Jan Kotéřa, 1871–1923: The Founder of Modern Czech Architecture
Municipal House, Prague
19 December 2001—24 March 2002

East Bohemian Museum, Hradec Králové
18 May–15 September 2002

Regional Gallery of Fine Arts, Zlín
19 November 2002–16 March 2003

Of the many students of Otto Wagner, Jan Kotéřa (1871–1923) stands out for his critical role in bringing the lessons of an education in Modernism to bear on an immediate and local level. Studying alongside contemporaries such as Josef Hoffmann and Jože Plečnik, Kotéřa succeeded Hoffmann as the recipient of the Rome Prize in 1897, and went on to become one of the most prolific if least noticed alumni of his generation. Establishing an office in Prague, he distinguished himself as a specialist in smaller commercial and civic commissions and as a favorite designer of residential villas. In the period of his greatest activity before World War I, he saw over thirty projects realized, working close to home in Prague and Hradec Králové, but also in Vienna, Sarajevo, and Sofia. An extraordinarily versatile designer with a strong, often symbolic grasp of materials and plan, Kotéřa single-handedly redefined how Modernism would be understood in Czech architectural circles, and heightened the demands that would be made of his successors and students.

Several years in the making, Kotéřa’s recent exhibition has been the first showing of his work in thirty years. It draws on the rich holdings of the National Technical Museum and the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, and includes original drawings, furniture, and decorative art objects that have been assembled together to reflect the depth of the architect’s involvement in his projects. The organizers have worked to make Kotéřa’s work accessible, and for an exhibition of this nature that aims at a diverse viewing public, their efforts were well rewarded. Sequenced primarily by chronology, the show begins with the architect’s student projects (1894–1897) and ends with his late works (1918–1923), while devoting considerable attention to building typology. Throughout, the exhibition maintains legible groupings of comparable projects, corresponding to Kotéřa’s own professional evolution, which began with the design of residential homes and continued with larger commercial and civic projects.

While many of Kotéřa’s student projects carry the imprint of the Wagner’schule, the consequences of his own inquiries become quickly evident. Early residential projects like the Trmal Villa (1902/3) are characterized by an economy of plan and materials, and reflect an interest in English house design that probably stems from his acquaintance with Hermann Muthesius, whom he would invite to lecture in Prague. Yet it is with his later residential projects that Kotéřa outshines the work of his contemporaries. In the design of his own villa (1908/9), a tall, vertical slab of bare brick encloses a staircase, anchoring the plan of the house and expressing its role as a means of circulation. The two wings of the home, one containing a studio, the other living quarters, extend in a tectonic assembly worthy of the praise later bestowed on the building by proponents of Constructivism such as Karel Teige. As in this building, the surface and detail that Kotéřa used during this period are predominately brick, and the comparisons made to Hendrik Berlage, whose work he studied in Holland, seem appropriate when they are mentioned in the exhibition.

There is more to Kotéřa’s work, however, than a passion for the inherent qualities of materials. We come to identify a heightened, symbolic approach to expressing the function of the building and its components through the exterior. Such is the case with the remarkable Urbánek House (1911–1913). Built for an aspiring music publisher, the building has an uninterrupted bay of windows across the width of the second floor that...
marks the concert hall to its rear. Four thin pilasters ascend its brick face, but they hardly seem to support the austere pediment perched above the cornice. This same triangular form is repeated in the brickwork above the windows of the residential floors, a restrained reminder of the apartments within, and a play on the pitched roof of the archetypal home. Also remarkable is Kotěra’s earlier design for the Museum of Applied Arts in Hradec Králové (1908–1912), to which a substantial section of the exhibition is devoted. With its monumental entrance flanked by figurative sculpture, and a polychrome cladding of brick, tile, and terra-cotta, the museum makes a profoundly robust impression. The two protracted wings that extend from its core articulate an enclosed lecture hall and library, and lend the overall design a rooted, organic character.

Like Wagner, Kotěra took the cause of pedagogy seriously; he taught architecture for much of his professional life. He was a professor at the School of Applied Art and the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, and many in the younger avant-garde generation studied or apprenticed with him. A prominent figure in both Czech and German circles, he kept his distance from the private polemics and political grating of the pre-war years, and this flexibility probably served him well. Kotěra’s smart and unpretentious solutions to new urban buildings were a good match for a burgeoning clientele of local entrepreneurs such as Urbánek, and for more established clients like the Gombrich family, for whom he designed a villa in Vienna in 1913. His was the rare and brighter face of the late years of Austrian imperialism, reflecting both the promise of professional achievement and a commitment to an architecture comparatively unmarred by social inhibition or political dogma.

In this manner, Kotěra breaks with the notion of an early modernist search for national styles, and with the echoes of Heimatkunst that resound in the work of many contemporaries. The organizers of the exhibition have challenged this trope, and even offered a diplomatic reminder that its first venue, the Prague
Municipal House, was a building that Kotéřa openly criticized. Designed by Antonín Balšánek, this late Art Nouveau palace was official architecture at its least demanding. Built as a cultural center for Prague's Czech community, it overflows with syrupy allegorical murals and sculpture, the direct opposite of Kotéřa’s realism of materials and function. The implications of this distinction could have been more explicitly examined, for it is here that a closer appreciation of Kotéřa’s Modernism really emerges. Kotéřa understood modern architecture as a search for reasonable solutions to spatial and functional problems, and a deliberate thwarting of expectations, which demanded as much of the user of a modern building as from its creator. That his early detractors in Prague accused him of internationalism seems fitting. He did not crib from the work of foreign architects, as early critics would suggest, but simply turned his back on many of the social and political demands that conditioned the work of his predecessors, to produce new and challenging solutions to everyday architectural problems. By allowing a rare glimpse at this enterprise, the recent exhibition has situated Kotéřa among the leading architects of his generation, and provided a context for his reappraisal. The publication of an extensively illustrated English version of the catalogue, the first comprehensive monograph of his work, lends it historical teeth, and provides a substantial footing for further study.

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Publications related to the exhibition:

Mies in Berlin
Museum of Modern Art, New York
21 June–11 September 2001

Altes Museum, Berlin
14 December 2001–10 March 2002

Fundación La Caixa, Barcelona
30 July–29 September 2002

Has the time come when a reconsideration of the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe no longer has to be a reconsideration of architectural Modernism itself? That this is indeed the case seems to have been one subtext of Mies in Berlin (and its sister exhibition, Mies in America, not reviewed here). The ascetic attention to structure and space and the arrogant distance from life of Miesian Modernism—Modernism in perhaps its most emblematic and influential form—were clearly not at issue in the show. The avant-garde as a project and Mies's ambivalent relation to it were not put in the dock; nor was the complicity between this idiom and the look of the late-capitalist city. Even if these matters have not lost their relevance, perhaps the logical short circuit that connects them to a single oeuvre has been severed; perhaps the time has come when it is possible to look at Mies without falling into polemical or defensive postures. One could, of course, question whether the purpose of the exhibition might have been to use the institutions that stood behind it—an embattled and regrouping MoMA and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz in the capital of the new State of Berlin. But it is to the credit of the organizers, Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll, that these complex pressures do not seem to have led to an agenda beyond their own valid and self-consciously pursued scholarly one. If the adaptation and installation of the exhibition in Berlin’s Altes Museum by Andres Lepik raised the specter of Prussian classicism, this was perhaps inevitable given the context; more on this later.

The purpose of Mies in Berlin was to look at the early work of the architect “on its own terms,” not as the mere prelude to the mature work of the American period, and with resistance to Mies’s own efforts to excise the seemingly conservative early projects from his oeuvre. Mies’s career was not presented as a modernist parable, one that only begins in earnest with the so-called “five projects”—the unbuilt skyscrapers, the office building, and the country houses of 1922–1924 that announce the architect’s avant-garde ambitions—and achieves fulfilment in the flowing space of the 1929 Barcelona Pavilion and in the classicist perfection of the American work. Instead, Mies’s European work was framed between the numerous pre–World War I country houses at the beginning of his professional life and the residences (from the Tugendhat House to the Resor House project) of the 1930s. By shifting the coordinates between which a narrative could be constructed, the organizers presented a novel picture of Mies. Even if its contours were occasionally drawn by selective and unexplained exclusions, this picture was plausible and convincing. It is certainly one that we will have to get used to.

Roughly the first quarter of the exhibition was devoted to the houses Mies built for a wealthy clientele in the southwestern suburbs of Berlin before World War I. These commissions are usually considered competent but derivative journeyman work, well crafted but uninspired examples of the prevailing neo-Biedermeier identified with Paul Mebes’s contemporary book-manifesto Um 1800. Despite evidence of later Miesian motifs and classical gestures, the work is usually downplayed in favor of attention to Mies’s mentors Peter Behrens and Hendrik Petrus Berlage. This approach was notoriously ratified by Mies’s destruction of the majority of his early sketches and plans in 1926, precisely when the architect had taken on the organization of the Werkbund Weissenhof settlement and the image of a far more avant-garde persona had already come into focus.

Yet the organizers were able to