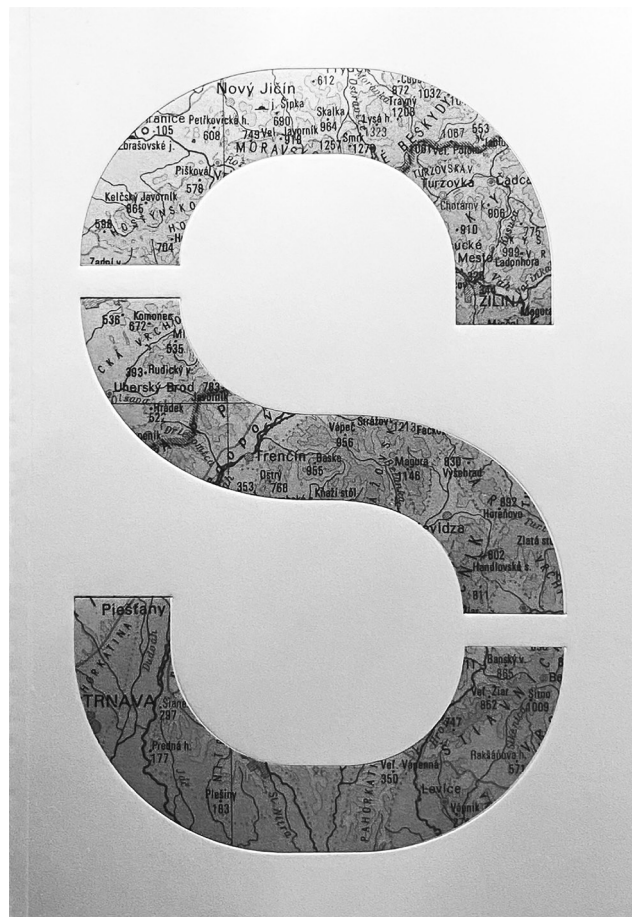


Back to Stavoprojekt Studios

Gabriela Smetanová

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Tóthová, Lucia

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The publication (*Vý*)*Stavoprojekt Trnava, Trenčín, Piešťany* aims primarily to draw attention to an important yet previously unexplored topic for Slovakia's architectural history. As the author herself states in the introduction, the publication was conceived as an outcome of a (more than five-year) exhibition-research project on the Trnava branch of the state design institute Stavoprojekt, along with its external studios in Trenčín and Piešťany, which operated in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 20th century. In turn, the initial exhibition in Trnava became a source of material for further research and subsequent exhibitions. Through the Stavoprojekt Trnava project, the author examines the development and transformation of state institutes and at the same time reflects the political and economic situation in the country.

The publication consists of 4 relatively autonomous sections planned as complementary: History, Interviews, Projects, Exhibitions.

The establishment of Stavoprojekt Trnava in 1972 and its later studios in Trenčín and Piešťany ensued from the gradual autonomy and diversification within the centralized Czechoslovak Stavoprojekt system, headquartered in Prague and Bratislava. A brief historical excursion invokes the interwar period and the ambitions of left-wing architects or builders to organize themselves into various associations and societies/unions. After the war, these movements already matched the general program of nationalization and centralization of the economy in the Eastern Bloc countries. The author describes the connection between the interwar construction industry's aspirations toward industrialization and more effective and scientific methods, and the gradual realization of this vision in the post-war period. It briefly takes us through the changes in the structure and functioning of Stavoprojekt in the 1950s and 1960s against the background of political and legislative changes. The greatest attention is paid to the 1970s and 1980s, the time of the greatest boom in the creation of design institutes and their economic independence, which also includes the founding of the Trnava studios of Stavoprojekt. A valuable addition to the historical overview is several graphic diagrams and tables showing the division and structure of the design institutes according to their constituent units (regionally managed design institutes, ministerial design institutes and cooperative design institutes), together with the chronological or geographical development of their number within the territory of Czechoslovakia. The publication thus offers a very useful insight into the complexity of the organisational structures and outlines their mode of operation.

Stavoprojekt Trnava was formed by the separation and transformation of the Bratislava Studio IV and was officially established at the beginning of 1972. Its founding was the outcome of the situation in which Bratislava, following the example of Prague, was established as an administrative unit separate from the former three regions – West Slovak, Central Slovak and East Slovak. Each region had two towns in which Stavoprojekt offices operated, and after Bratislava became a separate region, Trnava became the second town after Nitra to gain its own Stavoprojekt (p. 77). In the

following years, Trnava Stavoprojekt established its two external studios in Trenčín and Piešťany. Alongside the circumstances of the establishment of the Trnava studio, the author further discusses also the content of the work of the individual studios and their specifics. While most of the studio projects lay within the framework of complex housing construction, the Piešťany studio was established by transforming the Centre for Urbanism and Architecture and thus had a focus on urban design. She describes the relationships between the individual studios, as well as the structure and numbers of its staff and leading personalities. Specifically, she also mentions the representation and roles of women in these studios, revealing that despite the almost equal percentage of women in employment, they were only rarely included as project authors and mostly occupied other positions (draughtswomen, dispatchers, ...). The text outlines some suggestive avenues for possible deepening, but in this case, they remain only in the realm of enumeration and statement.

The author also pays attention to the actual buildings where Stavoprojekt operated in Trnava, Trenčín and Piešťany, but in a somewhat disproportionate way. In the case of the Trnava headquarters of Stavoprojekt, we learn about its location in the historical core, but also its technical and material design, and further its later adaptation for the University of Trnava after the 1989 regime change. The Trenčín studio found itself in a different situation, where they did not have the opportunity to custom-design their workspace, and a part of the former dormitory for singles was adapted for the needs of the design institute, with which the building was therefore shared. The Piešťany studio had the opportunity to design a new building, but little is said about it. In general, this section lacks any wider summary or interpretation. Nevertheless, the attention paid to the buildings where the studios of the design institutes operated in relation to the structure of the design institute itself and the way of working, especially interdisciplinary cooperation, is very stimulating. In this case, though, the treatment is more of a suggestion, a fragmentary presentation of the findings.

An insightful companion to the information summarized and explored in the introduction are the interviews with former employees of the studios. Each city is represented by two interviews – Marián Remenár and Jozef Danák from Trnava, Alexandra Gabrišová and Igor Mrva from the Trenčín branch and Lubomír Mrňa and Viktor Nižňanský from the Piešťany branch. Implicit in this chapter is the emphasis on the need to explore this area in architectural history, as the possibility still exists of interviewing those who worked in the former design institutes. From the transcripts of the fluent informal interviews, we can read echoes of the facts described in the introduction regarding the history and functioning of Stavoprojekt.

Common questions for all respondents include the formation and way of functioning of Stavoprojekt, the technical equipment of the studios, and the overall process of work and mutual cooperation; or additionally the respondents'

university studies and personal reasons for entering architectural practice, or comparison of experiences at different educational institutions or workplaces. Other questions expand the scope to the functioning of studios in relation to commissioning bodies (the state), civil engineers, or building contractors in the historical period and immediate context of a centralised command economy.

Many of the questions focus on the everyday, the pragmatic, the ordinary in the design practice of the 1970s and 1980s. In sole interview with a female representative, the topic of the status of women within the profession is mentioned, yet only in a marginal way – in reference to the unrecognised authorship of the architect in many of her projects. In her views, she felt that she was unlucky because she is a woman, and at that time “men were preferred more” (p. 130) – a very laconic statement among many other working conditions.

In the course of the interview, the author also discusses the methodologies, often now unimaginable then used in the systematisation of knowledge (for example, demographic surveys) for the purpose of drawing up the first municipal masterplans. Teams of architects themselves went to the villages and gathered information from house to house. “I remember, for example, the analysis of the entire West Slovak region. We were investigating how many family houses could still be built. We had to visit all 780 or 800 towns and villages, look for gaps and open spaces in the built-up area.” (p. 151).

The third part is devoted to the projects produced by the individual studios of Stavoprojekt. At the beginning of each section devoted to the three cities, there is a table of the realisations providing the name, location, and authors, highlighting those later presented with photographs or text. The projects are not arranged chronologically, and it is not clear whether in all cases these are exclusively realised projects or also involve unrealised ones. The given selection without the author’s commentary seems arbitrary, but it can be assumed that these are the “most significant” projects. I assume that the selection of buildings represented by the visual material is in this case only on an illustrative level, since the buildings are not, apart from their origin in a given studio, given any historical-architectural context beyond a brief, more formal description of a few select cases. Although the publication is not based on an analysis of the work of individual design institutes, at least some elaboration on the pictorial appendix would have been helpful. What can be gathered from the chapter illustrating the range of projects of the studios in question is the predominant typological composition (the theme of mass housing versus civic amenities, or other specificities of the studios).

In addition to the selection of projects, each city is represented by an exploded axonometric view of the floor plans of the institute building and several historic photographs. The thematization of the background of the project institutes, as outlined in the introductory historical section, is again brought to the foreground. Since the characteristics

of the physical background of the design institute studios in relation to the daily practice of the studios are a very interesting topic, it is unfortunate that this particular section is not given more extensive analytical and interpretive attention. Presented without any further commentary or indication, these axonometries seem unnecessary.

The last chapter – Exhibitions – is devoted to the main activity of the whole project. In the introductory texts provided by the curators of the individual exhibitions in the three different cities, a central concern is the need for viewer involvement, which was also reflected in their composition. In Trnava, the viewers answer the questions of where, who and what was worked on (in Stavoprojekt); in Trenčín and Piešťany, a timeline was created on the wall as a space for the creation of a conceptual map. The interactive nature of the exhibitions served to gather information, especially from the former employees, for further research. “As many archives and sources of project documentation began to be destroyed after the demise of the design institutes in the early 1990s, there is not much material for historical reconstruction available to the current generation, or it is difficult to find. Most often, whatever survives is found in the personal archives of former employees, but only rarely in regional heritage protection offices, period magazines and city archives.” (p. 290) This participatory mode of research creates a truly bidirectional enrichment. Visitors to the exhibition have the opportunity to learn something and contribute something at the same time, aware of the context they are complementing.

The publication, apart from the introduction, reflects more of a data collection part of the research than an analytical one. The amount of material accumulated, together with the interviews and presented projects of Stavoprojekt Trnava, is impressive but does not lead to any specific authorial conclusions. Nevertheless, the various graphical representations (maps, charts, tables) that organize the information collected are very helpful and valuable. The author herself is a graphic designer, which is also revealed in the ambitious design of the book, but especially in the layered treatment of the exhibitions themselves (documented in the photographs in the Exhibiton section). All the same, thanks to this publication we have an idea of the topics needing to be addressed in relation to Stavoprojekt. Among others, these include the design of typified buildings in relation to the possibilities of creativity when the institutes worked mainly on residential buildings – housing estates; the sense of freedom in creation and the forms of its expression; the position of male and female architects within the structure of Stavoprojekt; the mechanisms of commissioning and processing projects, but also the methods of financial evaluation. Or further, the transformation of Stavoprojekt in the change from a centralized economy to a market economy, and notably, the accompanying phenomena and consequences of mass housing construction and rapid urban development as such, as among them expropriation, compensation, or housing allocation and its criteria – all matters that are also thematized.