



Late Modernist Slovakia

Built Ideology

From 11 February until 14 March 2014

- Concept:** Adolph Stiller, Henrieta Moravčíková
- Exhibition venue:** Exhibition Centre in the Ringturm
1010 Vienna, Schottenring 30
- Opening hours:** Monday to Friday: 9 am to 6 pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays)
- Press tour:** Monday, 10 February 2014, 11 am
- Speakers:** Adolph Stiller, Henrieta Moravčíková
- Official Opening:** Monday, 10 February 2014, 6.30 pm (by invitation only)
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The latest exhibition in Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein's Architektur im Ringturm series highlights the Slovakian late-modernist architecture. During the 20th century, architecture in the country was often caught in a tug of war between modernism and totalitarianism, due to the influence of mainly undemocratic regimes. Slovakia was not alone in this respect – similar factors played a part in shaping architectural trends in many other European countries, such as Germany, Italy, Spain and – for a brief period – Austria, as well as in states in the former Soviet Union's sphere of influence. The focus of this exhibition – the relationship between modernism and totalitarianism, and how this was mirrored in the architecture of the time – was also the subject of two recent research projects at the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava.

The relationship between modernism and totalitarianism as reflected in architecture

The “success” of totalitarian regimes in Slovakia was limited in terms of both duration and scope. This was not sufficient to promote the evolution of a uniform aesthetic approach; for what it was, this approach also contained echoes of distant architectural designs developed in foreign countries. The powers were unable to set out their own ideas on the subject, and this left professional architects free to take part in a more or less continuous discourse on architecture with their international counterparts.

Even at their strictest, the constraints imposed by Slovakia's totalitarian rulers did not come anywhere close to those seen in Nazi Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union. The concept of totalitarianism outlined by political theorist Hannah Arendt only partly describes the circumstances in the First Slovak Republic from 1939-1945 and the Communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1953.

However, the benchmark of present-day architectural critique should only be applied with the aim of drawing attention to past designs against the backdrop of trends that were in motion at the time of construction, and in order to prompt debate on what is now historical architecture. The principles of modernism began to emerge in Slovakia in the early 1920s and as a consequence they shaped architecture there to a far greater degree than in other countries. Modernism called the architectural tune across Slovakia throughout the 20th century.

Moreover, the increasingly reform-minded socialist regime in Czechoslovakia can be named as “authoritarian”, “authoritative” or even “post-totalitarian”, since the system was “totalitarian in a way fundamentally different from classical dictatorships” as the dissident and later Czech President Václav Havel put it in 1978.

The projects which reflect this political dissonance include the Representation House in Žilina with its ideologically-sound formal language, the socialist model town of Nová Dubnica and Bratislava's remarkable Liberty Square. In contrast, the Slovak Broadcast Building is symbolic of a genre of public buildings that prompted heated discussion in the second half of the 20th century, alongside the Slovak National Gallery, Hotel Kyjev, the Prior department store and the House of Culture ROH, all in Bratislava, as well as the memorial of the Slovak national uprising in Banská Bystrica. Many structures, such as the Kamzík TV Tower in the Slovak capital and FIS sports centre in Strbské Pleso, blurred the line between architecture and infrastructure; they are represented at the exhibition by Bratislava's SNP Bridge.

Petržalka: a symbol of public residential construction

Few urban planning compositions or districts in Slovakia are as well known as Petržalka. The area became a synonym for plattenbau housing and was the flagship for the country's housing construction programme under socialist rule. The basic design for the estate complex intended to house 150,000 people, was the work of Slovak architects Jozef Chovanec and Stanislav Talaš. Around

50,000 apartments were built in Petržalka in just under 30 years, and about 112,000 people currently live there. In spite of its numerous negative connotations, in many respects the development remains an unrivalled example of urban planning and architecture in the former Czechoslovakia, and one of the world's most exceptional public residential construction projects.

The building work began in April 1973. The jury for what was arguably Slovakia's most important international architectural competition (Roland Rainer and seven other Austrian studios participated) recommended that Jozef Chovanec and Stanislav Talaš be commissioned with the planning – and both architects proceeded to implement a number of design elements which had been criticised in no uncertain terms by the jury. Foremost among these was the central axis – an urban boulevard which the architects had proposed as the backbone of the entire district and the focal point of working, social and cultural life. The Petržalka project was publicised in trade journals as a milestone in the development of “real socialism”, and its appeal also extended to newspapers and TV.

In line with the step-by-step planning of the country's overall social development which was under way at that time, the plans foresaw the incremental construction of the boulevard, as permitted by the available technical and financial means. One survey based on the engineering report asked to what extent the project would be seen as a technically feasible, visionary modernist undertaking or whether it would be commandeered for propaganda purposes with a view to strengthening the ideological drive towards building a socialist society.

In spite of its obvious shortcomings, in particular a lack of variety in the apartment blocks and the failure to implement the much-heralded principle of complex residential construction, Petržalka still outstrips modern-day housing estates in terms of its schools and pre-school facilities. The district's imperfections are attracting more and more investors – the expansive structure has left ample space for new ideas, including the revival of the central boulevard included in the original plans.

Slovak Broadcast Building: a late modernist masterpiece

The Slovak Broadcast Building is an outstanding example of late modernist architecture in Slovakia. The initial concept was developed within the scope of the comparatively relaxed socio-political climate of 1960s Czechoslovakia, with the first decisive steps towards realising the project taken in the late 60s and early 70s.

Architect Miloš Chorvát emerged as the winner of a design competition for the new building. However, the decision was subsequently made to use the concept put forward by the planners Ďurkovič, Svetko and Talaš which had from the outset been characterised by a functionally concentrated design and an overall unconventionally conceived building. Once the issues encountered during the early developmental phase had been addressed, the outcome was a self-contained urban structure of the surroundings of the Slovak Broadcast, comprising an extended plinth on top of which stood the dynamic element of the new broadcasting house – an inverted four-sided pyramid – containing the studios.

The imposing base of the building contains all of the most important recording studios and production rooms, with acoustic insulation offering full protection against external interferences. The platform roofs are spread across different levels, doubling up as extended terraces. The editorial and broadcasting areas rest on nine imposing diagonal struts which are anchored to the plinth, while the editing suites are located behind the honeycomb of diagonal steel ties which give the facade its characteristic appearance. At the heart of the building is the communications core, while the internal hall between it and the external walls gradually expands on the upper floors of the building. Extending across five floors, the access routes create an unusual sense of fluency between spaces. Each floor extends above the floor below by 3.30m, creating the requisite amount of editing space side by side across a minimal number of storeys. This approach also guards against excessive sunlight and keeps cooling demand to a minimum. The external increasing volume of the pyramid

creates the internal space where the most sensitive aspects of radio broadcasting are housed – soundproofed rooms such as sound archives and radio stations. These rooms are appended to the uppermost part of the reinforced steel core in the form of a steel construction which reflects the external form of the building. The machine rooms for the HVAC systems which ventilate the broadcasting rooms and sound archives in the upper part of the inverted pyramid are integrated into the tip of the vertical core.

Bratislava branch of the Czechoslovakian National Bank: timeless quality

The National Bank of Czechoslovakia decided to build a Bratislava branch in the second half of the 1930s, and in 1936 announced an architectural competition for its design, which was won by Slovak architect Emil Belluš. The National Bank was given a site at the top of Štúrova, a street that led from the former Laurinc Gate to the bridge over the Danube.

Although the building was conceived during a period of democracy, it is clear that it was shaped by other forces. The exterior of such a significant building as the National Bank is decisive, representing both strength and power. Its appearance seems to reflect its solemn state function while also presaging the impending war. Instead of being smoothly rendered, the travertine cladding that covers the entire building is coarsely worked and fluted in various ways, and the façades give an impression of seclusion. As the windows follow traditional vertical lines, their width is minimised – a point emphasised by the narrow grouping of the window frames over the two levels of the ground floor. On the upper floors the windows gradually become smaller, and the tiny windows on the top floor give the appearance of the building sealing itself off.

Completed in 1939, the building became the Slovakian National Bank. After the Second World War it was home to the Bratislava branch of the Czechoslovakian State Bank. When the National Bank of Slovakia moved into a new building in 2002, its former premises became the offices of the general prosecutors. The building stands out for the incredible quality of its construction – apart from the natural patina of travertine, the passage of time has not left its mark on the structure.

The exhibition

In its exhibition and accompanying catalogue, Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein presents Slovakian architecture of the late modern period, focusing on the relationship between modernism and totalitarianism. The exhibition attempts to spotlight on this theme by examining seven case studies. The catalogue provides a detailed commentary on the exhibition and includes the results of two recent research studies. The exhibition features contemporary photos by the most prominent photographers of the time, taken from a number of important Slovakian archives and collections. They include pictures by Rajmund Müller, Štefan Petraš, Vlastimir Petraš, Peter Šimončík and Karol Kállay, whose son, architect Karol Kállay, worked on various projects for Kooperativa. The most recent photographs are from Olja Triaška Stefanivič's colour photographic essay and were taken in 2012 and 2013.

Catalogue

Architektur im Ringturm XXXV, Spätmoderne Slowakei: Gebaute Ideologie; Adolph Stiller (ed.); 180 pages; German; featuring contributions from Henrieta Moravčíková, Peter Szalay, Matuš Dulla, Mária Topolčanská, Marián Potočar, Katarína Haberlandová; fully illustrated. Price: EUR 26