

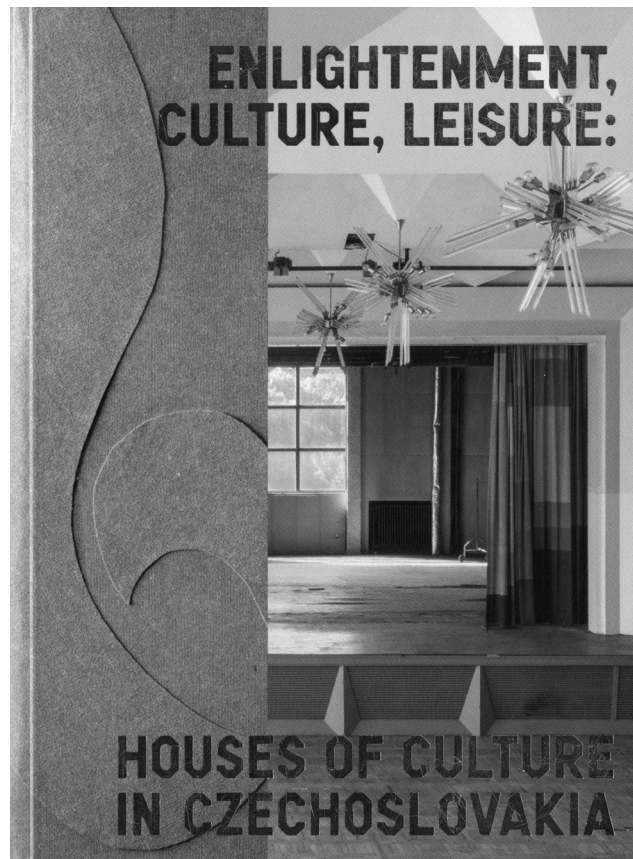
Houses of Culture in Czechoslovakia

Between Utopia and Reality

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Enlightenment, Culture,
Leisure: Houses of Culture
in Czechoslovakia, 2023
*Janečková, Michaela and
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The growing historiographic interest for architecture in the former socialist countries has generated numerous interpretative models, among which the phrase “socialist modernism” is one of the most common denominators, used to (de)code the cultural and social identity of a by-gone political system. Yet, more than three decades after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the presumptions that socially engaged architecture is determined by ideology and that its modernity needs discovering in the space “in-between” the culturally dominant systems in both East and West remain a constant of architectural historiography.¹

The historical and contemporary roles of multifunctional buildings and institutions for culture production, as well as their process of transformation up until the present, have not been sufficiently explored, whether in scholarly research into socialist architecture in general or as part of decolonising architectural culture from stereotypes of political power. The collection of essays titled *Enlightenment, Culture, Leisure: Houses of Culture in Czechoslovakia*, edited by Michaela Janečková and Irena Lehkoživová, is a major contribution to the research field, bringing into the spotlight the “houses of culture” as an important genre in modern architecture production. Exploring the topic across 900 pages, it is a landmark study of ideas, pivotal buildings and an intellectual milieu in the context of complexities and contradictions of time, charged with faith in a better future, yet gradually fading away in the decades to come.

As David Crowley highlights in his important foreword, this essential book is a valuable overview of houses of culture in Czechoslovakia as “a phenomenon with deep historical footings”; related to political, cultural and economic identities. Among the chief merits of this exceptional book is its ambition to document the rise of a specific architectural typology conceptually, its evolution over time, and the process of transformation of its larger meanings. In particular, it explores the questions of how a built form often criticized as a direct expression of the totalitarian system managed to open new perspectives of architecture production, and how these ‘sites’ generate dialogue in contemporary architectural culture.

The organisation of this impressive volume is persuasive, though with a few omissions and redundancies, as the outcome of the scope of the “macro” and “micro” perspectives of the individual chapters. The writing style accentuates the main topic and the latest disciplinary perspective, grounded on the close reading of a variety of sources alongside material culture, physical fabric, and written primary sources to provide adequate evidence. Applying the interdisciplinary approaches of architectural history, but also social, economic, and political history, as well as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and curatorial studies, the book focuses on the discourses surrounding the dynamics of political aspects, and the multilayered and changing roles of socially engaged architecture. The general introduction examines the typology of houses of culture in Czechoslovakia as a site of

conflicting visions, meanings and experiences of space. Organised according to the cited methodological apparatus and chronological aspects, the following chapters undertake a comparative analysis of case studies, providing a better understanding of the heritage of modernism, as well as key aspects of its relevance today. The structure of the book comprises four main units, related to the conceptual models, content and context. The first group of chapters argues that the establishment and activities of houses of culture should be analysed as an integral part of an architectural typology of multifunctional buildings for educational and cultural purposes dating from the 19th century. As such, the first group of texts explores the historical context in different perspectives: changing concepts of culture as a tool of emancipation from the 19th century onwards (Karel Šima), conceptual models of architectural typology in the period prior to First World War (Jan Galeta) and a close reading of the typology of the redoute as a symptom of the specific societal situation in Slovakia (Katarina Haberlandová and Laura Krišteková). The second section of chapters addresses the architectural typology of houses of culture in former Czechoslovakia during the period of state socialism. A wide range of aspects are explored, from the standardisation of architectural typology and implementation of modular systems (Lukáš Veverka), the introduction of participatory practices through the paradigmatic agenda of “Plan Z” (Jan Zikmund), up to the role of decorative arts and interior design in shaping the visual codes of social agitation (Jitka Šosová). The third section consists of two texts: an overview accentuating the multiple roles of houses of culture in Czechia from 1939 to 1989, written by the editors Michaela Janečková and Irena Lehkoživová, accompanied by a text addressing the political, social and economic aspects which determined the re-definition of these buildings after 1989. The final, and methodologically most consistent, fourth section brings a comprehensive overview of houses of culture in Slovakia by Henrieta Moravčíková and Peter Szalay, accompanied by a case study of the iconic former trade-union centre Istropolis, focused on the destruction of this paradigmatic example of socially engaged architecture in Slovakia, and a critical analysis of the Palace of Culture in Prague by Jiří Andrs, viewed through the lens of “transition as condition”.² The concluding remarks by Josef Ledvina examine the role of photography in (re)shaping the contested meaning of architecture examined in this volume. Taken between 2017 and 2023, the photographs by Martin Netočný and Oskar Helcel establish the visual codes of communicating architectural ideas based on photography, from documentation to socially and politically engaged criticism, as well as relativizing the boundaries between architecture and culture in the sphere of the visual, spatial and ideological aspects of representational discourse. The layout of this richly illustrated book uses the format of the documentary brochure as a model, but the re-interpretation of the medium conceptualizes the subtle relations of word

and image in multilayered visual messages. However, although the illustrations closely follow the textual arguments, the density of images sometimes makes it hard to reconstruct the visual quality.

The book convincingly argues that from some points of view the development of culture houses in Czechoslovakia is similar to the situation in other socialist countries. However, Czechoslovakia has a long and opulent tradition in “enlightening” the people by culture, embedded in the politically formative period of the second half of the 19th century. Concerning the nationalistic movements in the frames of former Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia represents a paradigmatic model for many other social and political contexts. Tracing this historical background, the book examines the innovative and experimental nature of the architectural typology and related conceptual models of socially engaged architecture as an integral part of a societal democratisation and modernisation.

The book highlights key issues of the term “house of culture” as applied to a variety of multifunctional buildings used for cultural and educational purposes, constructed to become sites of social interactions, places where people gathered and socialized, participated in cultural events - yet equally places which strengthened the social integrity of the community and increased the trust people placed in the dominant ideology. As such, the term “house of culture” is the closest translation of “*kulturní domy*”, introducing the pan-Slavic ideas of national and cultural identity, which determined the multiple roles of socially engaged architectural sites assigned to the built environment and institutions throughout the period. Indeed, the term “enlightenment” was common in the period after 1918, closely linked to President T. G Masaryk’s conception of education and culture as vehicles to elevate the mental capacities of the nation-state.

This edited volume aims to bring a comprehensive overview of the intertwined roles, both historical and contemporary, of houses of culture in Czechoslovakia and to assess their future potential by analysing their cultural and historical context and attendant values; programmatic, architectural and urban aspects; including cultural policy and management. Furthermore, it demonstrates

that the topic transcends the field of architectural history and brings into play a critical analysis of political, social and cultural circumstances. To comprehend the complex and contradictory social transformations that include architecture, it is necessary to trace the “complex, meaningful and creative lives of buildings”³ and the changes these buildings undergo over time.

In their investigation of the relationship between programmes, stakeholders, employees, and the architectural environment, the authors relied on archival materials, popular culture and propaganda, as well as on oral history as integral parts of the narrative. One possible criticism of the book might be that it does not fully explore the possibilities of constructing the narrative, particularly the comparative and critical analysis of the architectural typology in wider context of Central and Eastern Europe. To expand our understanding of the house of culture and its phenomenology, and the relationships between different types, the editors could have deepened their terminological discussions.⁴ As is well known, workers’ homes and clubs built in the Soviet Union post-1919 were based on the model of the *Maison du Peuple*. Similarly, the model of transnational exchanges and transfer of ideas and ideologies perhaps could have been better contextualized through the popular typology of hybrid environments including cinemas, theatres, libraries, sports halls, and spaces for various other activities. Still, the critical analysis of multifunctional buildings built on both sides of the Iron Curtain,⁵ as well as the close reading of the ideological program and politics of space from immediate post-revolutionary society through socialist modernism and eventually post-socialist transition and neo-liberal post-capitalism remained out of focus in this volume.

But these are minor quibbles. The book brings a valuable overview of the extensive bibliography and comments accompanying the case studies, which extends the volume’s capacity to serve as an exceptional departure for more advanced studies. As such, the book is a welcome expansion of the research field, and will undoubtedly become a source reference for future scholars, exploring the new interstitial, interdisciplinary narratives of the globalized world.

1 For the debate and expanding the research field, see the series of volumes: MORAVÁNSZKY, Ákos and HOPFENGÄRTNER, Judith (eds.). 2017. *Re-Humanizing Architecture. New Forms of Community, 1950–1970*. Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag; MORAVÁNSZKY, Ákos and KEGLER, Karl R. (eds.). 2017. *Re-Scaling the Environment. New Landscapes of Design,*

1960–1980. Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag; MORAVÁNSZKY, Ákos and LANGE, Torsten (eds.). 2017. *Re-Framing Identities. Architecture’s Turn to History, 1970–1990*. Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag.

2 BLAU, Eve and RUPNIK, Ivan (eds.). 2007. *Project Zagreb. Transition as Condition, Strategy, Practice*. Barcelona: Actar.

3 MAUDLIN, Daniel and VELLINGA, Marcel. 2014. Introduction. In: MAUDLIN, D. and VELLINGA, M. (eds.). *Consuming Architecture. On the Occupation, Appropriation and Interpretation of Buildings*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 1–19. doi: 10.4324/9781315813523

4 See, for example: GALJER, Jasna and LONČAR, Sanja (eds.).

2021. *The Caring State and Architecture. Sites of Education and Culture in Socialist Countries*. Zagreb: Hrvatsko etnološko društvo.

5 CUPERS, Kenny. 2015. The Cultural Center: Architecture as Cultural Policy in Postwar Europe. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 74(4), pp. 464–484. doi: 10.1525/jsah.2015.74.4.464