

Art and Prague's Public Space - Old Traditions and New Dimensions

Art has had a significant place in public spaces, for aesthetic, urbanistic, ideological, representative or other reasons, since ancient times. We can mention Luxor, Babylon, Athens, or Forum Romanum and then go on, in historical sequence, from the Gothic and Renaissance towns to the grandiose Baroque and Classicist concepts. Also in Prague, a unique open air museum of art and architecture, we can find many interesting examples of the integration of sculpture in the context of public space. The most interesting ones are the Romanesque relief of the Judith Bridge, the triumphal decoration of the Old Town bridge tower by Petr Parler, the Baroque plague columns and statues and the unique gallery of sculptures on Charles Bridge, which was originally planned to continue, along the New Castle Steps, up to Prague Castle.

In the 19th century a new sculpture gallery of Prague facades was created (the National Theater), and many monuments, in which this theme was worked out from the traditional solitary level (the Jungman monument), to the complex, multifigural compositions and architectonic projects (Hus, Palacky, the competition for the Zizka monument at the Vitkov hill). The development of avant-garde architecture has restricted the participation of art work in an architectonic or urbanistic concept to a significant extent; however, many interesting projects were created in this field as late as the first half of the twentieth century, with the inventive projects of Zdenek Pesanek in the lead. The collaboration between architecture and art in the shaping of public space issued from the natural unity of disciplines and the still traditional conception of the decorative element in Kotera's generation. At that time also the congenial Plecnik's projects for Prague Castle came into existence. Gocar's generation which followed worked in almost "genetic" collaboration, based on personal contacts which were stressed by membership in the same art groups, or these people taught at the same schools. There is a long list of examples from which we can present Janak's Hlavka Bridge which was finished by several minute architectonic elements and by the sculptures of Jan Stursa and Josef Maratka; or there is the obelisk and the monument of the Dead Prague Citizens, created by Bohumil Hysman in the complex of ministry buildings situated below the Emauz Monastery. After the war, Jaroslav Fragner followed this tradition in his monuments (together with Karel Pokorny and Vincenc Makovsky), and in the reconstruction of the Carolinum, which is not only a model example of the reconstruction symbiosis of the new and the old, and of artistic synthesis, but in the case of the Chancellor's wing and the Lion fountain, also a specimen expansion of an art work into the public space.

In the period after 1945 this situation has been restricted to the creation of ostentatious monuments and facade decorations. Later, at the beginning of the 1960s, in the "thaw" period, there appeared abstract compositions created in the spirit of EXPO 58, some of them surprisingly progressive in the context of works by Miloslav Chlupac, Zdenek Palcr, Vladimir Preclik, the almost forgotten monument of the Czechoslovak Radio by Stanislav Kolibal and Zdenek Rothbauer in Prague - Kbely. The Czechoslovak participation in Montreal and Osaka was the swan-song of the magnificent integration of architecture and art, after which came the "normalization" pressure of the 1970s.

Artistic-ideological boards were established by every regional committee which, together with the omnipotent art commissions of the Czech Artists' Fund, controlled and distributed millions, by means of which they corrupted the compromised artists, and thus created the illusion of a State support of art. There existed a clause about an obligatory four percent investment in art works for every project,

which naturally became an opportunity for a disgusting huckstering, and which rather discredited art in public space. At that time the whole country was contaminated with ugly monuments of labor leaders, and with sculptures of mothers and children. The decoration of the New Scene, Palace of Culture, Prague underground etc. is a "waxwork" sui generis. However, even in this deluge there appeared good works, namely in the field of the less ideologized applied art, which issued from the natural beauty of the material and quality craftsmanship (the works of glass artists, mobiles by V. K. Novak), or in the sphere of reconstructions, (some of the complex garden reconstructions by Otakar Kuca and the circle of his fellow artists, namely Stanislav Hanzik and Josef Klimes).

In the 1980s, we can see just a slight shift from the sterile standard to academic modernism under the influence of fashionable environmentalism, e.g. the attempt at a complex conception of the new pedestrian zones. Unfortunately, the stereotyped combination of complicated paving, curb-stones made of polished granite, and fountains surrounded by neglected bushes, remains the model "enlivenment" of the city parterre in the investors' ideas and projects by nowadays. An impossible-to-overlook signal of that epoch is also the solitary efforts of the younger generation of architects and artists. In this limited space we can mention several old people's homes by Jan Linek and Vlado Milunic with the participation of Karel Nepras, Josef Mzyk, Cestmir Suska, (or the completion of the housing estates of Jizni mesto, the pavilion by Jiri Mojzic, the unrealized project of the shopping center Luziny), or the New Barrandov (Zdenek Holzel, Jan Kerel, in collaboration with Michal Gabriel, Vladimir Preclik). Hardly anybody can imagine today how much energy and effort was necessary to develop these and other projects (e.g. the playgrounds by Tomas Ruller and Kurt Gebauer), which partly remained in plans only, and were forgotten.

In a conscious and evident opposition to the official trends of that time, the exhibitions like Little Town Quarter Courty Yards (Malostranske dvorky), Prague 1981, or Space, Architecture and Art, (Prostor, architektura, vytvarne umeni) Ostrava 1983, which was banned and the catalogue destroyed, attempted a better level of mutual interaction, and a natural creative symbiosis between architecture and art. The idea of the exhibition at the back yards of Little Town Quarter came into existence quite spontaneously, in the circle around the sculptor Cestmir Suska. These people, in fact, wanted to find a place for an art exhibition, away from the closely monitored official or semi-official Prague exhibition halls. The idea behind this exhibition was approved, as it was presented as an attempt at a conservation of monuments and creation of an environment, which was accepted at that time. The creative potential of the action was connected with the vitality of the younger generation. Young artists succeeded with an attractive connection between what was at that time an unusual space installation, and the romantic environment of the Little Town Quarter back yards. The exhibition was a kind of new and unconventional action which drew both the participants and Prague inhabitants into the game, and for this reason it met with a completely unexpected reception. Also, the instant ban, which was practically impossible to uphold, helped the popularity of the exhibition, and made it an adventure in conspiracy, and an enthusiastic discovery. A similar exhibition, called Old Town Courty Yards (Staromestske dvorky), planned for 1982, remained in planning only, and was later exhibited in the Rubin studio, and the projects of the shows at Kampa and Jizni mesto housing estate were not realized at all, after a similar exhibition at the Stromovka tennis courts was banned by the secret police. This successful model for a symbiosis of art works created for a concrete place in a concrete time was taken up by other actions, like the Chmelnice symposium in Mutejovice, or by the exhibitions in Vojan park, Wallenstein garden, Kladno back yards, first Confrontation, Svarov, etc.

It was thus quite logical that the exhibition Little Town Quarter Back Yards was recalled during the show at Old Town shortly after 1989. The legend of Little Town Quarter Back Yards lives on, in a way.

The "Velvet Revolution" and the beginning of the 1990s represent a crucial turning-point because of the total absence of large public orders. The collaboration between architects and artists takes place mostly in the interior reconstructions (David Vavra with the circle of artists, the Holeceks), and only very rarely does an art work occur in a new building. The majority of recent completed projects do not deviate from the traditional schemes, the buildings suffer from the lack of liberality of the investor, and they give a rather puzzling impression. This is, in the first place, true about the monuments (Winston Churchill, British pilots), but it also concerns the sliding lattice of the Myslbek palace, or Sipek's portals at the second courtyard of Prague Castle. This vicious circle is very well illustrated for example by several rounds of the competition for the Capek brothers' monument, in which the most inventive and less traditional design by Pavel Opocensky was finally chosen, although the completed work in the specific site is not very convincing. The attempts at finding a place for Makovsky's statue of T.G. Masaryk, which are still going on, seemed a farce. The dispute over the facing of Vlado Milunic's eye-catcher in front of the City Library took two and a half years. All this, together with the shameful state of the Palach square, or the competition, in which the City Council reversed the decision of the jury, and preferred ready-made clothing over the designs by Karel Nepras, is no tribute to the understanding of this situation by the heads of Prague City Council. One of the few successful projects, which integrate art with the city parterre, is Nepras's guard stones in front of the Lichtenstein Palace, and the synonym for art in a public space in today's Prague, sadly, is the bazaar on Charles Bridge and vulgar billboard advertisements.

The inexhaustible possibilities which widen the spectrum of artistic expression with the new media and new definitions of public space, thus, in fact, remain unexploited. The Board for the Protection and Development of Prague's Culture Space, which was instituted in 1994 as an independent association representing the professional public, also is attempting to aim its activities in this direction. In addition to the expert statements and interventions in the majority of the above mentioned planes and projects, the board tries to emphasize the role of art in the projects, which have been designed completely purposefully so far, such as shop portals, paving, colors of facades, fountains etc. This pressure, however, hasn't been very successful for several reasons. Besides the lack of money for public orders, and the preference for routine technical solutions, there is the surviving, deeply rooted conviction that contemporary art is not able to handle such tasks. Architecture and art really diverge in the end of the twentieth century. Art captures more and more intimate and banal things by means of its subtle methods, it moves away from reality, and is indifferent to public opinion. The architect Zdenek Vavra recently said at a conference held on the theme The Relationship between Art and Architecture: "In an effort to reflect upon relationships and human experience at the end of the twentieth century, artists arrived at an expression which is no more from the material world, an expression which is not related to reality, and thus is of no use for architects." It is, however, necessary to say that such a situation was not caused by postmodern art, but by the crisis of modern art. "The loss of the absolute horizon and nihilistic neuroses are the generally accepted features of our time" (Oldrich Sevcik). However, this is not an absolute truth both for the sphere of art and architecture. As a university teacher I can confirm that there are also students of the traditional ways of expression, and as an art and architecture historian I believe that a tradition has its sense. We should not look for the way out in the separation of the past from the future, but in their symbiosis in the present. The only reasonable solution of the discussion over the

future of Prague is the necessity of a balanced relationship between preservation and development, and in the same way, it is necessary to assert the representation of art works in the city structure in a wider extent. Not only aesthetic reasons speak in favor of this, but also sociological, psychic, and city-forming ones, which stress the involvement of city inhabitants and their identification with the environment. The success of this effort, however, does not depend on the artists themselves, but, among others, on the extent of the projection of this basic premise into the city plan and the Prague development strategy.

The aesthetic quality of the environment used to result not from a political declaration but from the free will of the investors and the users. That is the source of the surviving non-organic and formally decorative connection of art works with architectonic projects. The new period demands an adequate recognition of the long-standing relationship between architecture, art and space, which must be a result of the creativity of architects and artists themselves. I believe this project will bring new stimuli of a long-term character, and that it will not remain in the level of the exhibition of thoughts, parasitic for the unique space of the historical center of Prague.

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