

INTRODUCTION

Writing a Postwar History

The biggest victim of the Stalinization of architecture was housing. [Karel] Teige would have recoiled in horror at the endless drab rows of prefabricated boxes of mass housing proliferating around all the major cities of Czechoslovakia. Here was the exact antithesis of his utopia of collective dwelling, resembling more the housing barracks of capitalist rent exploitation and greed than the joyful housing developments of a new socialist paradise.... The result was one of the most depressing collections of banality in the history of Czech architecture, one that still mars the architectural landscape of this small country and will be difficult—if not impossible—to erase from its map for decades, if not centuries. Eric Dluhosch, 2002

Few building types are as vilified as the socialist housing block. Built by the thousands in Eastern Europe in the decades after World War II, the apartment buildings of the planned economy are notorious for problems such as faulty construction methods, lack of space, nonexistent landscaping, long-term maintenance lapses, and general ugliness. The typical narrative of the construction and perceived failure of these blocks, the most iconic of which was the structural panel building (*panelový dům* or *panelák*, for short, in Czech), places the blame with a Soviet-imposed system of building that was forced upon the unwilling countries of Eastern Europe after the Communists came to power.¹ This shift not only brought neoclassicism and historicism to the region but also ended the idealistic era of avant-garde modernism, which disappeared with the arrival of fascism in many European countries but survived in Czechoslovakia through World War II. Like many interpretations of

the early decades of East European communism, this narrative emphasizes the Soviet role in these developments and reinforces the notion of a schism between the interwar and postwar histories of the region.

In former Czechoslovakia, this received history has been especially alluring since interwar modern architecture is held in such high regard. There are world-class examples of cubist, constructivist, and functionalist buildings across the region. In the 1920s and 1930s, Czech and Slovak architects were connected to the international avant-garde through a network of Dutch, French, German, and Swiss designers, many of whom visited Prague during their travels through Central Europe.² They participated in international organizations such as CIAM (Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne, or the International Congress of Modern Architecture) and published journals and books highlighting their prolific production.³ The Baťa Shoe Company, famous for its interest in modern architecture, had its headquarters in Moravia, where the owners built a modern factory town with a state-of-the-art movie theater, department store, hotel, and skyscraper office tower.⁴ Many architectural historians who have written about Czechoslovak modernism have lamented the lack of a definitive history of Czechoslovak architecture in the interwar period.⁵ A number of excellent studies in Czech, Slovak, and English have recently closed this gap in the scholarship, however.⁶

To greater and lesser degrees, these studies propose that the historiography of the modern movement should return Czechoslovakia to its rightful place as one of the most outstanding sites of avant-garde architecture in the world. Scholars in the Czech Republic and Slovakia typically do this implicitly, offering extensive documentation of the massive production of Czech and Slovak modern architects. There have also been a number of exhibitions and accompanying catalogues that have made drawings and photographs of projects available.⁷ The studies written by émigré scholars or those written in the region for an international audience often have an overtly national tone, one that equates the end of communism with the restoration of the country's standing as a modern European nation. For example, in the introduction to his translation of Karel Teige's *The Minimum Dwelling*, Eric Dluhosch refers to "the liberation of Czech architecture from its Soviet imprisonment" after the "Iron Curtain was lifted by the Velvet Revolution."⁸

Building on the existing English-language scholarship in a 1993 essay, Kenneth Frampton summarized many of these widespread views:

Czechoslovakia has been largely ignored by Western European historians of the modern movement. While by no means the only Central European culture to be slighted by Western cultural history (Hungary was neglected to an equal degree), Czechoslovakia was certainly one of the most significant from the standpoint of twentieth-century modernization. When one looks back over half a century to

the country's modern movement, one cannot avoid being impressed by the way in which Czech modern architecture especially, together with a modern *modus vivendi*, became an expression that was seemingly embraced by the entire society. It was as if the spirit of modernity sustained by this culture embodied the very essence and identity of the new republic which had been created out of the ashes of the First World War and the ruined Habsburg Empire.⁹

Frampton ended the essay with a reflection on the intervening decades:

If any nation ever possessed the cultural and technical capacity to give Socialism a human face, it was this one. When one looks back at these historically modern but, after the passage of more than fifty years, now remote people, one cannot resist thinking of them as belonging to an innocent and vital modernist movement, one that has since become jaded and lost, destroyed on every side by the depredations of war and terror, and by a consumerism that knows no bounds and has no cultural *raison d'être*. One looks at them across the chasm of a vast and destructive time as embodying a hope: the promise that small and relatively prosperous nations may yet still realize a mediated modernity worthy of the name.¹⁰

For cultural historians of Czechoslovakia, this idealization of the First Republic (1918–1938) and its modern “essence” will be familiar. It was a theme that shaped much of the pre-1989 literature on twentieth-century Czechoslovakia by portraying the turn toward communism as a national tragedy.¹¹ It is only recently that a more complex picture of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s has begun to emerge.¹²

Within the field of architectural history, the result of this idealization of interwar architecture has been twofold. On the one hand, there remains a desire to uncover the fabled record of this “innocent and vital modernist movement,” hence the continued call for a definitive history despite the increasing number of comprehensive and competent studies on the topic. In 2005, curator and art historian Jaroslav Anděl remarked that a survey of “the modern movement in architecture in interwar Czechoslovakia . . . is long overdue.”¹³ Two years later, architect Eric J. Jenkins, writing in the journal *Centropa*, conveyed his desire for “the still-missing, thorough history of Czechoslovak modern architecture between 1920 and 1946” that would give his research on Baťa architecture a “contextual discourse.”¹⁴ Given the long bibliography of journal articles, exhibition catalogues, and books in this text, this refrain seems to indicate a desire for something more than just a survey. It seems instead that some scholars are looking for a more tangible embrace of the Czech avant-garde by mainstream architectural historians in the “West,” which may require more than just a national survey to achieve.

On the other hand, the formulation of the communist period as, in Frampton's terms, a “vast and destructive time” creating an impassable “chasm” that distanced the “remote” people of the interwar period from those living in

the 1990s, has left the period between 1938 and 1989 largely unexplored. Many Czech scholars agree with this perspective and, preferring not to engage with questions of communism, have largely ignored the period.¹⁵ As Dluhosch's statement indicates, the general perception, especially among older scholars, is that architecture of the postwar period distorted and perverted the project of interwar modernism to such an extent that the buildings of the period became the "exact antithesis" of the "socialist paradise" promised by theorists such as Karel Teige.¹⁶ Journalist and architect Stephan Templ spoke even more directly to this point when he wrote in a 1999 exhibition catalogue that, at the end of the First Republic, "a half century of darkness was to descend: This was the end of the modern era."¹⁷

There are signs that this attitude may finally be fading as the generation of architectural historians trained after 1989 matures. Recently there have been several exhibitions, catalogues, and books on the postwar period focusing primarily on the architectural exceptions of the period, including single projects such as the Czechoslovak pavilion at Expo '58 in Brussels, the work of individual architecture offices such as the SIAL group in Liberec, or surveys of unique examples.¹⁸ Unlike those projects, this book considers what Dluhosch has described as the "endless drab rows of prefabricated boxes," the everyday architecture that constitutes much of the built environment of former Czechoslovakia.¹⁹

SITUATING THE PROJECT

This book is the result of attempts to filter, edit, and analyze an enormous collection of archival, primary source, and photographic material gathered in the Czech Republic and Slovakia from 2002 to 2008. One of the most important sources was the professional journal *Architektura ČSR* (Czechoslovak Architecture), published from 1939 to 1942 and from 1946 to 1990. Archival collections, unavailable to scholars until after 1989, were another critical component, along with many contemporary books, pamphlets, and publications that have received no scholarly attention until now. The results are uneven at times and simplifications had to be made in order to let the argument overtake the many details. What follows is, therefore, one path through these sources, rather than a definitive or final interpretation.

From the start, understanding the complex relationship between architects and the Communist Party was one of the most challenging aspects of this research. Many historians have assumed that the party was an oppressive force acting from outside to influence architectural production. The documents and texts utilized for this project reveal a different story. Architects were typically members of the party, and those who were not participated in a state apparatus organized on the principles of the planned economy. Thus,

architects who were not party members were still subject to the same professional standards and expectations as those who were. With few exceptions, all architects in early postwar Czechoslovakia, regardless of party membership status, conceived of their work in a materialist framework that emphasized buildings over architectural discourse in the sense that discourse was abstract and intangible. As quantitative indicators overtook the more creative aspects of their everyday work, they adapted to this new context by changing some of the criteria by which they judged their own work, finding satisfaction in providing for people's basic needs, such as housing.

This project is both a history of building typologies and an exploration of architectural practice. It chronicles changes in the profession following the transition to state socialism, when architects became technicians and industrial producers rather than artists or individual creators. In a purely stylistic analysis, the shift from the elegant forms of the interwar years to the crude and heavy constructions of the postwar period could be posited as the loss of an aesthetic sensibility or the forced imposition of socialist dogma in the realm of artistic production. This book argues, instead, that the change was a symptom of the broader postwar reconstitution of the cultural landscape, a recalibration of the relationship between creative practices and technological determinism. Starting just after the war and intensifying after 1948, the balance between these two competing interests tipped heavily in favor of technology, even during the era of socialist realism, when architectural research on standardized types continued without interruption. With this shift, architecture became part of the state apparatus, establishing a new set of priorities and goals for practitioners and making the autonomous expression of individual design intentions appear to be as intellectually misguided as free-market capitalism was in the realm of economics.

This scenario was not unique. A similar process of institutionalization in architecture and other professional disciplines occurred across the region.²⁰ This study of Czechoslovakia, therefore, contributes broadly to the historical understanding of socialism and the mechanisms at work within the state to manage the new system. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that each of the Eastern Bloc countries was the product of a particular historical formation. Although they shared similar external pressures from the Soviet Union, common social and economic goals, and comparable systems of governance, each country moved along the path toward socialism at a different pace and with unique local conditions. Rather than focusing on the similarities within the bloc, a strategy common among nonspecialists and regional specialists looking for general patterns, this project focuses on the particularities of Czechoslovakia and draws its conclusions from local events and decisions. From an architectural standpoint, Czechoslovakia is an excel-

lent case study in the region because of its unique nexus of preexisting technological capacity, minimal war damage, and skilled architects who survived the war and stayed in the country.

The time period covered in this book is roughly bracketed by the start of the Košice Program in 1945 and the end of the Second Five-Year Plan in 1960. The point is not that 1945 and 1960 were the beginning and end of a linear trajectory but that these events are points of entry and exit along a continuum of architectural modernism in Czechoslovakia. The text emphasizes 1950, rather than 1945 or 1948, as the most significant turning point for postwar architecture and shows how the transformations that occurred over time were in no way a foregone conclusion when the Communist Party first came to power. The changes resulted from the colliding interests of three groups: the older generation, who were attempting to reconcile their vision of the modern project with that of the new regime; ambitious young architects, educated after the war and eager to satisfy the whims of their superiors; and architectural bureaucrats who struggled to fulfill the ever-increasing demands for housing and other utilitarian buildings in the planned economy. Since architecture is always a product of larger cultural, political, economic, and social systems, this book also contributes to the broader historical discussion about a reperiodization of transition and change in postwar Czechoslovakia.²¹

This book addresses three primary methodological issues that reflect disciplinary tensions in the field of architectural history and the preoccupations of scholars writing about various aspects of European communism. First, this work reveals the value of untapped historical resources that lay dormant in what one might call the gaps between disciplinary interests. This material, both archival and bibliographic, lies beyond traditional scholarly boundaries dictating what is and is not acceptable source material in a given discipline. Thus, in addition to typical textual resources for architectural historians, such as journals, books, and personal papers, the sources utilized include materials from government archives and ministerial and administrative files. These little-explored sources help to expose the intricate web of ministries, administrations, committees, and institutes that defined the socialist landscape in the Eastern Bloc.

Second, it is essential to reconsider the top-down, monolithic image of the Communist Party as the single entity driving cultural production. This simplistic dichotomy of the party on one side and the oppressed producers of culture on the other dissolves when one reexamines the multilayered mechanisms of interaction and negotiation between these two spheres. The research for this work has revealed that, for many architects, remaining or becoming a member of the Communist Party in 1945 or 1948 was an expression of long-held political beliefs about the potential of a socialist society and

not just a status adopted out of fear or by force. Much of this early enthusiasm was dampened in later years, but the architecture of the late 1940s and even the 1950s must be seen in the context of this initial hopefulness.

Finally, this book implicitly challenges methodologies, still common in art and architectural history, that privilege formal and aesthetic criteria over process-driven observations that seek to make connections between objects and the cultural contexts in which they were produced. This reduced reliance on aesthetic criteria necessarily diminishes the importance of conclusions about artistic quality, or what can crudely be characterized as judging between beauty and ugliness. Such subjective determinations are only useful inasmuch as they reveal something about the priorities—be they aesthetic, functional, or technological—of the society in which an object was made and of the critic or historian engaging in the discussion.

With these methodological priorities in place, other questions receive only cursory treatment, for example, whether or not these buildings were formally successful—this is purposefully not a history of architectural styles—or even whether or not people liked living in them. These are valid questions. However, they would be best answered by a different type of study, one based on other methods and assumptions. The objects of study here are not the buildings themselves but rather how they were constitutive of the political, organizational, and professional systems within which they were conceived and built. Czechoslovakia was a country with a strong aesthetic tradition and well-developed building industry, yet within one professional generation it underwent a total transformation, as standardization and typification replaced an older model of individual commissions. This book attempts to explain why and how this transformation occurred.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN 1945

The architectural developments discussed in this book must be situated within a specific and unique context. Despite scholars' tendency to describe the Eastern Bloc as a homogeneous region, each of its countries had different histories and wartime experiences. Thus, they came out of the war with distinct problems, strengths, and levels of legitimacy. Although the nostalgic desire for the peace of the interwar republic and the country's relative lack of physical and economic damage during the war positioned Czechoslovakia to emerge from the occupation more quickly than neighboring Poland and Germany, hindsight reveals that this fragmented and depleted environment was the perfect incubator for state socialism.

The Košice Program, drafted in Moscow under Soviet supervision in April 1945, set out a new framework for postwar governance and determined much about the immediate postwar experiences of the country's inhabitants.

Representatives of four Czech and two Slovak political parties participated in drafting the program, and these six political parties together became known as the National Front. The Czech parties included the Communists, whose leaders had spent the war in Moscow; the weakened Social Democrats, who would soon merge with the Communists; the Czech National Socialists, the party of President Edvard Beneš; and the centrist People's Party, which had been Catholic but agreed to take a nondenominational stance after the Moscow negotiations.²² The Slovaks sent representatives of the Slovak Democratic Party and the Slovak Communist Party, but the more powerful populist and rightist Slovak parties were absent.²³ With Communist support, Edvard Beneš was reelected president in the new coalition government, and democratic general elections were scheduled for 1946.²⁴

The Košice Program was wide ranging and ambitious. Economically, its immediate goals were the nationalization of large industries and the redistribution of confiscated German, Jewish, and Hungarian property to Czechs and Slovaks.²⁵ All "rightist" political parties were banned immediately "for collaborating with the Nazi regime." This, of course, was facilitated by the parties' lack of representation at the meeting. As a largely socialist coalition, the National Front supported "a long list of social rights, including the right to employment, vacation, medical care, and old age insurance."²⁶ Slovaks were recognized as a "distinct nation," but their request for sovereignty in a federalized state was rejected, a decision that would continue to influence Czech-Slovak relations into the 1990s. The program called for popularly elected national committees to be formed at the local, district, and regional levels "to administer public affairs."²⁷ This form of governance was described as a "people's democracy."²⁸ From the start, these committees had disproportionately high Communist Party representation and played an important part in the state apparatus.²⁹

The six months following the adoption of the Košice Program came to be known as the "National Revolution."³⁰ Despite the preeminent position of the Communist Party in the initial Moscow negotiations, the political rhetoric of the National Revolution did not include blatantly Marxist language. Historian Bradley Abrams notes that, at the time, the Communist Party did not demand "the wholesale transplantation of Soviet culture onto Czech and Slovak consciousness."³¹ Abrams shows, instead, that after the May 1945 liberation, Communist Party intellectuals formulated an argument that emphasized "patriotism, national traditions, [and] the progressive quality of the national character" as the foundations of the party's legitimacy.³² The party purposefully chose to build their base of support through local and regional initiatives in anticipation of the upcoming general elections rather than start their campaign with aggressive language borrowed from the Soviets. These

efforts were rewarded in May 1946, when the Communist Party received 40 percent of the popular vote in the Czech lands and 30 percent in Slovakia; combined, the party's take was almost 38 percent of the total.³³ It was only then that they came forward with the "political strategy" of the "Czechoslovak road to socialism," which emphasized the basis of socialism in the progressive Czech national character.³⁴ In the rhetoric, this progressive character was put in opposition to the fascism of the German and Hungarian peoples and the perceived backwardness of the Soviets.

A "genuine coalition" government ruled in Czechoslovakia until February 1948.³⁵ It oversaw an economic recovery, the massive transfers of large populations, and the creation of a Czech and Slovak nation-state, which constructed its identity in opposition to the free-market capitalism and multinational composition of the interwar republic. As an occupied territory safe from Allied bombing until late in the war, Czechoslovakia had suffered less physical and economic damage in World War II than many European countries.³⁶ Ground battles occurred away from major urban centers and disproportionately in Slovak territory, which was more rural and less industrialized.³⁷ Although specific Czech factories were bombed, including the Baťa Works in Zlín, the Vítkovice Iron Works in Ostrava, and the Škoda Works in Plzeň, the damage in the Czech lands was contained and reversible.³⁸ Some economists have even claimed that the country was enriched by the war.³⁹ By the end of the Two-Year Plan in December 1948, the economy had almost reached 1937 levels and exceeded those with respect to "national income, transportation, and industrial production, which were higher by 10 percent." The building sector, however, was one of the worst performers, fulfilling only 66 percent of its targets; agriculture reached 80 percent.⁴⁰

Despite these circumstances, it would be incorrect to argue that the country emerged from the war unscathed. In his assessment of the overall health of the Czechoslovak economy in 1945, economist Jan Michal described other types of destruction that occurred, including "the reckless wartime depletion of natural resources, the great distortion of the pattern of output, employment, and trade, and the disruption of the monetary system, in addition to physical destruction and losses in territory and population."⁴¹ Food was in short supply across the country, with rations as low as 1,300 calories a day in May 1945, increasing to 1,800 calories by the end of the year, but still remaining below the "desirable level" through the 1940s.⁴² The far eastern region of the country, Subcarpathian Ruthenia, was ceded to the Soviet Union at the end of the war, resulting in the loss of territory and 850,000 inhabitants.⁴³ The Jewish population was also decimated, through emigration and extermination in concentration camps. Only 44,000 of the 356,000 people who identified their religion as "Jewish" in the 1930 census remained in the country by

1945. Many of those who stayed then left in 1948, with another wave of emigration in 1968. By 1980, only 9,000 Jews lived in Czechoslovakia.⁴⁴

The most significant loss of population was due to the expulsion of citizens determined to be of German descent. In 1945 and 1946, three million people were forcefully expelled from the country as a form of war retribution and for what, at the time, was justified as a national security measure.⁴⁵ The earliest and most violent expulsions occurred in the summer of 1945. These came to be known as the “wild transfers,” when in just a few months more than seven hundred thousand Sudeten Germans were “herded” by Czechs into Nazi-style “concentration and labor camps... where as many as 30,000 Germans died.”⁴⁶ During 1946, the remaining German population was transported to German territory in a more orderly fashion, but they were forced to leave with few possessions and no compensation for their property or assets.⁴⁷

As a result of these combined population losses, Czechoslovakia’s population shrank dramatically, from 15.9 million in May 1945 to only slightly more than 12 million in December 1946.⁴⁸ Many Jews and Germans had owned or managed industrial, banking, and commercial operations. The loss of most of those populations, together with the reduction of the skilled labor pool and the depletion of the industrial knowledge base, contributed to extreme labor shortages that were evident after the war and would continue to plague the country for decades.⁴⁹

The social and cultural consequences of the war proved to be the most destructive. In 1939, 70 percent of the population of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia was Czech; by 1950, this number had grown to 94 percent.⁵⁰ As historian Nancy Wingfield has shown, the loss of the country’s long-established German community created the need to construct a “new collective memory” for the country, one that “used socially organized forgetting—exclusion, suppression, and repression—on the one hand, and socially organized remembering—the deliberate invention, emphasis, and popularization of elements of consciousness—on the other... to legitimate the new ‘purer’ postwar Czechoslovak nation-state.”⁵¹ Beyond the outright anti-German propaganda common in political rhetoric, aspects of forgetting included changing building, street, and city names from German to Czech; removing monuments related to German historical figures; and forbidding the use of the term “Sudeten” after May 1945.⁵² The construction of this “new collective memory” focused largely on unifying the Czech and Slovak peoples, whose histories and wartime experiences were distinct. Within architecture, this new collective memory was created by emphasizing the shared vernacular heritage of the region and by highlighting the modernizing character of Czech and Slovak architecture in the interwar period.⁵³

In addition to the loss of the German population, there was a large trans-

fer of Czechs and Slovaks from the interior of the country to the “borderlands,” the Czech term for the Sudetenland, where they were promised property confiscated from Germans and Jews, including businesses and homes. According to historian Adrian von Arburg, between 1945 and 1950, 25 percent of all Czechs left their homes and “tried to build a new existence in the borderlands.”⁵⁴ As part of the Košice Program, the Communist Party gained control of the Ministry of the Interior, which was responsible for organizing the resettlement of the borderlands. The ministry opened what they called the Settlement Office (Osídlovací úřad) in the fall of 1945 to oversee these activities. Due in part to the association of the Communist Party with the resettlement efforts, a significant portion of the Communist Party’s support in the 1946 general elections came from this region.⁵⁵

One of the most serious obstacles to this population shift to the borderlands was the lack of housing. Although there were as many as 640,000 apartments and houses in the government’s possession by 1946, some belonged to Czechs returning to the area, some were primitive even by interwar standards, and others suffered war damage and needed reconstruction.⁵⁶ Historian Zdeněk Radvanovský writes that this “catastrophic lack of housing” was “a burning problem for practically all new settlers,” many of whom had to live with friends, in hotels, or in makeshift accommodations.⁵⁷ To alleviate the crisis in this critical industrial area, many of the postwar government’s early housing initiatives focused on this region, where housing shortages would continue into the 1950s.⁵⁸ The cities around Ostrava suffered similar problems since the housing stock in that area was depleted and the coal mining and steel industries began expanding rapidly after the war. Given these circumstances, architects quickly recognized the crucial role the profession could play in the future development of the country.