

HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN THE 1970s AND THE EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE YEAR 1975

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ABSTRACT In the time of oppression after the Soviet occupation beginning in late August 1968, Communist Czechoslovakia did not participate in the 1975 *European Architectural Heritage Year* (EAHY 1975) campaign. Czech conservationists, however, attained outcomes of lasting value in the 1970s. Some of these achievements were ahead of, or at least in step with, the ideas of the EAHY 1975. By contrast, the Czech conservation system was unable to stop or slow down the process of neglect, deterioration, and final demise of a considerable part of the country's architectural heritage. This process was reversed with the Velvet Revolution of late 1989 and the dramatic changes that followed. However, new risks to the architectural heritage have arisen with the limitless liberalism of the last decades and it is now time to recall much of the ideals of the EAHY 1975.

1. THE 1970s IN CZECH CONSERVATION: IDEALS AND REALITY

The Seventies, the decade that followed the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, was a gloomy time for most Czechs. It started with massive political purges and ideological censorship. The state authorities, controlled by the Czechoslovak Communist Party, tried to isolate Czechs from any Western influence, and heritage preservation was no exception. That is probably the main reason why the EAHY 1975, with its democratic, pan-European spirit, was not celebrated in Czechoslovakia. Its wonderful documents – the → *Amsterdam Declaration* and the → *European Heritage Charter* (see appendix) – were not published in our country and the whole West European campaign was totally ignored here. It was neither commented on in specialist journals nor mentioned in the daily newspapers or other mass media. The only exception was a rather short and dry notice, written by Emanuel Hruška (1906–1989), a renowned urban planner, who at the time was President of the Czechoslovak ICOMOS (Hruška 1975, 119). In spite of this isolation, the care of architectural monuments in the country had attained some important achievements in the Seventies.

I will mention here only the most important of them. After years of extensive research in the field, using highly complex methodology developed in the Sixties (Korčák 1964, 33–43; Hlobil 1985, 36), the *State Institute for Monument Care* (today called the *National Heritage Institute*), successfully completed one of its main tasks: it prepared for the Ministry of Culture the declaration of 35 of the most valuable and best preserved historic city cores in the Czech lands conservation areas (or, as they are called in this country, reservations). Simultaneously, research and evaluation of another 900 cities and historic urban ensembles was carried out. It proved that the number of reservations, strictly limited by the ministry, was entirely insufficient and that another, perhaps less strict form of urban protection was badly needed. Thus the second form of urban protection was thought over by the Institute (Kibic 1973, 83–104). Later, under the title *conservation zones*, this new protection tool was incorporated, next to reservations, into the new (second in succession) law on monuments, issued in 1978 (Kibic and Vošahlík 2011, 135–235). To cut a long story short, it was in the Seventies when the concept of the present Czech system of urban

protection, certainly one of the most complex in Europe, was born and partly carried out (Vošahlík 1984, 194–199; Kibic and Vošahlík 2011, 304–307).

Apart from this significant achievement, the Seventies saw a great amount of research carried out on historic buildings and other individual monuments. Thorough historic building surveys were done using a unique archaeological method, and led by Dobroslov Líbal (Líbal 1967, 52–71; Líbal 1995, 262–263), who later, in the Nineties, was President of the Czech ICOMOS. It is also worth mentioning that there was a new interest in the value of twentieth-century architecture and its protection (Kudělka 1971, 311–320) and also in the hitherto much underappreciated architecture of the nineteenth century. Thanks to the initiatives of conservationists and the support of the *Union of Czechoslovak Architects*, practically all the buildings by important early modernist and modern architects of the twentieth century were listed in our country in the course of the Seventies (Štulc 2012, 337–339) and a number of nineteenth-century town quarters were declared conservation zones in the following decades (Kuča 1998, 33–68).

In sharp contrast to all this was the extremely inadequate practice of that time. In the Seventies, the years of chronic neglect of the buildings that had been erected in the past, all the existing building stock, a typical feature of the Communist system, led to political decisions to tear down the dilapidated buildings on a massive scale. Frequently, whole historic town cores or suburbs were cleared to make room for extensive new development in the form of huge estates comprising prefabricated concrete panel housing (Aš, Chyše, Horní Slavkov, Příbram, Havlíčkův Brod, Žďár nad Sázavou, Sokolov and many others). Apart from this, some megalomaniac, bulky buildings of highly questionable architectural value caused serious damage to the historic integrity, appearance and natural functioning of historic complexes, including some reservations (like Znojmo, Jihlava, and Olomouc). The continuation of these trends in the following decade brought the architectural heritage of Czechoslovakia to the verge of total collapse (Kuthan 1990, 304–317; Štulc 2007, 50–51).

2. CZECH CONSERVATION AND EAHY 1975

Although in Communist Czechoslovakia no institution directly participated in the wonderful movement that in Western Europe resulted in the EAHY 1975 campaign, many of the progressive ideas of the → *Amsterdam Declaration* and the → *European Heritage Charter* had already been a standard part of Czech conservation philosophy of that time. On the other hand, some postulates of the campaign in Western countries could not be applied in Czechoslovakia because of the totalitarian regime. Focusing on the selected main principles provides the following useful comparison of the declared goals of EAHY 1975 and Czech practice.

The → *European Charter* points to the importance of a monument's surroundings, and states that groups of historic buildings, because of the atmosphere they create together, may acquire the quality of works of art. The Charter thus gives international recognition to the idea which independently became the basis and leading principle of Czech preservation philosophy beginning in the 1890s (Wagner 1946, 28–39; Kotrba and Líbal 1969, 46–51; Hlobil 1996, 4–5). The theory of the artistic character of historic cities was disseminated in our country especially by the reputed *Association for the Preservation of Old Prague* (Klub Za starou Prahu) (Bečková 2002, 45–56) and shared by the most distinguished Czech conservationists of the 20th century, Vojtěch Birnbaum, Zdeněk Wirth, Václav Wagner, Václav Mencl, and Dobroslav Líbal. Thanks to them town conservation areas were proclaimed by the Czechoslovak government as early as in 1950 (Mencl 1951, 129–139) and a bit later this form of urban protection was enshrined in the first Czech (and simultaneously also Slovak) law on historic monuments, passed in 1958. In keeping with the forward-looking legislation, properly staffed administrative and advisory services existed in Czechoslovakia in the Seventies.

On the other hand, the Communist system and its policies led to processes that stood strongly against the EAHY 1975 ideas. The historic centres of cities gradually turned into areas of substandard hous-

ing. Fully in line with Communist social engineering, their inhabitants who were still of working age were offered, sometimes even forced, to move into newly constructed, better-equipped, but mind-numbingly dull concrete panel housing estates (Štulc 2007, 93–110). Some problematic newcomers exchanged them for their original homes. Architectural and urban conservation was hardly the priority of the urban and space planning so strongly recommended by the → *Amsterdam Declaration*. The Socialist building companies, almost totally industrialized in their working procedures, were refusing to work on the repair and restoration of historic buildings, and the traditional skills of builders and craftsmen were left to die out. The impact of all of this on the architectural heritage of the country was tragic. Quality was declining not only in conservation practice, but also in contemporary architecture, the heritage of tomorrow (Štulc 1984, 129–142).

Wholly contrary to the noble, democratic ideas of EAHY 1975 were the fear and unwillingness of the Communist regime to allow the public to get involved in matters of historical preservation. People were not in the least permitted to participate in the making of decisions affecting their environment and their lives. Consequently, Czech professional conservationists, steadily beaten in the continuous struggle against the unqualified opinions of bureaucrats in decision-making positions, were deprived of any visible public support. At the same time, they were deprived of possible collaboration and information exchange with their Western colleagues.

EPILOGUE: AFTER THE VELVET REVOLUTION OF 1989

The conditions for historical preservation changed dramatically in Czechoslovakia and, later, the Czech Republic after 1989 (Hlobil 1990, 317–329). The renewal of democracy, the restitution of property to its rightful owners, and other forms of property privatization, and the total privatization of the state-owned building companies (resulting in their greater flexibility), all these changes ended the long nightmare of Czech conservationists, the seemingly inevitable physical deterioration, so typical of the Seventies and Eighties, which had been leading to the total destruction of the architectural heritage. Other dangerous risks, however, soon arose. First and foremost among them was the pressure of land and housing speculators and enormous investments (Tegethoff 1990, 301–304). From the point of view of conservationists, the Socialist Scylla was superseded by the capitalist Charybdis. In the entirely new situation, Czech historic preservationists had to adapt, it was a great help to them that they inherited an excellent, rather rigorous, and complex law on historic monuments, together with a long tradition of scholarly research, method, and theory. Preservationists were given great support by the general public, which, represented by a number of new non-governmental organizations, was suddenly much more active and involved. The now independent mass communications media were, for the most part, also supportive of historical preservation.

In all that, the Czech conservators found, even if belatedly, much of the fascinating spirit that had changed society's approach to architectural heritage in Western Europe in the Seventies, the spirit that we had been deprived of because of our Communist past. Last but not least, I should mention the fresh start provided by our new communications with colleagues from other European countries and friends on other continents, first of all by way of ICOMOS and its international scientific committees. These contacts give us great moral support. Better communication has also enabled us to encounter also adverse features of the developments in heritage conservation in West-European countries during the last decades, including the impact of neoliberalism, the victories of powerful developers, and, often, the defeatism of authorities. What we are most sorry to see is a certain trend of opportunism in part the conservation community. It is reflected, for instance, in the recently presented concept of tolerance for change as a new paradigm of world heritage conservation philosophy. I mostly believe, however, that the EAHY 1975 anniversary reminds all of us of its wonderful spirit and the ideals so badly needed these days.

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