Multimedia

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Brno Architecture Manual

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Plzeň Architecture Manual
http://bam.plzne.cz/en

Czechoslovakia’s interwar years bracket a significant period in the development of the country’s avant-garde architecture, with all levels of Czech society embracing modernism as a progressive expression of national identity. In particular, functionalism emerged as the leading architectural style in Czechoslovakia during this time, with generous government contracts and investments from the private sector resulting in a substantial amount of new building that transformed the cities of Prague, Zlín, and Brno into vibrant centers of modern design. Brno, the capital of Moravia and the second-largest city in Czechoslovakia at that time, underwent extensive transformation during the mid-nineteenth century due to heavy industrialization. Brno expanded significantly in the 1860s after its fortifications were removed and the center grew outward according to principles that Austrian planners introduced from their work on Vienna’s Ringstrasse. Eventually, in 1919, Velké Brno (Greater Brno) emerged as a suburban area that annexed several towns and municipalities into one city. This annexation coincided with the foundation of the Česká Škola Architektury at České Vysoké Učení Technické (the Czech School of Architecture at Czech Technical University) that same year, and the combined trajectories of both events resulted in a building boom that saw the construction of a large volume of high-quality modernist architecture, including office buildings, department stores, cultural centers, apartments and cooperative buildings, cafés, schools, sports facilities, and residences such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Villa Tugendhat, dating from 1928–30. In addition to this new architecture, in 1928 President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk inaugurated an exhibition center in the city that opened with the Exhibition of Contemporary Culture, celebrating Czechoslovakia’s first decade of cultural and technical accomplishments. Architects such as Bohuslav Fuchs, Jaroslav Grunt, Jindřich Kumpošt, Jiří Kroha, Otto Eisler, Ernst Wiesner, and Josef Polášek transformed the city into a capital of modern architecture to the extent that Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson included examples from Brno in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1932 Modern Architecture: International Exhibition.

The Communist takeover in 1948 broke the chronological continuity of scholarly research concerning building design in Czechoslovakia that engaged the international avant-garde and contributed significantly to the history of modern architecture and urbanism. After the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, a rediscovery of and renewed critical interest in the interwar period of Czechoslovakian architecture and Eastern European architecture in general occurred among international scholars. Comitant with this new scholarly access and in conjunction with the renovation of numerous buildings, in 2011 Rostislav Koryščanek, architectural historian and former director of Dům Umění Města Brna (Brno House of Arts), launched the website Brno Architecture Manual (BAM) to expand public access to the architectural heritage of this city. BAM combines the formats of a city architecture guide and an online database, which currently includes 383 buildings or complexes designed by ninety-eight architects. It complements these entries with scholarly texts, historic photographs, archival material, and technical documentation such as maps, drawings, and a bibliography in a clear format with Czech-, English-, and German-language interface.1

In comparison to traditional printed guidebooks, which are limited in their capacity to include large amounts of scholarly text with accompanying images and archival material, the BAM database concentrates a substantial amount of information in a single site that is easily accessed through the searchable subject headings of “Trails,” “Objects,” “Architects,” “Trips,” and “Literature.” The “Trails” section offers a selection of self-guided walks through nine of Brno’s neighborhoods that link to an interactive map with marked routes, detailed information about the destinations, and historical cartography keyed to the routes. The website summarizes each trail by listing the number of “objects,” or architectural sites, found there; the route’s length; information on the public transportation available to reach the designated start point; and GPS coordinates. The “Objects” section features a summary of each building, its architect, and typological references.

While the BAM website facilitates the planning of detailed urban itineraries across Brno, it also provides scholarly resources for those interested in researching the city’s interwar architecture. Each trail links to a text describing the district’s historical, architectural, and urban development, and each object links to a description of the individual
building accompanied by archival documents, published essays, and a series of images that invite comparative analyses between the building’s original status and its present condition. The site also contains information about demolished and unrealized projects. BAM delivers on its promise of providing an “atypical tourist guide” by integrating MP3 audio voice recordings of the published site descriptions with sounds and noises specific to each building, allowing visitors to review architecture in situ while listening to its description. A guidance system of marks for each building allows travelers to orient themselves quickly at the physical location using points indicated on the virtual site. While BAM offers invaluable tools for initiating research on significant architecture that has been neglected, future iterations of the website would benefit from including a process through which visitors could generate and publish their own itineraries, thereby developing specialized walks with different historical foci. Likewise, further development of BAM would benefit from a mobile app for offline access.

The success of BAM among Brno’s design professionals and the general public has resulted in the development of similar websites for other cities in the Czech Republic, such as the Plzeň Architecture Manual (PAM), which launched in 2015. Organized according to the principles of BAM established and offering the similar feature of trails, PAM maps the architecture of Plzeň (Pilsen) from 1914 to 1950. One route traces Adolf Loos’s work, consisting mostly of interior spaces designed for influential entrepreneurs, four of which recently have opened for public visits. In contrast to BAM, PAM includes information on Plzeň’s most important public spaces, such as squares, boulevards, and parks.

While iconic modern buildings such as the recently renovated Villa Tugendhat attract visitors to the Czech Republic, both BAM and PAM provide information about other important architectural destinations in neighborhoods that heretofore have remained off the general tourist map. Websites such as BAM and PAM benefit from a growing network that allows visitors to triangulate among various sources of information—experts employed in tourist centers and significant buildings, digital devices, and the city itself—to take part in an innovative form of architectural tourism that navigates between physical and virtual space, allowing them to gain in-depth knowledge of a city’s history, topography, architecture, and urban development.

Databases such as BAM and PAM promote further research into the early twentieth-century architecture of the Czech Republic by providing freely accessible archival materials and references to sources that previously have been difficult to identify or have been unavailable in English. In addition, the sites’ editors may expand and revise what is already an impressive amount of complex information. Further iterations are planned for both databases; BAM in particular is working to include mid-nineteenth-century architecture and urban transformations of Brno as well as postwar architecture leading up to the present day. This systematic mapping of architecture and the open access to information these websites provide may serve to recalibrate the place of Czech architecture among the canonical buildings of Western architectural history. These sites also serve as models for the improvisational deployment of local, community-based, learning communities benefiting from global technologies.

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Notes
1. A lack of publications in English and other languages still characterizes the status of research on Brno’s architecture during the interwar years. See mainly Zdeněk Kudělka and Jindrich Chatrián, eds., For New Brno: The Architecture of Brno, 1919–1939 (Brno: Muzeum Města Brna, 2000). Also important are the activities of Obecní Dům Brno, an association that has published a number of bilingual books (Czech and English), particularly on individual architects active in Brno; see http://www.obecnidumbrno.cz/publication.html (accessed 19 Nov. 2015).
2. For a typical guidebook, see, for example, Renata Vrabelová, ed., Brno Architecture/Architecture 1918–1939 (Brno: Centrum Architektury, 2011), which contains information on 127 buildings.
4. Two more sites, the Hradec Králové Architecture Manual and the Franchise Architecture Manual, are expected to launch in the next few years.
7. The next stage of BAM currently in research will document the architecture in Brno in the years 1946–89. On this period in Brno, see Rostislav Koryčánek, Jana Kohlíková, Jan Kristek, Jaroslav Sedlák, Šárka Svobodová, Jan Zálešák, and Markéta Záleková, Na práhu zitků: Brněnská architektura a vizuální kultura období socialismu/On the Threshold of Tomorrow: Architecture and Visual Culture in Brno during the Communist Era (Brno: Vysoké Učení Technické v Brně, Fakulta Výtvarných Umění, 2014).

Oeke Hoogendijk, writer and director The New Rijksmuseum

First Run Features, New York, 2014, 131 min.

In the documentary film The New Rijksmu-

useum, director Oeke Hoogendijk chronicles the simultaneously precise, meticulous, radical, and frustrating decade-long renovation of Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum (2003–13), a significant piece of architecture that forms a centerpiece to the city and houses a trea-

ure trove of paintings from the Dutch Golden Age, including masterpieces by Rembrandt van Rijn, Johannes Vermeer, Frans Hals, and Jan Steen. First Run Fea-

tures, which produced the film, describes Hoogendijk’s work as capturing the story from a “fly-on-the-wall perspective,” a point of view that provides an innovative way to objectively document a controversial renovation and to convey the frustration in-

olved in the sumptuous but fragmentary story the film delivers. As the camera follows the architects, museum director Ronald de Leeuw, art restorers, curators, artworks, and members of the feisty Dutch Cyclists’ Union (DCU), these performers in the renovation process tell a story about the ways in which this building’s transfor-

mation engages social and material culture.

Rather than presenting an overview of the Rijksmuseum’s architecture, its in-

stitutional history, or the artworks’ role in the design, Hoogendijk depicts events