895 also marked the sudden emergence of Alfons Mucha as an internationally famous artist and the leading figure in Art Nouveau in Paris. According to his own frequently repeated assertions, he derived his inspiration from traditional Czech and Moravian folk designs and was deeply committed to Slav nationalism. But his style was not recognized as particularly Czech (his own national origins were so obscured that many people thought he was French and spelled his name Alphonse), and the Czech nationalists did not see in his work a sufficiently explicit tribute to the National Revival. Besides, he was living in Paris and thus was for some people a "sell out," who had abandoned his native land. For more detail about Mucha's career, please click on the following link: [Mucha](#)]

What's particularly interesting in many of the debates about art and architecture throughout the modernist period in Bohemia (and elsewhere) is the idealistic and spiritual tenor of the arguments. To an extent that is perhaps difficult for us to recognize in these much more disillusioned and cynical times artists and architects saw their work as charged with high moral purpose, ranging from a commitment to the political ideals of pan-Slavism to the dreams of a distinct Czech identity or the loftiest utopian goals of international socialism. Hence, shifts in style or criticisms of existing styles, along with the acceptance or rejection of particular artistic projects, were an integral part of a wide and passionate debate about the most important political priorities of freedom and justice in a newly emerging Czech nation. In retrospect, given how the brutal ironies of later Nazi and Communist rule brought a swift end to this discourse, these modernist hopes may seem extraordinarily naive to us, but that should not obscure just how vitally important these elements were for the development of modernism in Prague.

In 1887 a group of artists formed the Mánes Union (named after the nineteenth century Josef Mánes) to promote internationalist styles in art, especially among young artists and to assist exhibitions of modern art. The first specifically modernist group in Prague (called *Osma*, meaning eight), inspired in part by the Edvard Munch exhibition in that city in 1905, was formed in 1907 by a group of Czech and ethnic German artists, who turned away from the prevailing styles to develop an aesthetic derived from expressionism and primitivism and who used their art to produce distinctively modernist works exploring their own alienation, moral suffering, and psychic pain (see Mansbach 16 ff). A few years later, in 1910, a number of Bohemian artists first experienced the work of Picasso and Braque in Paris. Under that influence, some former members of *Osma* and young artists influenced by cubism and expressionism founded the movement *Skupina* in 1911 "on the platform of cubism—initially called 'New Primitivism' or simply 'New Art'" (Švábha, *Architecture* . . . 101). The members of this group (which included some architects) developed an eclectic, powerful, and highly individualistic style.

The Czech artists born in the 1880s were a passionate group. Their establishment of *Osma* and *Skupina* can best be understood as a tempestuous bid to break through prevailing local conditions and psychological limitations and to deal with universal issues of cosmic importance. Hence, themes of extraordinary (and often disconcerting) expressive power—religious, anthroposophic, or excessively individual—were depicted in a vocabulary drawn from progressive international styles: German expressionism, French fauvism, analytic cubism. . . . The result of such a melding of styles and themes was a highly charged art that conformed to the disquieting conditions of the Habsburg Kingdom of Bohemia in a state of spiritual crisis and impending political collapse. (Mansbach 54)

[Parenthetically, it's interesting to observe how close in spirit many of these works are to the stories of Franz Kafka. For obvious reasons, interpreters of Kafka tend to locate the source of his imaginative vision in his personal life, particularly in his family relationships or his Jewish heritage. However, the fact that a number of other artists, ethnic Germans and Czechs, expressed similar anxieties suggests that there may be much more informing Kafka's disturbing visions than his unique personal background.]

This phase of Czech modernism in architecture introduced Cubist principles and the style so popular before the war came under attack in a climate of renewed commitment to social and political causes. However, the public debates about cubism in painting, before and after the war, helped to create a discourse which, to a significant extent, architects seeking a more spiritual, imaginative style could appropriate, regardless of any intimate connections between what they were promoting and the formal properties of cubism or cubo-expressionism in the work of visual artists. To some extent, in other words, the term *cubist* attached itself to developments in architecture for reasons which have little to do with direct formal influence (Bois 189).

Modernist Architecture in Prague: Art Nouveau

Architecture in Prague played a central role in the National Revival once the city gained self-government and the Czech political parties won control of the city council and promoted the construction of a number of important civic buildings in traditional nineteenth century historical styles (The National Theatre, 1868-1883, the Czech Polytechnic, 1872-1873, the Rudolfinum Palace, 1876-1884, and the National Museum, 1885-1890) and all sorts of memorials, schools, and commercial buildings (Švábcha, *Architecture* . . . 18 ff). This concerted attempt at historical retrieval generated in the *Manifesto of Czech Modernism* a demand for something more distinctively new, a break with the monumental tributes in outmoded and often grandiose styles.

Modernism in Prague architecture began around 1900 with the work of Jan Kotěra (1871-1923), who had studied with Otto Wagner in Vienna. He brought to Prague architecture a demand for "truthfulness," creativity, and the need to organize the space from the point of view of the function of the building, without attaching great importance to traditional historical styles (Švábcha, *Architecture* . . . 48). Initially, the new style (called Sezession, a general name for a number of progressive art movements in Austria and Germany in the 1890s) had much in common with Art Nouveau—an emphasis on lyrical and dynamic curves inspired by natural forms of plants in the ornamentation, cornices, arches, and the interior of a building. These had certain affinities with the neobaroque style and in many cases could be adapted easily enough to traditional Czech folk motifs and elements of historical style (as in one of the most famous examples of Art Nouveau influence in Prague, the Municipal House, 1903-1912, designed by Osvald Polívka).

[For a picture of the Municipal House, please use the following link: [Municipal House](#)]

The work of Kotěra and his pupils, however, following the main trends in the development of modernist architecture, moved away from the natural allegory of Art Nouveau into a style more characterized by geometrical symbolism (Švábcha, *Architecture* . . . 63) with an increasing emphasis on function and the material structure of the building. This process, in the view of some critical young students of Wagner and Kotěra, produced an architectural style empty of spiritual purpose and filled with a sense of utilitarian sterility. The style, it was alleged, emphasized far too much the dead materiality of the structure and hence lacked vital beauty (Švábcha, *Architecture* . . . 100). Inextricably involved with this critical spirit was a desire to reject the Viennese origin of Kotěra's modernist style in order to create something uniquely Czech in response to what was happening in Paris. Out of this reaction came the demand for a new style.

Cubist Architecture in Prague

The development of cubist architecture in Prague is most closely associated with Pavel Janák (1882-1956), the movement's major theoretician, who, writing in 1912, rejected the geometric style of Kotěra and Wagner in favour of something which gave freer play to the imaginative powers of human creativity:

We consider the teaching of modern architecture on the individualization of materials, that is, the derivation of artistic form from the natural and physical qualities of the material to be materialistic and aimless, limiting the free creation of the architect to the interpretation of the material. . . . Architectural beauty can only be a constructed beauty expressed through the materials, but residing in an almost dramatic counterweight to the material. (Janák, quoted Moravánsky)

The spiritual purpose of architecture was to make this dynamic imaginative creativity manifest. Beyond that it had no social or political or national agenda. Janák expressly denied that architecture should have as its aim any improvement in society, Czech or otherwise: it is an "independent activity that has no obligations except to itself" (quoted, Švábcha *Architecture* . . . 128).

What this amounted to in practice was turning away from the orthogonal (box like) qualities of the geometric style with its emphasis on tectonics and replacing it with "a system whose logic of form consisted of a diagonal or triangular compositional plane, and the Wagnerian cubes gave way to tapered quadrilaterals, pyramids, and all kind of slanted forms" (Švábcha, *Architecture* . . . 101), to produce a structure which embodied the human spirit's struggle with and creative triumph over inert matter. Form is not determined by the material but imposed on the material. In the words of one of the more extreme proponents of this view, Vlastislav Hofman, "form is absolute and superior to function" (quoted in Dvorak). That principle applies as much to the inside space as to the entire building.

The oblique angle of the falling rain is caused by the additional element of the wind; similarly, the snow formations, washouts, ravines, caves, and volcanoes are all positive changes to the previous natural form of the matter. . . . The best example is the process of crystallization: the force of crystallization is much more powerful than the weight. (Janák, quoted Moravánsky)

For Janák and others reacting against Sezession-style architecture in the years before World War I, the banner of cubism was an important way of calling attention to the need for a new emphasis in the development of a truly Czech style.

It was "off-center" position of the young generation of Prague artists, with their strongly developed sense of an indigenous cultural tradition, on the one hand, and their interest in the larger context of art, on the other, that, imbued with a high degree of poetic imagination, aided the syncretic and yet autonomous movement that was Czech cubism. Steeped in the Czech tradition, in many cases in the Austro-German milieu, and looking toward France as a beacon of the new, the generation of artists born around 1880 seized on an opportunity to explore cubism less as a style or movement than as an important transition stage leading to "an ideal spiritual art" as the ultimate expression of the new era. Their position on cubism, and on modern art in general, was far from homogeneous. (Murray 45)

The emphasis here on the continuing vitality of German and Czech tradition is an important reminder that some of the most easily recognized features of Czech cubist architecture, particularly polygonal facades on the buildings which help to create a fractured appearance which changes with one's viewpoint, may owe more to those traditions than to the direct influence of cubist art itself (Murray 52) and helps to explain why the cubist buildings in Prague seem to blend in so well with the baroque architecture of the city.

Informing a great deal of modernist discourse in painting and architecture, especially cubist architecture, are theories of and discussions about perception. In fact, as Columina points out in her analysis of Le Corbusier's attacks on cubism (152), modernism itself can be identified with revolutions in perception produced, not by shifts in art and architectural styles, but rather by the conditions of living in the large city, where a multiplicity of images constantly bombards the viewer in fragmentary and fractured ways, especially given the increasingly emphasis on seeing things while in motion (in trams and cars, for example, and in films). The process of seeing, in other words, becomes increasingly subjective and dependent upon the point of view of the observer.

The characteristically jagged appearance of cubist buildings, Švábcha points out, in addition to symbolizing the struggle between imaginative spirit and inert materials, tends to turn the building into a "subjectively viewed phenomenon," since the oblique facets look different when the viewer moves to a different position and thus create an experience different from that produced by a building whose structure is designed to express the physical laws of matter (*Architecture* . . . 119). In addition, of course, the appearance of a building with such an outer surface changes constantly as the angle of the light falling on it alters.

Reinforcing this sense of subjective viewing were the contemporary ideas about perception developed by Theodor Lipps, according to which perception is founded on an inner reality, an empathy (*Einfühlung*) which

presents itself as an aesthetic sympathy between the artefact and the observer. . . . the pleasure of looking at something is an interior process, both a spreading-out and a concentration, an interior moving back and forth—losing oneself in observation and finding oneself again. It is a pulsation that appears to be the pulsation of the inner life of the artefact as the observer invests it with a certain kind of activity originating from his own life experience. The entire "life" or content of a work of art is nothing else but *Einfühlung*, empathy. Lipps made a distinction between the moral satisfaction induced by the objective reality, the meaning of the artefact, and the process of observation, which is different: the observer enjoys something that has an ideal content, an objectified ego. Aesthetic pleasure therefore is identical neither with moral satisfaction nor with merely sensual enjoyment. (Moravánszky)

Some critics of cubist architecture rejected this distinction, seeing in the style (especially in late cubism) mere sensuality, an unhealthy emphasis on mere ornamentation. One of the most curious yet influential later reactions against cubism attacked it for its sexual decadence, seeing in the style merely a new manifestation of the very characteristics for which Art Nouveau was also savaged, sensual tendencies which sapped the sturdy masculine vigour and intellectual clarity best displayed in an increasingly pure geometric form. "If the Greek triumphed over the barbarian, if Europe, inheritor of Greek thought, dominates the world, it is because the savages like loud colors and the noisy sound of tambourines which engage only the senses, while the Greeks loved the intellectual beauty that hides beneath sensory beauty" (Ozenfant and Jeanneret [Le Corbusier], *Après le cubisme* [1918], quoted Columina 151). Lurking in such criticism is a more ominous sense of later styles designed to intimidate the human spirit rather than celebrate its imaginative powers.

The rhetoric of vigor and the whole aesthetic regime it props up has to be understood in terms of this fear of the "bizarre and the original." The heroic male figure—energetic, cool and detached—is the figure of modernity. Architectural order here, the control of the senses, is first and foremost social control. Purism is puritanism, in the sense of a regime that maintains a clear distinction between straight sex and deviant sex. (Columina 151)

The most characteristic feature of cubist architecture, the multi-faceted facade of the building is also a way of articulating a vision of space, particularly the relation of inside and outside (in Janák's words, "Wherever spirit was active, the surface is transformed, moved, as if in its folds and waves the surface were a mixture of the matter existing inside and the space on the outside" (quoted in Dvorak). The cubist design, in other words, should not celebrate the solid tectonic qualities of the material but call those into question, establishing an ambiguous relationship between the space inside and outside the structure:

It is precisely this mixture of inside matter and outside space that Cubist facades want to accomplish. . . . The crystal-like creases on the surface are not an extrinsic decoration: The viewer does not differentiate the wall from its ornamentation. The inside of the house, its mass *continuously* proceeds into the furrows and fractures of the splintery façade. The inside and outside, the matter and space, merge together creating a sense of continuity between the dense material core and the wavering air surrounding it. . . . The articulation of the surfaces is of decisive importance because if matter and materials blend with the surrounding open space, the borders of the building disintegrate. If the borders of a building disintegrate, the building itself vanishes. The primary straight wall, the border separating the inside from the outside,

becomes slightly distorted in order to reinforce the idea that this process should be pushed to its limits. This emphasizes the idea that the boundary zone becomes a mixture of inside and outside influences, denying a sense of denoted space. (Dvorak)

Whatever the theoretical coherence (or incoherence) of the many writings of the cubist architects, the great achievement of the movement is, of course, the buildings themselves, a remarkable collection of aesthetically pleasing, dramatic structures which have made Prague justly famous as the most important home of a unique twentieth-century style. It may well be the case, as Dvorak maintains, that Czech cubism was a temporary digression in the development of modernism, something its early practitioners moved away from in the 1920's ("anti-modern" is his term for the cubist program in architecture, in part because it turned its back on the established tradition, culminating in modernism, that architecture has something to communicate). Nonetheless, the movement's legacy of some strikingly original buildings in Prague which visitors from all over the world flock to see attests to the imaginative vitality of one of the more curious moments in the history of architecture.

Images of Cubist Architecture in Prague

For a gallery of well-known examples of Cubist architecture in Prague, you might like to sample the photographs on the following page: [Prague Cubist Architecture](#).

Rondo Cubism

World War I seriously interrupted the development of Czech cubist architecture, and after the war the newly independent Czechoslovakia recommitted itself to the search for a national style. This led cubist architects (Janák and Gočár among them) to alter their attitude towards ornament (Švácha, *Architecture* . . . 134) and to apply circles and decorative folkloristic elements to the facade of the building, in an attempt to affirm a new national style. This trend came to be called "rondo-cubism," "decorativism," or "national style" (Moravánszky), and is most clearly manifested in Josef Gočár's Czechoslovak Legiobank, an explicit tribute to Czech soldiers in the war.

Earlier styles of cubism remained alive, but came under increasing attacks from the "austere, rationalistic, and pragmatic" demands of functionalism (Švácha, *Architecture* . . . 192) and from the hostility to ornament in the name of mathematical harmony and simplicity in purism (a movement launched after the war by Le Corbusier). In Prague in the 1920's the leading voice of the avant garde, Karel Teige, a committed Marxist (but not a Communist) urged a break with modernist styles from before the war and a rejection of monumentalism, in order to promote a "'new proletarian art . . . a kind of socialist Gothic,' which would have artists cast off the elitist conceit they had hitherto embraced and humbly come down to the level of everyday life . . . an art that would evoke in all people a sense of brotherhood and love for ordinary things (Švácha, "Before and After . . ." 109).

And with that shift the major artistic aim of the cubist architects in Prague, some of whom were now working in and teaching the new style, finally was overwhelmed by the emphasis on rational social hopes for progress enshrined in an architecture of scientific functionalism.

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