

Absorbing Modernity?

Jana Tichá interviews Martin Hejl and Cyril Říha on 14th Biennale of Architecture in Venice

How would you describe the main principles of the exhibition in the pavilion for the Czech and Slovak Republics at the 14th Biennale of Architecture in Venice?

ČŘ Before we start with any concrete principles, it might be good to mention that this year was somewhat unusual, and at least in two different ways. The first peculiarity is that it was a Czech-Slovak exhibition, which has been far from common in the past two decades, when exhibitions altered between Czech and Slovak ones. This year, it was prepared by a large Czech and Slovak team, and Czechoslovakia became the subject of investigation as the state entity that was for the selected period, i.e. from 1914 to 2014, the dominant force on our territory. This is the first thing. Second is that the curatorial team of the national exhibition made the conscious decision to join up with the larger project of the main curator, Rem Koolhaas. This too is unusual, because the majority of the national exhibitions come up with their own themes. We spent a lot of time arguing over this, because it can of course be viewed as a sort of diktat, various opinions were voiced as to whether it wouldn't be better to defy this somehow, whether in terms of creative freedom or in the grounds that the demand of the main curator was completely unheard of and impossible to achieve. Mapping one hundred years of architecture in Czechoslovakia in a single year is truly a terrible task. There were claims that we should be "punk" and turn against it. I, however, kept repeating that to turn against this huge demand is really hardly punk, because it's part of the mainstream, something that always gets done. Sometimes it seems to me that the most genuine punk stance today is to wear a dinner-jacket.

MH Our main reason behind wanting to meet this assignment was curiosity. We were attracted by the chance to see all of the pavilions from the world, or at least those countries there in Venice, to see how they dealt with it. To work with the same question, to work with the hundred years from 1914 up to 2014 and discuss what modernity means for them. It was a chance to see if the tendencies or development of modernity in individual countries across various continents somehow corresponded or diverged. At the same time, of course, there were those speculations on whether architecture is global, whether in fact by 2014 all architecture is the same everywhere, if all national specificities really have died out? It's up to everyone how they interpret it, but precisely for this reason I think it was important to hang in there and not to insist on our own ambitions of self-representation, but really to meet this research aim, which in the context of exhibits for the Biennale is far from common.

We'll get to the topic of globalisation later, it really is an intriguing question, but for now I'd like to remain for a bit longer in Venice and with your project. You focused on the residence and the changes in its concept over the past hundred years. Why did you choose precisely this theme?

MH At the outset, we tried to find some principle that would take us consistently through all of these hundred years, which of course is hard, because this section of time includes the period between the two World Wars, then Communism, then the period after 1989, in other words we have one hundred years separated into minimally three very different political eras. We tried out six different programs, from offices through cultural buildings, residences, even sacral structures, and tested how they stood up as the narrators or guides for the outline of the entire century. In the end, what we found is that the exceptional buildings that most architects want to talk about – those specific, beautiful, repeatedly photographed ones – are often little more than tiny islands of the exceptional, and don't work for creating a coherent linear narrative flow; their message is not that strong, and also the Czech-Slovak background isn't really about them. So in the end, we decided to work with the residence, because this is the chief substance that forms the urban fabric. Often it's overlooked, just like the air we breathe. But this is what we've built the most of, and it's passed through the most turbulent changes, which most accurately reflect each change in the political system.

ČŘ You could even say that the residence is the most typical sample for showing any trend in terms of its importance for human life. Housing is a constant, one of the few that follows us everywhere. Unlike, say, sports structures, which are typical for only a certain segment of the population, and only for a particular time. Second, there's the purely statistical extent, and this applies around the world. Dietmar Eberle once told us in an interview that sixty percent of all built substance is for housing. And so even in statistical terms it's the most typical.

How did you select the individual settlements and housing complexes that you accentuated – whether in the exhibition or in the book?

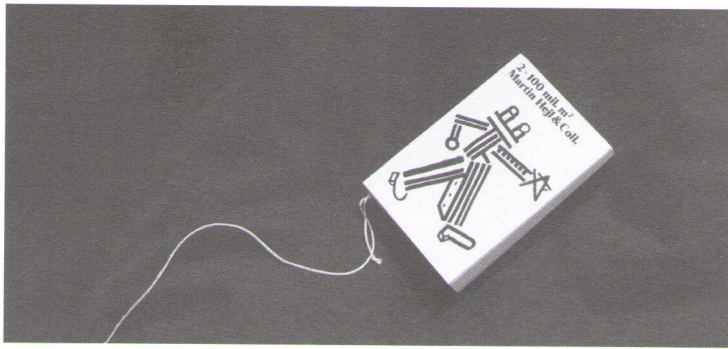
MH We viewed the project from the start as the chance for a kind of zooming-out: to get as far away as possible from the typical architectonic perspective, which is the focus on a single structure in human scale. We have one hundred years, and need to work it through in an extremely short time, so let's zoom out as much as we can. It turned out that thanks to the essence of the human dwelling, we have to take into consideration quantity of built mass, and also the size of the individual housing complexes. These are the two phenomena that are connected with housing in this era. So we said to ourselves that the parameter for selection would be the largest representative built ensembles for each period.

And so you chose them by their volume, or by their area, in short by the physical size of the grouping?

MH Yes, this was one of the main parameters, not the only one but it was the first.

Why specifically size? Are large dimensions typical for modernity?

MH My sense is that it's absolutely typical. We went through 56 cities and towns in Czechoslovakia and mapped housing construction in all 56 of them, meaning that it includes all district towns between 1914 and 2014, and if you place the findings side by side along the timeline, then you see that before 1939 we mostly created small-scale, small-format structures, and sometime in the 1960s, or more accurately primarily in the 1970s, we built up enormous areas of land. After 1989, it all fragmented back to small individual designs.



Why do you think that development assumed this trajectory?

- MH That's a good question. We've speculated a lot about it, and think it can be answered from several different angles. On one side, it's a question of technology, of prefabrication, which reached its culmination as almost the parametric form of construction, in which hardly any space was left for the personal will of the architect, and political forces or political authority had the chance for easy realisation of construction across a relatively broad area. Also, it seems that after 1968–69 it was a definite method to increase people's comfort at home, and allow them to forget the freedom that they had so briefly regained. In a way, it could be a kind of instrument for silencing the public through comfort, a sugar-cube for society at large. Of course, another factor here was the postwar need for housing construction, even though in our case this reason is doubtful, because over these one hundred years Czechoslovakia, or the Czech Republic, had essentially a constant number of inhabitants, and even lower after 1945, if we recall the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans.

In a certain sense, this size and repetition across a grand scale eventually turned out to be counterproductive. After 1989, it turned out that people don't really find it psychologically suitable, because there occurred a massive return to a reduced scale of construction – even if we could consider that the satellite towns are not much different from high-rise estates, only in different garb. Do you agree with those critical voices that say the parametric method of construction on such a large scale is beneficial neither for architecture nor for society – or does it have its positive sides?

- ČR This is a similar construction faced at the start of the era that we're talking about by Tomáš Bata: should you make shoes to measure, i.e. single individual items, or select a systematic approach. Of course, there's an economic calculation behind this, but not only that. Bata's project also applied to town construction, and in many ways it was a social project too. Yes, it does have certain aspects that can be criticised. But overall it seems to me that today we might have gone too far and thrown the baby out with the bathwater. The entire ethos of modernity, which is connected to the scale of projects and to systematic consideration of our life, has suddenly become something negative. We see behind it either the socialist epoch or the limited economic interests of real estate developers, but this is only one side of the coin. There are also social questions, environmental questions, behind this which would hardly be solved by some pedantic adherence to small-scale forms.
- MH The Czech Republic or Czechoslovakia is statistically one of the countries with the highest figures of people who are satisfied with their own dwellings. If we keep in mind that in Slovakia in the 1980s up to eighty percent of the population lived in prefabricated apartment blocks, then this itself casts doubt on the very question that you've just posed.

The size and the parameter-setting ambitions of this type of modern architecture that we're talking about contain a definite ambition for universality. Do you think that this universal ambition is typical for modernity? And if it is, has this universal ambition of modernity already worn itself out, or is there still some hidden potential in it?

- ČR This is, indeed, a very general question. On one hand, this ambition probably is something that is specifically linked to modernity, to a program based on architecture being more of a science than an art. In such an expression, we of course feel some specific focus of architecture on a definite program, but we can also find here another trait that we shouldn't overlook. Architecture is obviously always conditioned by culture, geographic features, climate, etc., which give it a specific local or regional character. But there is yet another component that sometimes is forgotten: the mathematical part of architecture. Architecture is the creation of space, and completely integrally works with geometry. These are things that reach beyond any local conditions, and in this sense architecture must address age-old questions regardless of whether it's classical Greece or a hundred years in the future. In this way, it's closer to, let's say, music.
- MH As for universality, I would say that it always appears within society at a specific moment. Modernity is connected to concrete, which is a strange surrealist substance, suddenly hardening and becoming solid matter. What form it will take is purely a question of our own intellect and aesthetic preferences. We are capable of imagining and systematically replicating certain structures. As time came to show, the technology became exhausted and there appeared phenomena like *Dead Concrete* etc. It's similar in other areas: when Henry Ford put his first car on the market, all of them came in black, and everyone was simply glad to have their own car. When the first iPhone appeared, it too came in one colour and was the same for everyone, yet in time it always becomes clear that this is not enough: all right, we have the product and it works, or we have a place to live and it's the sort we want, but now we'd like a bit of personalisation, because we don't want to have it just the same as everyone. This is some kind of essential human need. And this is the phase that architecture is at right now.

Or in other words, you think that the generic quality of large scale, which we now attribute to prefabricated housing estates, is something temporary or time-bound? That it's not an inherent quality of modernity?

- MH At the time when these housing estates were being built, the construction could not meet the market demands, because no market economy existed here. If this had been the case, then so many identical structures wouldn't have been built,



because logically they would have had no success in the market. For the same reason, we no longer manufacture all cars the same, because people no longer want to purchase identical cars. Or if you buy a bottle of Coca-Cola now, every bottle has the same label, the same corporate identity – but each label has a different name, and you can buy one with your own. In terms of construction, a certain personalisation arrived with catalogue-based single-family houses. This is in fact the answer of systematic solutions to the problem of sameness and prefabricated structures.

Connected to this is yet another question, and this is the role of the architect in modern society: in a society that first accented the universal, the repetitive, the generic – and today wants to add personalisation to this, but only within this basis. To what extent are, for instance, large housing estates the result of the creative work of an architect?

CŘ It's not only about housing estates: this is essentially one of the leading questions that we found worth observing. To what extent are all of these large ensembles – not only the prefabricated housing estates, but also Zlín and even today's catalogue-houses – the result of the work of architects? I would say that if we try to look at this one theme for some time with a bit of a critical eye, we could not arrive at any black-and-white, unambiguous answers. Usually, it becomes clear that extreme answers are unjustifiable. On one hand, Zlín is viewed, within one interpretation as a purely architectonic town, forming the prototype of realised architectonic modernism. But we deliberately added to our book an interview with historian Ondřej Ševeček, who holds precisely the opposite thesis. His view perhaps deliberately emphasises how the architects had a very marginal role in creating Zlín, and the entire project for the town was formed by economic and ideological motives. Similarly, the opposite extreme is to say that the high-rise housing estates are a pure manifestation of the ideology of post-1968 Czechoslovakia, and architects had nothing to do with them. In our book, we've provided a broad range of documents that reveal what interesting architectural debates and history lay behind them. Then there's the entire discussion on the situation after 1989, and how and with what examples to represent all of it. For all these questions, we try to find in our book answers that are not black and white, but form a stimulus for reflection.

MH It's my impression that architects may well have lost influence, particularly in the 1970s, but that they still managed to operate somehow and shifted their task into these larger scales. They couldn't influence, for example, how a single building appeared. Construction took place in sections, in the form of certain building blocks that had to be placed into the landscape and meet certain charts and tables, which really isn't that much different from today's commercial development ambitions or projects. Nonetheless, they still had an influence on how this pattern from which the building blocks were made was put into the landscape. And the areas that they built in were often surprisingly attractive. The housing estates around Prague – and not only there – were all allocated to exceptional natural settings. After the revolution, architects paradoxically have, in my opinion, less of an influence on how the built substance of the city appears.

CŘ I'd like to add something to this. In the series of interviews in our book, you can follow a growing disillusionment or frustration among those who influenced planning and construction. This disillusionment or frustration concerns precisely their influence on the results of their work. In fact, this really surprised us, and we tried to find out why it was the case. And I would say that one of the possible answers is related precisely to this standardisation, as the solution for the ambitions of large-scale modernist projects. Standardisation, in the form that it took place, is only one of many possibilities, and certainly it could have been done differently. In the 1920s, standardisation suddenly gave architects a completely unexpected possibility for changing the world. A genuine intervention into how massive quantities of people would live in the future, what their social conditions would be, how the economy of the state would develop. With the same instrument, there could also have been no less of a dramatic change in environmental conditions, if these had been a question back then. But it was all done in such a way that they simply presented their client with a product that could then only be applied mechanically, and without any need to give it a unique interpretation. The architects as creator, as co-creator of the system, ceased to be necessary. Many times I've said to myself that the architect was sitting on the proverbial branch and building these enormous visions that are in their own way stunning, unique, unrepeatable – but at the same time cutting through the branch where he's sitting.

MH Yes, for the architectural profession this is a relatively typical situation, and doesn't take place only with standardisation, but at a later stage with the program. Whenever we come up with anything, there immediately forms a kind of profession of specialised consultants who work on only one specific question, bill the client for their services, and leave the architects completely out of it. We're not able to keep hold of our own inventions and change with them, I mean intellectually. This is another of our findings.

I'd still like to ask more about this role of technology. There were, for example, ironic remarks about "urban planning by crane routes", in other words wherever the crane could reach this was the span between the individual sections of prefabricated blocks. Did you discuss this question?

MH Yes, quite frequently. We had the good fortune that at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava (VŠVU), Peter Stec and his atelier had come up with relatively detailed diagram sketches of individual technologies. So in our book, we have a manual, almost like an IKEA assembly manual, for how to build a prefabricated housing estate. It's a mapping of all of the cranes, all of the technologies necessary for construction. Every brick wall takes its appearance from how the human beings put it together. No less so do prefabricated estates correspond to their method of construction. And it's just as likely that the houses of tomorrow will be marked either by local carpentry – or by 3D printing. Development of technology is possibly the strongest parameter in the entire hundred years of modern architecture, at least in our case. In Zlín, for example, the first prefabricated structures were developed in 1953, yet in the new town of Ostrava-Poruba, which was being built at the same time, no use was made of them, because there was a kind of nostalgic regression and bricks were the material. This, though, turned out to be too expensive, and very likely the engineers in Zlín, not far away, smacked their foreheads and said but we've got a system that's much more agile, quicker, cheaper, more effective. And then all at once –

I myself was shocked at the lightning speed with which these panel structures came into use. It really was all within a flash: one brief moment and suddenly across all of Czechoslovakia the construction was of concrete panels.

How would you define modernity in architecture?

- MH Modernity is a certain type of thinking, of rational concrete systematic thinking about certain problems. As a means of thinking, it's a kind of permanent component of our genetic code, every day we use it and build upon it. There are even places on the planet where this systematic component is extended above other values, such as contemporary China.
- ČŘ Generally, I would define modernism in terms of two types of faith or trust: on one side in innovation, and on the other in large projects. Of course, this has its dark sides, for example in a certain interpretation it overlooks the role of the old and the traditional, and of course this gamble on large projects not only evokes but even leads to a certain type of totalitarian thought and reaction, yet on the other side it's connected to a definite ethos and the dynamism of enormous creative expansion. This dynamic of enormous enthusiasm, disappointment, and repeated return: this could be a possible description of the course of modernity from 1914 to today.
- MH I would say that it's a fascination with technology, and possibly as well a certain moment when there occurs some kind of boom, whether economically or in any other field. In the same way, avant-garde artistic movements travel: they emerge somewhere, stay for a while, and suddenly it's most interesting somewhere else, the way that economies vibrate within the place where there is the most energy, whether in construction or in economy or elsewhere. Logically, this is where the newest technologies are, and it's there that, in my opinion, the moment occurs when modernity flourishes.

Is modernity a phenomenon historically bound to the 20th century? Is it something unique that characterises this age, or are there various modernities and the idea forms only a kind of mode of existence or mode of thinking that periodically re-emerges in history?

- ČŘ I would say that both of these are true. Either we can understand it purely as a part of the history of artistic programs and tendencies, in which case it is a closed epoch and we can say that it was followed by postmodernism as a critique of modernity, and so on. But just as strongly we can say that modernity is a universal constant that forces history always forward as a process of renewal.

Is the modernity of the 20th century something specific in reaction to those that already existed in history?

- ČŘ Hard to say. As I mentioned earlier, the almost exalted emphasis of interwar modernism on grand projects, faith in innovation on all dimensions from construction systems and building methods up to its own ideals, is perhaps something specific. And the postmodern turn can, similarly, be interpreted as a critique and radical refusal of these ideological totalitarian tendencies in modernity. Or it could also be understood, as one current within postmodern philosophy suggests, as the transformation and consistent thinking-through of the initial premises of modernity. Take, for instance, the demand to address the problems of the city as a whole. Of course, it could be done in a totalitarian method, a top-down method, through strict directives, through ultra-strict planning of a type now in considerable disrepute. But still it could also be done differently. Take, for instance, the current revival of large urban strategies, though working from the bottom up. And much the same is true with the emphasis on innovation and experimentation with new things. This too could be done differently, not only through attacking everything old and traditional. In this question, I'm reminded of contemporary Swiss architecture, where such a strictly drawn contrast between old and new, innovative and traditional, truly does not exist.
- MH But here you're really not comparing the same things, and if we're talking about modernity, then size is an unavoidable criterion. Comparing the peak construction period of Prague's 'South Town', when a record number of flats was constructed in a single year, and new construction in Switzerland is a bit off, because you're bringing together two things that really can't be compared. For any comparison of Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and South Town, we'd now probably have to shift over to Asia and not draw any comparisons with what's going on here now, because we've already passed beyond this peak of construction speed. In essence, we're taking care of what remains for us, and architects seem to be gleaning through it and thinking about how to clean up the public spaces or starting to repair the villages. We're in the phase of a kind of nostalgic glance back into the past.

And do you think that within the scale of the Czech Republic, a country with only around ten million inhabitants, it's really possible or even desirable to see the type of development that we now find in Asia? And this is not even to mention the volume of capital.

Is it in any way comparable?

- MH This really is a complex political and economic question. We don't have a seacoast or a merchant fleet. Here there will never be the circumstances that industry would expand to the extent of creating a megalopolis. Prague is a city where you can see, wherever you stand, a forest in some direction. We have, in essence, a residential landscape, a pleasant one. So it's only logical to take up the question of how to work with this landscape. Modernity is something that's now taking place in different focal points. At the same time, we were part of it through our presence in the Soviet Bloc precisely in the time of the 1970s, but it started as far back as Bat'a, that spark, that great madness when it occurred to someone to create an industrial metropolis in a sleepy Moravian backwater and then expand it successfully to the entire world. On the other hand, not to be entirely regressive, the Czech Republic lies at the geographic centre of Europe, at the intersection of a great many transport routes. Transportation of goods is something that contemporary society, and I mean this globally, is based upon, and this is why we're discussing logistical centres at the airports in Brno and Prague. Only this is something we find hard to absorb and comprehend, architects still can't find an opinion about it. There is an enormous quantity of goods that flow across this planet from place to place. For example the flowers that you buy anywhere in the world, they pass through Rotterdam first and then continue onwards, which is utterly absurd, but this is the society where we live. And we, as architects, but also as inhabitants of this country, always have the possibility of going along with this development, thinking optimistically, seeking out new forms and then being on the side of modernity, believing that tomorrow will be good – or else we can go in the opposite direction, turning back and searching for the future in the past, in traditional technologies.

in traditional crafts and sustainable agriculture on the farmstead. The question now is whether it really isn't absurd, in and of itself, to start on both of these paths at once.

- cř We can be modern in different ways. It's quite justifiable to critique that kind of social-engineering ethos of modernity and programs that are no longer experimental creative visions but turn into ossified directives and regulations to be repeated mechanically. But this is not the only method of how to address the wider context. This could assume a different form. It seems to me that now this question is coming up once again, at least in some form. I think it's completely legitimate to talk about not only individual buildings but entire cities, with an impact on the whole of our planet. It's not necessary to do it exactly the way it was in the 1920s or 1930s. Modernity, simply to be modern, has to keep renewing itself and forming itself into different versions.

Do you think that modernity for the twenty-first century has to become more diversified, more personalised?

- MH It's true that architecture today is the same everywhere. So on one hand yes, but on the other hand no. This is the case because it's simply not possible to build the same thing in a jungle, in a desert, or in Siberia. There will have to be certain changes. We architects and engineers are always too arrogant and stupid. This comes up if we have to build an all-glass city planned for the Middle East and it's supposed to have zero energy loss. If you look at the desert oasis of Gadamès in Libya, it's just slapped together from earth, but it's also a very clever system to keep a temperature of 21°C in the middle of the Sahara, day and night for the entire year. There's always more that we can learn from. Right now is precisely the moment when the technologies dreamed up by 20th-century modernity can meet with the intelligence and sensitivity of eras going back to prehistory. Somewhere here there will appear a kind of hybridisation that can push us forward, so that we won't be drowning in plastic any moment now.

What do you think that Koolhaas really meant with that term "Absorbing Modernity"?

- cř That phrase could be interpreted many different ways. Maybe what interests us is how the individual national traditions, window types and so on, were gradually digested into a universal language of modernity. In this sense, "absorbing modernity" can mean a modernity that absorbs. In the sense of absorbing previous traditions and making them into something different. But at the same time it also asks us to what extent we ourselves have absorbed modernity. Or that modernity has somehow absorbed itself in becoming such a self-evident part of our life. This is the modernity that never ends and keeps popping up throughout history in various forms. But it's also about absorption in yet another sense of the word: something is absorbed, taken up, vanishes. And this is modernity as a specific historic segment, not as some everlasting cultural element. It had its golden age of verve and élan, which truly has vanished. When we started to work on the project for the Biennale, all of this was in it. Modernity that corresponds to older traditions. Modernity that's an integral part of our life, without which there wouldn't be either history or life. And finally, modernity as a kind of subject for art history, as a definitive element that gradually came to an end. All of this is in it. Modernity is not a single entity, and I suspect that Koolhaas deliberately voiced the theme as ambiguously as he did, because all of these layers, and definitely many other ones that we're not even aware of, are in fact there. At the same time, they can't be entirely kept separate, and it's not that simple to say that we're talking only about this one and that one should be left for other disciplines. All of them are related to each other.

This multiplicity of meanings also came out within the level of the individual exhibits in the national pavilions. Some of them accentuated the aesthetic, stylistic level of modernism, such as the pavilion of Germany, where – in the West – after World War II modernism understandably also formed an important political theme. Others stressed the social-political aspect, such as the Chilean pavilion, and we could go on even further.

- cř They all chose their own approach to make sure that the theme was workable, their own perspective, and tried to get the most out of it that they could. Just as we did. Already we've heard several times over that it was a terribly immense task, that we all must have broken our teeth on it, and that it could even have been a definite strategy to have everyone break their teeth.
- MH But did you notice that in this way there occurred a great many moments of border-crossing? This in and of itself was enormously liberating. The energy you felt there when the individual curators met up was unbelievable. All of them were full of their own adventures, their gains and losses during the realisations. At the same time, a great many borders simply were erased, such as between North and South Korea, with the joint (South) Korean pavilion winning first prize, or the Czechoslovak pavilion, or the Scandinavian pavilion essentially devoted to Africa. This means that architecture became the means to unlock historical traumas, which is an incredible achievement. Of course, taking such a long look back at the great century of modernism, precisely from the standpoint of a Euro-American interpretation, from the standpoint of the classical Western world, could lead to a certain frustration. No longer is so much being built here, now everywhere else is seeing the building, we're no longer the centre of this development, what will become of us, and so on. And then you come across those instances or countries which have been through all of this several times, such as Japan. The Japanese pavilion was amazing, a whole range of things to make us think, from small inventive designs and aesthetic treats up to more general ideas of how architecture should move into the future. And yet these were all experiments from a single period. I would say that it will be very hard to create another architecture biennale that would have such a thematic span, such an atmosphere and such a synergy as this one. The discussions I've been having with Cyril on this theme have been going on for over ten months and it doesn't seem that they're losing interest. Similar debates right now are present in all the countries that participated, lots of them and even linking up together. And this is probably the greatest justification of all for this past biennale.