

Coming to peace with the architecture of the past: The case of Czechoslovakia



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Abstract:

Czechoslovak architecture built in the Communist period, which lasted from 1948 until 1989 holds a negative image in the eyes of the public (Národní Galerie Praha, 2020). Architecture built during the communist regime is frequently criticized for its strong political and ideological background. Moreover, many of these structures are being neglected which further increases their general disfavour. However, this paradigm has started to shift. This is the case, especially amongst the post-communist generation who seems to enjoy this architecture more for its aesthetics and function and they can disconnect this architecture from the regime it was built in (Hatherley, 2015).

A more professional audience argues that these buildings are the heritage of the past which should not be seen only in the light of the period when they were built (Národní Galerie Praha, 2020). Many of these structures are deeply functional while maintaining a unique and high aesthetic quality which is often so rare in the region. It is often assumed that the architects who designed these buildings had to collaborate or affiliate with the regime of that time. Yet, almost always the opposite is true (Vladimír Brož, 2019). One of the obvious proofs of this is that many of these architects were removed from their position and any public appearances after they condemned the invasion of the Warsaw pact in 1969. Second, architecture in Czechoslovakia was much more closely associated with art at the time than it is now. As a result, its position in reflecting on the current state of society may have been more significant during Communism, when freedom of expression was more restricted than it is now.

An example of these aspects of the former architecture is a building of the Federal Assembly, nowadays known as the New National Museum designed by Karel Prager. The building was built as an extension of an older building that served the stock exchange. Its new function was a Federal Assembly, a parliament. Yet, it only ever held a formal function because it was finished after the invasion of 1968 thus in the period of Normalisation when the 'power' was no longer in the hand of Czechoslovakia but rather in the USSR's.

The original purpose of the building was to represent a new, more progressive ruling of the communist party and the architecture should have been the way to communicate this message. However, this never happened because of Normalisation. After 1969, the trust in the communist party fell massively and its physical representation in the form of architecture followed suit. This caused the buildings to become hated objects, despite their design never intending to represent anything closely related to what was happening in the post-invasion period. This hatred still remains in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia who are failing to embrace their past. Yet, the younger generation perceives this architecture more objectively. This fact gives these buildings hope that their future might be still bright.

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Introduction

Architecture's inherent trait is its ability to store the memories of the time when it was built. Sometimes, however, an architect designs a building whose value is appreciated only much later. This was the case for many buildings built during the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Architecture as all of the other intellectual disciplines had to yield to the oppression by the regime. Nonetheless, architects were still able to realize buildings that are worth the attention to this day. The face of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia changed and evolved. The 1960s were arguably the closest the Communist regime has managed to come to be true to its original promise. Many fields including architecture, art, philosophy and other kinds of thought flourished during this time. This time brought back the optimism for a better future and it started showing in all kinds of art, including architecture. The '60s became the 'golden age' of Czechoslovak architects of the second half of the 20th century. Architects of this time were allowed to create freely without restriction, they were able to create new ideas and concepts that carried through the following two decades. Unfortunately, it was not long-lasting and what came after it showed the true nature of the Stalinist model of Communism. The period of Normalization stopped any progress in its tracks and it removed any doubts left about the regime. The following two decades were marked by oppression, discrimination and hope for an alternative. During this period buildings lost their architects whose contributions were censored and the buildings were left without an author. The Velvet revolution of 1989 brought a new hope but the damage left by the previous regime was too extensive to repair in a year or a decade. What followed was a slow recovery from the total destruction of values of an entire population caused by Communism.

Now, thirty-two years since the Velvet Revolution a slight improvement can be observed. However, there is still a long way to go until the now-divided Czechs and Slovaks recover their values and standards. Luckily, it appears that the upcoming generation might manage to achieve this.

Context of the time - Czechoslovakia and Its Communistic regime from 1958-1989

Czechoslovak revolution of 1948 - Communist coup d'état

In the aftermath of World War II, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) held a relatively strong position. It had a clean record throughout the war and it was well-liked by the general public. The fact that the Soviet army liberated Czechoslovakia further played into favour of the popularity of KSČ. Furthermore, the Soviet saw Czechoslovakia as a strategic prize because of its border with Germany and uranium deposits. (“1948 Czechoslovak Coup d'état,” 2021)

Nevertheless, Czechoslovakia had a relatively strong but short, tradition of democracy, which lasted from 1918 until 1938. At the start, the KSČ tried to keep up the appearance that they will respect the democratic functioning of Czechoslovakia. However, in the year 1946 elections, KSČ won with 38% of the votes which was the highest achieved result of a Communist party in any democratic elections up to that time. This has catapulted the Communist into positions of power from where they gained control of the most important parts of the state, such as the police and military. It also had ministered at strong positions such as propaganda, education and agriculture. This has allowed them to quickly dominate the public sector. However, despite these successes, most expected that KSČ would be defeated in the following elections in May of 1948. However, in the meantime, the tensions between Communists and Non-Communist party members grew and it became increasingly apparent that the Communists were trying for a coup d'état. The coup d'état was inevitable, mainly because of nearly complete control of the police and the tensions exerted by the Soviet army that was still stationed on the borders of Czechoslovakia. The coup was a success which led to many fleeing the country because of the fear of living in a Communist regime. In May 1948 a new constitution was approved. The new constitution declared Czechoslovakia a 'people democratic state'. In the election at the end of May 1948 voters were presented with a single list, the Communist won with 89.2% of the vote and took full control of power in the country. (Kaplan, 1989)

Normalization in Czechoslovakia - 1968 to 1989

The Communist reign in Czechoslovakia began with a series of show trials that predominantly took place in the Stalinist period of the 1950s. During these trials, many were executed on the fabricated basis that they acted against the regime. These trials have set the precedence for the following decade. Luckily the trials have calmed after the '50s. The '60s were marked by a reformed way of governing. In this period the government eased the travel restrictions which meant many could travel to foreign countries. Which had a great impact on Czechoslovak culture and arts. Many architects, artists and 'thinkers' were able to reflect on the approaches of 'the west' which allowed them to bring and create new ideas. (*Ikony (6:00-8:00), (Ján Milošlav Bahna)*) During this period, the party also eased the restrictions on freedom of speech and tried to reform the Stalinist approach to Communism that was imported from the USSR.

The reformation movement is also known as 'The Prague Spring' began in 1967 and reached its peak in 1968 when Alexander Dubcek, the first secretary of the KSČ introduced the idea of 'Socialism with a human face'. The reform called for complete freedom of expression press and also eased many other restrictions, such as travelling to foreign countries. The aim of Prague spring was to democratize the uni-party system. Nevertheless, this was not something that the Soviet regime would approve of and after a series of failed negotiation attempts to revert the reforms, the Soviets decided to invade Czechoslovakia with the armies of the Warsaw pact of which Czechoslovakia was a part. The armies of the Warsaw group invaded in August 1968 and stayed in Czechoslovakia until the events of the Velvet revolution in 1989. This act of aggression has been the last straw and finally broke the trust between Czechoslovakia and USSR. From this time until the end of Communism Czechoslovakia stayed in a state of a puppet state that was directed primarily from Moscow.

Architecture during Communism

The architecture after the revolution in 1948, shifted from an independent creative and entrepreneurial occupation to one where architects were just ordinary employees of one collective company. This largely restricted any freedom of creativity (Vorlík, 2019). The focus of the profession was shifted to a more quantitative approach where a large number of apartments had to be built to fill in the after war shortage (Zarecor, 2011). This was achieved with a strict focus on standardisation and prefabrication, which became somehow iconic for the Communist regime (Lizon, 1996). The building contracts themselves were assigned on the regional or institutional bases without any form of competition (Vorlík & Moravčíková, 2019).

However, the '60s were a time of change, when the regime started opening up. Architectural competition once again became one of the main mediums for selecting architects. The quality of the competition was also quite high and often resulted in the truly best designs (Vorlík & Moravčíková, 2019). The relaxation of the regime also allowed individual offices to come back to existence. The ateliers were named by the letters of the Greek alphabet. Notable ateliers run at the time were Alpha; run by the architecture couple Vladimír Machonin and Věra Machoninová - responsible for the design of Hotel Thermal in Karlovy Vary (CZ), Beta; run by Jan Šrámek - Czechoslovak embassy in London and last but not least Gamma; run by Karel Prager - Federal Assembly building in Prague. The ateliers allowed for a much more creative and individualistic approach, which gave many architects the opportunity to express their talents (Sedláková, 2013). This is exactly what happened, and the result was some of the finest buildings that were constructed during the Communist era.

The political and also architectural climate has shifted dramatically after the events of 1969. The Normalisation had a drastic impact on how the architectural competitions were run and who could participate. The focus of competitions was only on public buildings of importance and only invited participants could join. The union of Architects - the institution, where every architect had to be registered to be able to work also underwent a transformation; Only

politically acceptable individuals could remain a member. This meant that many important architects of the '60s were then banned from participating. The only way to remain relevant and be assigned a project was to be a part of an atelier that had already begun to specialize and had a good reputation in the 1960s or to be a charismatic boss who could deal with leading communist functionaries (Vorlík, 2019). Some, who were banned, such as the duo Machoninov's were allowed to finish their projects; Hotel Thermal. Nonetheless, they were denied public recognition and the right to publish their work both at home and abroad.(Brož (Vladimir 518), 2019).

The architectural style was also rapidly evolving from one decade to the next. The 1950s were marked by architecture with a strong emphasis on the regime's propaganda; namely on the 'peoples houses' such as the house of sports, house of pioneers and most notably houses of culture (Zarecor, 2011). The architecture of that time was also strongly shaped by the universities enforcing the ruling party's style of Soviet Socialist Realism (Brož (Vladimir 518), 2018). Throughout the 60th the Party started to relax some of the restrictions. This led to an increase in consumerism in the society, which in combination with the ambition of Czechoslovakia to improve its international image allowed architecture to come in the highlight once more. The shift started with World Expo 58 in Belgium, which was the first expo held after WWII. The best pavilion prize at Expo 58 went to the Czechoslovak Pavilion. (Třísková & Zákostelecká, 2020). The success of the modernist structure carried over and became an inspiration for many Czechoslovak architects throughout the '60s and '70s. The architecture of the '60s shifted from propaganda to department stores, embassies and Foreign Trade Enterprise; Companies who had the means had the goal of representing themselves in the best possible light and thus gave their designs to the best architects of the time(Brož (Vladimir 518), 2019). The '60s also led to a slight shift to the west and the international style, which merged with interwar functionalist, which was particularly successful in Brno (CZ), as well as inspirations from the Czechoslovak Expo 58 pavilion. Brutalism and in parts high-tech were styles that were largely adopted by the younger architects (Vorlík, 2019). The 1960s were the only time throughout Communism when travelling abroad became more readily available. Many young architects who were educated in the Socio Realist dogma were able to see different styles as a result of this. This result-

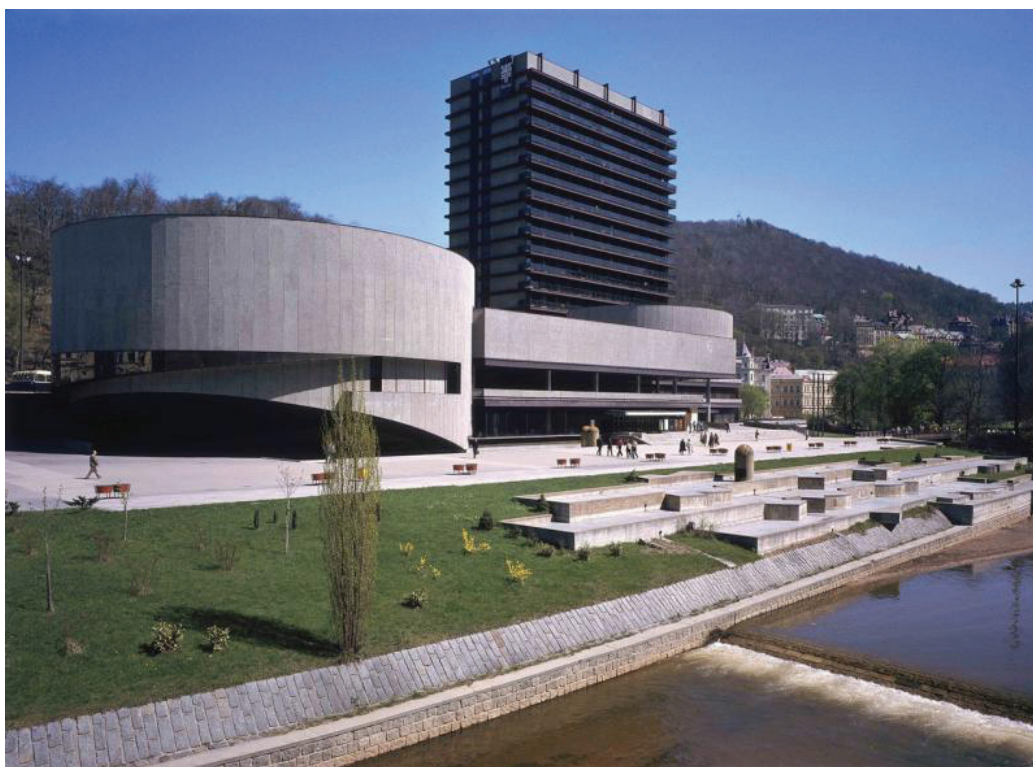
ed in their relatively rapid embrace of brutalism and technology-focused architecture, which persisted even after the 1970s Normalisation. (Dekan et al., 2021).

Opposition in Brutalism and High-tech styles

The realities of the 1960s allowed many to explore the ‘west’. Despite the fact that traveling abroad was still difficult, many people were allowed to go and see the architecture of the ‘capitalist west’. These experiences inspired many to create architecture in a brutalist style. The new technologies were also an inspiration of which the high-tech style was the embodiment in the ‘70s. The new styles gave a rise to a new expression in a country where censorship was still overwhelming. The ‘60s were a time of experimentation and nearly everything was allowed. However, this has changed after the events of the ‘Prague Spring’ in 1968. The following period of normalisation resulted in a ban on many of the best architects of the time. However, those who managed to build up their renown throughout the ‘60s sometimes managed to cling to their works and those who were banned were at least allowed to finish projects that were in the process of being built.

Věra Machoninová and Vladimír Machonin are an example of such architects. They were not strictly forbidden to continue their architectural work but they were not given any credit for their creation nor were they allowed to publish. They were considered ‘dangerous’ by the Communist regime. Nonetheless, they continued on their buildings after 1968 (Brož (Vladimír 518), 2019). At this time they were working on their biggest project - Hotel Thermal in Karlovy Vary (CZ) (Willoughby & Kordovská, 2019). This duo - being husband and wife had a division of work; Vladimír Machonin worked on the management of the atelier and he was the person responsible for communicating with the regime. As their granddaughter paraphrases the words of her grandmother: “From what I’ve gathered, I think my grandpa was more of a manager. He was good with people and could talk things out with the government or with the bureaucracy.” *She describes her grandmother as following: “But it was never a good idea to send grandma to talk to the bureaucratic people, because she would just get into a fight. So I think grandpa was more the manager and grandma was more in the studio, taking*

care of the planning itself."(Willoughby & Kordovská, 2019)". This is also the reason why Věra Machoninová is often credited for the design. Mrs Machoninová is a perfect example of the generation inspired by the brutalist style and the high-tech style. Her education and talent for mechanics and statics allowed her designs to reach completely new heights. The technology was one of the main drivers in the design of Hotel Thermal but also other buildings such as Kotva - department store in the centre of Prague and the Czechoslovak embassy in Berlin. Ms Kordovská, the granddaughter of Machonin's describes her approach to materials in one of her interviews: *"My grandmother always tells these stories about how she had a friend at the Institute of New Materials, where in laboratories people were experimenting with new materials and then my grandma came and used them on a whole building."*



(Hotel Thermal, designed by the Machoninov architectural couple, (Pučerová & Směták, 2010))

One more example of an architect who was deeply inspired by the brutalist style was a Slovak architect Vladimír Dedeček. He too got a chance to travel throughout the '60s and get inspired by the architecture of the time behind the Iron Curtain. Contrary to Machoninov's V.

Dedeček was allowed to continue designing through the Normalisation period. Although his view on the Communist regime was quite clear from his own words describing the design for a political school in Modra (SK): “(...) I did not want to build a resort for political functionaries. I wanted to build a building, which could in the future when Communist are gone, be used as a hotel. ...I once mentioned this thought, and the local director told me that he would stand me against a wall and have me shot for what I just said. Only because I expressed my reactionary thoughts...”(Dekan et al., 2021).

Despite this, nearly every architect who continued working during the ‘70s earned the derogatory nickname of the ‘Communist Builder’. This label stuck with many of these people in spite of being completely untrue in most cases and ruin their public image for decades to come (Dekan et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it’s important to mention that an architect is only an architect if his buildings are actually built (Brož (Vladimir 518), 2018).

Karel Prager - His work and views

Some consider Karel Prager to be the most influential Czechoslovak architect of the 20th century. Prager's work consists of a number of completed structures, some of which have a high social significance. Nevertheless, many of his buildings were never realized. The prime reason for this is the events that followed the Prague spring. This prompted architects who were members of the Czechoslovak architects' association at the time to condemn the actions of the Czechoslovak allies who had invaded and occupied their country. Because of their determination to denounce these actions and stand by their ideals and convictions, these architects have been sentenced to become inconvenient members of society (Sedláková, 2013).

Early life

Karel Prager was born in 1923 in Czechoslovakia. He enjoyed drawing and art, and later became intrigued by geometry. Prager always leaned to construction, he started his learning as a builder when he was 16. A year later he started studying at a Higher school of industry and building. Shortly after he started working at a construction company. After the war was over, Prager started his studies at the Czech Technical University in Prague, where he studied Architecture and Building. After his graduation, in 1949 he started working in Stavoprojekt; Stavoprojekt was a result of forced unification that happened in 1948, when all of the private companies had to be unified into one, in line with the Communist doctrine. Prager was critical of the functioning of this institution, he noted that the work done here was strictly linear without any room for discussion or much creativity. The employees had to follow imposed mindset and they were in no way supported to grow as professionals. Nevertheless, Stavoprojekt was the place where Prager became a part of a 'youth group' where he met his future team of 'technically focus architects'; Albrecht, Kadeřábek and Prager (Sedláková, 2013).

Professional career & Atelier Gama

'Architecture is only the realised work' (Karel Prager, 1963)

Prager's first remarkable project is the building of the Department of Molecular Chemistry of Czech technical university, which he designed in cooperation with Albrecht and Kadeřábek. The Dep. of Molecular Chemistry was a symbolic dot behind the not so successful return to the historicist deviation of Czechoslovak architecture during the '50s. The design for the building made a clear statement about returning to the successes of the pavilion of Expo 58 by going back to the accomplishments of Czech functionalism and a strong focus on the technical aspects of the building. This new approach to technology highlighted the strong side of this architectural trio. Prager, especially based a lot of his design on structure defining concepts and new technological innovations. He was a strong proponent that technology should be the driving force of the new architecture and the Department of Molecular Chemistry clearly defined these ideals by strictly deviating from the style of socialistic realism. This structure can be seen as the forerunner of what was to come in the 1960s.



(Department of Molecular Chemistry of Czech technical university 1960-1964, (Koukolík, n.d.))

The relaxation of the Communist regime in the '60s brought a change and a new wind to how architecture was done at the time. Stavoprojekt was first split into regions and Prague got its own branch. However, the transformation continued further and to increase the efficiency of the building institutions in the country a proposal to split further was suggested. The suggestion was that there could be more professional competing groups - ateliers. Obviously, these would not be privately owned ateliers but they would at least allow for much more independence. The idea came to fruition and a number of independent ateliers were created, always with one or two main architects as the directors. However, the ateliers were not just architectural firms; they were full-fledged construction firms with a large number of engineers on staff. The first of these ateliers was Gama - the atelier of Karel Prager established in 1967. The ateliers were quite selective of their employees, so only the best designers and engineers were selected. This new arrangement resulted in a quite competitive environment of groups that included talented people. This, in combination with the renewed approach of architectural competitions, opened the doors to the new and much-improved architecture of the '60s.

Throughout the 1960s atelier Gama worked on its two significant projects; A building for the temporary parliament for Czechoslovakia - National Assembly and the Emauzy, a complex of pavilions for the association of design ateliers, of which Gama was a part. Both of these buildings could be characterized by their distinct structural solutions. They clearly demonstrate the idea of Prager to build a city above a city, a concept that is constantly repeating through the work of Prager (Brož (Vladimir 518), 2019). His fascination with structure partly set a start point for his more influential idea which he applied through all of his buildings. Prager created a building guild, similar to those that would exist work on the Gothic cathedrals. This guild encompassed not only architects but also artists, engineers, sociologists, philosophers, sculptors and so on. This allowed his designs to go address complex situations where he was the director - architect (Brož (Vladimir 518), 2019).



(Emauzy 1969-1973, NGP (n.d.))

After the successful end of the '60s came the Normalisation and '70s. Normalization had a major effect on Prager's and the atelier Gama's work. Prager was forbidden from publicizing and his name was not allowed to appear in any form of the public press. The sudden disappearance meant that many of his projects were left unexplained. This resulted in the emergence of urban legends. These tales portrayed Prager as an insensitive architect, whose designs are non-contextual, exaggerated and preposterous (Sedláková, 2018). He found himself in a void in between the regime and the public. The only people who could fully understand his work were his co-workers or friends of his co-workers. His ability to communicate his designs to his country, let alone the rest of the world, was taken away from him.

Throughout the 1970s, Prager still got to work on his designs and he was also finishing the buildings that resulted from the competition that took place in the '60s. Regrettably, the other projects on which he worked were seldom realized, Prager called these projects 'wasted' (Sedláková, 2018). The ones that stick out the most are the superstructures designed for the valley Košíře. Here Prager designed experimental housing complexes that were raised high

above the ground. These superstructures were not strictly designed only for housing, they also included offices, hospitals and other functions. The project had progressed to a point where extensive technical drawings of the sewerage and power system were already completed. The design took inspiration and was alike to the designs of the metabolism's group and Archigram (Sedláková, 2018). Unfortunately, it was never built.



(Superstructures - Košíře (1974), Karel Prager, Radomíra Sedláková (2013))

One more of his designs that were produced in the 1970s but never came to fruition is the redevelopment of Karlín - Těšnov, a Prague district. Here he developed a complete plan that included fairly detailed designs of a hotel, National library, International business centre, centre for scientific and technical information and a Czech philharmonic. The plan included detailed plans, sections and situations of the whole complex (Sedláková, 2013).

Later career

The 1980s were for Prager defined mostly by a single building; The New stage of the National Theatre in Prague (1981-1983). Originally the reconstruction and expansion of the building of the National Theatre were assigned to Jaroslav Fuchs who won the competition in 1964. However, owing to the unexpected passing of architect Fuchs, the project was left without an architect. The Atelier Gama was approached. First with the request to design an interior of the restaurant building. However, later it also entered and won the competition for the building of the New Stage. The competition had a requirement that the building needs to be finished within two and half years, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Old Stage. The time schedule was reached and the building was finished on time. Immediately after its completion, it faced a lot of backlash from the public. Nonetheless, it was widely publicized and respected abroad. This was also the first time that Prager's building was published but only after receiving a special exemption from the government (Sedláková, 2013).



(New Stage - National Theatre Prague 1981-1983, Pinterest)

Prager worked on a few more designs during the remainder of 1980, some of which were completed but most were not. The '90s brought large changes, the regime has fallen apart in November 1989. This placed the Gama studio in the same position as it was during the Prague Spring. It was an independent office once more. However, now managing it became a little more complicated. The future of the new democracy seemed bright for architecture, and in many respects, it delivered on its promises. Atelier Gama had two relatively large projects going on at this time; the first one being the reconstruction of Rudolfinum (Prague) - A Neo-renaissance building constructed in 1885 now serves a purpose of the Czech Philharmonic and art gallery. The second large project was the reconstruction of the House of the Black Madonna - A house built in a cubist style, originally designed by Josef Gočár, who is widely considered the founder of modern architecture in Czechoslovakia. The other designs included urban plans and a few more buildings from the won competition. Unfortunately, many projects ever managed to come to fruition, Karel Prager passed suddenly in the year 2001. He worked until his last day.

"I can't tear myself away from our architectural curse, but also from our joy. But capitalism opened the world to us a little too late, so I'm wrestling it as hard as I can. (...) Well, you have to live and die with your shoes on. I'm a little bit bad with my heart, which is getting weaker and weaker.

But "we're still going", and so I'm preparing a sort of summary of the basic actions of our rebellion (not dissent - we didn't go "heating" (a reference to dissidents who had no other options than to work in the boiler room) but we poked the regime). (...) there are only a few people and actors of these times and events and it is necessary to remember them in the 'last move' (...) to capture the decisive events in our lives. (...) Guild, the association of architects and designers. the ban of architects and artists. the dissolution of the union in 69, the purge of the central committee and the excommunication of 36 architects for 20 years. these events, against the background of which we lived and did - or tried to do - architecture in the context of Western culture, are being erased from the consciousness of this new generation." (Karel Prager; from the letter to Jiří Klein, 1998)

Art as a 4% of architecture

The art in architecture was an essential part of any design worldwide. In Czechoslovakia, this phenomenon became a law, which made art mandatory in any public building project. This law was in effect between the years 1965 and 1991 and at least 4% of the entire building budget had to be spent on art. The law was also a norm in some western countries. The art that was selected had to be preceded by a transparent public competition and the work was to be selected by an expert committee. This regulation made it so there was a lot more art in the public spaces and it also guaranteed its high quality which curbed kitsch (Karous, 2015). The law actually allowed that the artists who were banned by the regime still had a chance to have their art displayed. This is because the competition's rules were followed, the authors remained anonymous, and there was nothing the Communists could do to censor them once they were chosen. This sometimes created an opportunity for criticism at a time when criticism could not exist.



(Common Madonna, Miloš Zet (1970s'), Sochy a Města)

Národní Shromáždění - Federální Shromáždění (1967-1974) (National/Federal assembly)



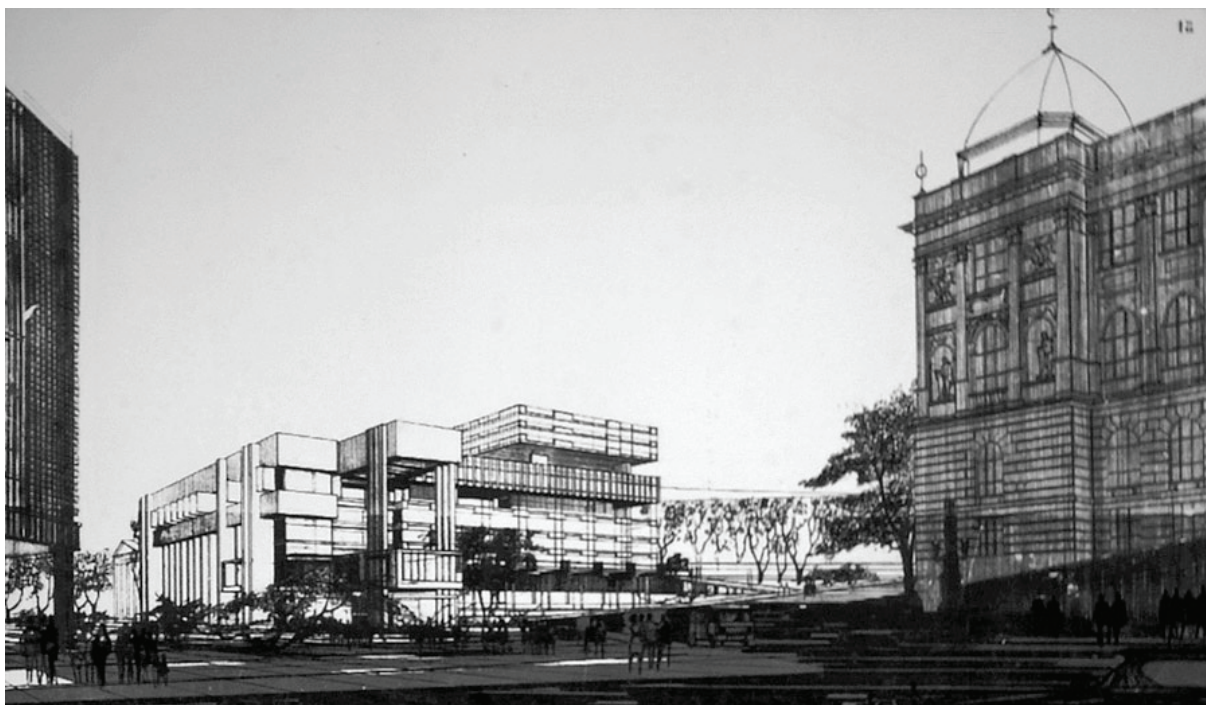
(Federální Shromáždění, K. Prager 1967-1974 (ČT, n.d.))

The Federal assembly was the building that elevated Karel Prager and his atelier Gama to the international architectural spotlight in 1960. The building was planned as an extension to the former stock exchange, where the Czechoslovak parliament held sessions during the reconstruction of Rudolfinum. The extension was meant as a temporary parliament that would serve in the interim before the proposed parliament was completed at Letna - a Prague district. The building is situated in the dead centre of Prague, at the top of the Wenceslas square. It stands next to the National Museum, a neo-classicist building finished in 1891 (Muzeum, 2021). The original plan of Prager was that the two buildings, National Museum and the Federal assembly, would be integrated together with the Wenceslas square. However, this never came to fruition. The building was designed to be public and open to the public from the start - It is also why its original name was the National assembly. The idea was that after the parliament moves to its new building, this one could be transformed into restaurants and spaces with public functions (Sedláková, 2018). Nevertheless, this never happened, the building was renamed shortly after

its finish because of a change in the Czechoslovak legislature, which made the Czechoslovak government into a federation. Furthermore, the normalization effectively eliminated all sense of a sovereign governing entity, and what remained was generally regarded as a charade. The building was also never made publicly accessible and separated from the Wenceslas square further deepened its image of disconnect.

Competition

The competition for the National assembly was announced in the year 1966 and six offices were invited to participate. The reason for the competition was that the stock exchange building did not offer enough space for the needs of the Czechoslovak parliament. The competition called for a relatively large extension given the plot of land and the requirement that the structure of the stock exchange shall not be altered. Only two of the resulting submissions managed to achieve the required area; The studio of Věra and Vladimír Machonin and the studio of J. Albrecht - J. Kadeřábek - K.Prager; Gama. Both proposals called for elevating the building above the old stock exchange and creating a sort of city above a city. The proposal by J. Albrecht - J. Kadeřábek - K.Prager was ultimately selected.



(Competition proposal for Federální Shromáždění 1965, Machoninov's couple

(Sedláková, 2018), n.d.)

Structure

The design of the Federal Assembly (FA) was taken by Karel Prager and Jiří Kadeřábek. Jiří Albrecht worked on the reconstruction of Smetanovo Divadlo - State opera - the building standing next to the Federal Assembly. The duo from the studio Gama started working immediately. The largest challenge of the project was its structure. Prager had a strong tendency to focus on the structure in his designs and this project was the pinnacle of his fascination. The project was a national one, which meant that people from the whole nation had to be included. This meant that the engineers and artists came from every corner of Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia. The 1960s were a time when steel finally became available for building. In the initial years after the war, steel stayed reserved for military and civil purposes only. This changed in the '60s because the steel companies were producing a surplus so it could be finally used in public buildings. The Hotel Thermal, designed by the Machoninová duo, was the first building in Czechoslovakia to make extensive use of steel. Prager, too, made extensive use of steel, especially in the building of FA. FA is more of a structure than a building, it works in a similar way as a bridge does. The structure consists of Vierendeel trusses that are two stories tall and 83 meters long and weigh 400 tons. The entire structure is supported on four reinforced concrete doubled-columns and two more supports that are integrated into the stock exchange building.



(Lifting of the Vierendeel trusses, 1969 (Marečková, 2013))

Designing the structure was no easy task. This structure was the first of its kind in the world. The initial Structural design was done by structural engineer Jozef Zeman, who was responsible for multiple other steel structures around the country. Most notably the Žďákov bridge - the longest arch supported bridge in the world at the time of its completion in 1967 (“Žďákov Bridge,” 2021). As the construction progressed the structural design was shifted to an office based in Bratislava, run by Juraj Kozak and a team of young engineers (Sedláková, 2013). Prager was the main organizer of the project, he was also responsible for the integration of the structure and the more aesthetical aspects of the designs were left to Kadeřábek. FA was no exception to Prager’s obsessive attention to detail. The entire interior was designed specifically for the building of FA - it was a Gesamtkunstwerk. The floor plans of the buildings were flexible, allowing for a smooth conversion without jeopardizing the original design intentions (Brož (Vladimir 518), 2019).

All in all, the structural architecture is what distinguishes this structure from others. Its construction overlapped with the events of the Prague Spring. It is possible to see the Vierendeel trusses being in the process of lifting in some movies which were capturing the events that were happening around the Prague Spring. These images offer an insight into a more optimistic and arguably the best period of the Czechoslovak Communist past. Unfortunately, the downfall that began to happen after 1969 is also clearly reflected in the public perception of this building.

Art

Prager placed a high value on the concept of a complex and comprehensive artistic work. His idea of a builder’s guild also included a wide range of artists. In the case of FA, these artists were from all around the republic. This was supposed to reflect the idea of a national nature that the structure was supposed to represent. Prager chose the artwork; he was the person in charge of approaching the artists he chose himself. Some of the most influential artists at the time were involved, including: Clupáč, Zoubek, Preclí, Uher, Libenský & Brychtová and many more. The artworks included ranged from paintings, sculptures to ceilings. Art could be found in every corner of this building.

Unfortunately, the events of 1969 had a large impact on the building of the FA. The art was impacted the most because most of the artists that participated and created works for FA were all of a sudden banned. Their works have never been installed despite being finished. Some were able to remain, mostly because their abstract nature was not completely understood or because they embodied ideals that were beyond the regime's censorship.



*(Relief glass wall; sculpture designed by Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová,
(Sedláková, 2013))*

Some of the artworks that were removed were created in response to Jan Palach's act. Palach was a 20-year-old student who burned himself in protest to the Soviet occupation just a few meters from the building of the Federal Assembly. His actions were censored within the media and he was labelled by the regime as a mentally disturbed individual. However, the act was clear to everyone. Some of the art that was to be displayed in FA held a hidden meaning, commemorating his action.

One of the pieces submitted to the competition by O. Zoubek was removed shortly before its selection as the winning design because of its competition keyword, inspired by the ancient theatre - *The hero dies, the idea goes on.*

The same fate happened to the sculpture designed by M. Chlupáč. The sculpture was supposed to be mounted on the large sculptural needle - pylon that stands in front of the Federal Assembly. The name of the artwork was *'The Flame'*. It was quickly rejected and had to be renamed to something of more universal value; *'Mother and child.* In the end, however, the needle held a large plaque that held an inscribed text; *'All power in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic belongs to the working people.'* A lie that hung there until the Velvet revolution of 1989. Fortunately, in recent years a new sculpture was mounted on the pylon; A sculpture dedicated to the actions of Jan Palach in 1969.



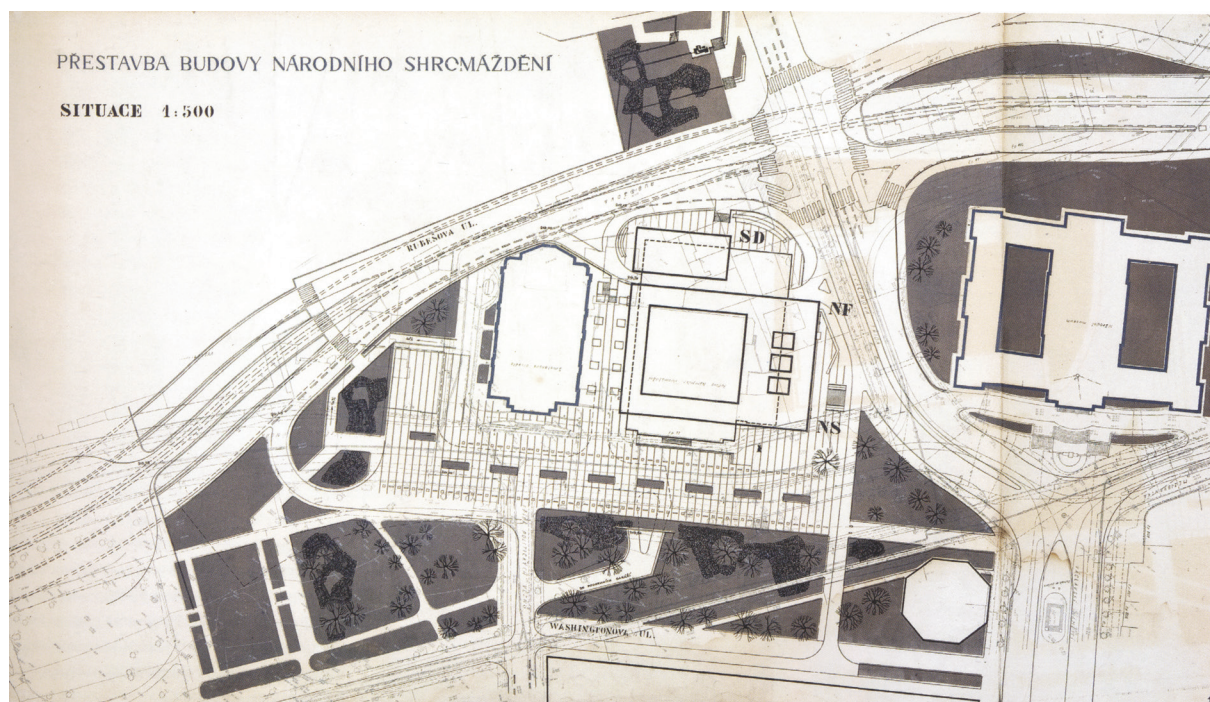
(The Chamber of Parliament of Federal Assembly, Alica Kuchařová (Sedláková, 2013))

Context & Life of the building

The competition for the FA took place during the golden age of Czechoslovak architecture in the second half of the 20th century. The building had everything one could possibly expect from a building that needs to fulfil such a high representative function. Unfortunately, the events of 1969 have changed not only the sovereign nature of Czechoslovakia but also the nature of its architecture. It was a time when the best that were still left, were banned from public life and it reflected in every sphere of public life. All of the efforts of Prague Spring were lost, no more free speech, no foreign travel, no room for criticism of the party. The only aspect from Prague Spring that remained was the discussion of federalizing Czechoslovakia into a federation of Czechs and Slovaks (Moravia was also included in the discussions that took place during Prague Spring). This has resulted in a slight change in the government organisation, where each country had its own parliament. All of this, however, was merely formal; Czechoslovakia had lost much of its original self-sovereignty as a result of the events of Normalisation and had effectively become a puppet state of the USSR. Therefore, the National Assembly had to be renamed and became a Federal Assembly. The change in name also led to a slight change of program which was no longer accessible to the public. The building became a symbol of the regime and soviet oppression. The initial urban plan was never realized and the building was never connected to the rest of Wenceslas square. A busy road separates it from the square to this day. The road has further stressed the public image of FA as a separate, unsightly, oppressing and unwelcoming structure. The large steel skeleton looming over the original - beautiful building in a poetic way that reflected the state of Czechoslovakia from 1969 until 1989.

Even after the revolution in 1989, the building's negative reputation has remained largely in place. Its new user has become Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The radio used the building for multiple years and offered an alternative use, as was always planned. The radio moved in 2009 and the building was given to the National Museum. Unfortunately, Radio Free Europe and the subsequent owner, the National Museum did not do much in the way of up-keeping the building. Rather, they down-kept it by adding cheap material without any respect to the original material design. During this time some of the art pieces were damaged and lost. However, things took a more opti-

mistic direction in 2019 when the original building of the National Museum and the FA were connected with the underground tunnel. This action also made the building publicly accessible again, after nearly 50 years, it is finally used as it was always intended. Nevertheless, the public image of the building is shifting slowly but it looks like the future is quite optimistic. Younger generations are beginning to see the building for what it is now, rather than for what it once was. And this is exactly how Prager described his architecture: “It will not be understood now,” he said, “but people will eventually see its worth in 50 years.” (Brož (Vladimir 518), 2019).



(Context plan of the Federal Assembly (In the middle), State opera (left of FA), and National Museum (On the right), (Sedláková, 2013))

Coming to peace with Communist architecture

Czechoslovakia's recovery after 1989 was relatively slow. However, thanks to the relatively central location in Europe and the 'west' sitting right on the borders of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which split in 1991, the transition was easier compared to the rest of eastern Europe. Nevertheless, Communism has decimated the economic advantage that Czechoslovakia had before WWII, compared to some of the western countries. Sadly, the economic damages were not as impactful as the social and cultural ones. Forty-one years of Communism have left Czechoslovakia in a state where it has lost many of its morals, values and most importantly people who had to flee the regime.

Discrimination, bullying, persecution, humiliation, lack of personal freedoms. These are only a few things that people had to endure throughout this oppressive regime. As a result, it's no surprise that after the events of the Velvet Revolution people were left stigmatized and regretful. As a result, it's no wonder that the former regime is perceived negatively. The architecture was always a part of society that served a role of a collective memory thanks to its longevity. The structures left from the former regimes inherited the imprint of the time when they were constructed. The state of the country after the revolution also did not play in their favour. Many of them, if not most, fell into disrepair. There is still relatively little initiative to keep these structures standing. However, over the last 5-10 years, the initiative has grown slightly. This is largely due to the fact that the new generation has less bitter feelings toward the Communist regime (Brož (Vladimir 518), 2019). Many from the younger generation have started to judge the architecture built between the years 1958-1989s less for the time when it was built and more for its true value. They are also better educated on the topic of this architecture, and they understand that the architect has not always acted as a regime's "puppet."

This new view of 'socialist' architecture has sprung a new initiative, usually led by architectural professionals and young people. This group of people aims to further educate, even the older generations, about the qualities of the architecture that was built here. It is often surprising to find

out who are the main proponents of restoring and maintaining architecture from the “50-’90s. The students from both Slovakia and the Czech republic are often the most invested. An example is a Slovak series of documentaries by the name of *Ikony*, which follows the most influential architects of the past regime, in Slovakia. This documentary series is directed by mostly young students and young professionals in the fields of architecture and film, and it features people who are currently nearing the end of their lives. It is probably the last chance to document their merit to this state. Another notable person responsible for restoring awareness about this topic is Vladimir 518. Vladimir 518 is a Czech rapper who has no prior education in architecture or art. Despite this, he has been one of the most vocal and prominent voices advocating for the preservation of architecture from 1958 to 1989. As he says himself; “We will regret that we did not act sooner to preserve our own heritage.” (Brož (Vladimir 518), 2019). Another phenomenon of the recent past year has been the project going with the name ‘Čierne Diery’ (Black Holes). This project comprises five enthusiasts who started documenting Slovak and Czech architecture which is either already ruined or on the brink of being a ruin. They chose to publish their work via Riso-printed graphics that became extremely popular and became a collector’s item around Slovakia and the Czech republic.

Despite this, the progress in saving or restoring ‘socialist’ architecture often appears pointless. One of the deepest wounds left by Communism both in Czechia and Slovakia is ignorance. This manifests itself in the public’s approach to the things that are common - people usually do not care. This has been the reason why many valuable buildings have been demolished. This, unfortunately, happens even to the most valuable buildings in both countries. A recent example of this is Transgas in Prague, which was demolished in 2019 despite the widespread outcry and numerous petitions which called against its demolition. These events also often become political. For instance, with the case of Transgas, Prague’s upcoming mayor promised that he would stop its demolition. However, after he was elected to office, he himself signed the papers for its removal. These things happen regularly and usually with the same actors. A similar story is also ongoing in Bratislava, Slovakia. It concerns the building of Istropolis, which was designed by Ferdinand Konček, Ilja Skoček and Lubomír Titl. Despite numerous experts calling for its inclusion in the National Heritage List, the state sold the building to a developer. Now, its fate is uncertain and one can only hope that the re-

alization that these buildings will one day be missed will come sooner rather than later.

Another worry that complicated the whole discussion is the sustainability of these structures. It is important to realize that most of them are reaching the age of 50. The age when buildings are usually demolished or refurbished. For a number of reasons, refurbishing many of these buildings is often a difficult task. The first reason arises from the way they were built. All of the buildings constructed in the previous century do not meet today's and future thermal standards. As a result, their facades must be refurbished, which is always costly in terms of both monetary resources and the carbon footprint associated with such refurbishment. The second reason is their actual value; some of these structures are clearly better than others, but the decision-making process has frequently favoured demolition over refurbishing. The last major reason is ignorance; it is often the case that even when buildings are listed as heritage, they are refurbished in an inadequate manner. This often happens even though the original author is sometimes still alive. An example of this is the Hotel Thermal in Karlovy Vary by the couple Machoninová's. The building itself has a high architectural and social value. It has been the main location for the Karlovy Vary film festival for the last 50 years; The film festival in Karlovy Vary the largest in central Europe and is highly regarded. Despite this, Hotel Thermal already underwent one renovation in the '90s when most of the originally designed furniture was destroyed and replaced with a cheap alternative. This action has destroyed the Gesamtkunstwerk nature of this design. In the meanwhile the Hotel was suggested to be added to the heritage list, however, this was rejected. Now, the second renovation is taking place and the responsible architect is the one who rejected the proposal which called for this building to be added to the heritage list (Willoughby & Kordovská, 2019). The original architect Věra Machoninová is still alive. She, a woman in her '90s offered to help with the renovation of the building for a reduced repayment but this offer was refused by the director of the hotel.

Regardless, socialist architecture seems to have a promising future. More and more people are beginning to recognize its true value and it is being judged less based on its political past, rather than its architectural qualities and ideas. New technologies offer the opportunity to refurbish these buildings so they can remain monuments for future generations. The new generation of young people is likely to be the first to grasp the original architects' concepts and motifs and use these structures as they were intended.

Conclusion

One might argue that during Communism, both the Czech Republic and Slovakia had a higher standard of culture and art than they do now. However, this claim ignores the fact that high levels of culture, particularly in the second half of the 1960s, arose from sources other than Communist ideology. An exemption might be the pavilion designed for the Expo 58 by František Cebra, Josef Hrubého and Zdeněk Pokorný. The design was produced during a period when the majority of the restrictions and fears associated with the demagoguery of the early 1950s were still in place. However, it is important to remember that the three architects and other artists responsible for the Expo 58 pavilion designs were in their formative years a decade before Communism started, and therefore their thinking had not yet been distorted by the regime's ideology. The true Czechoslovak 'golden age' of the second half of the 20th century started in the '60s. Its main sources were the freedom of thought and the opportunity to reflect on the 'west' which were only possible in the '60s. Yet, it is important to realize that many of the architects who were most active during 1960 were educated during Communism. By looking for inspiration outside of the Iron Curtain, they were able to distinguish themselves from the regime's ideology and "forced" styles. They however still took some of their inspiration from the 1930s when architecture in Czechoslovakia reached its true peak. The results of this blend of thought were architecture and art which distanced itself from the principles of the ruling regime, it managed it by focusing and reflecting on things that were more important and more elemental/basic than politics. An example of this is the elemental depiction of a woman, cosmos or movement in many sculptures and paintings that originated at this time. In the case of architecture, it was often the idea of technological progress and function. Furthermore, many of the ideals associated with communism, such as workers, co-participation or equality, are intrinsically valuable themes; Yet, the corrupt regime's dark face twisted them to the point that they became unrecognizable. The fact that these values would be once such a large part of our daily lives should make everyone reflect on the current state of affairs, where many of these values cannot be noticed in Czech and Slovak architecture of today.

The reason for this is most probably the events that followed Prague Spring; Normalization. Normalization has ruined both of these nations beyond recognition and its consequences can be very much still felt today. The level of culture has been falling steadily from 1969 until the late '90s. This can be observed the best in the state of politics of both of these countries. In the 1990s the former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once described Slovakia as the "black hole of Europe.", which was probably also true (Dzurinda, 2018). Despite a few ups and downs, Slovakia and the Czech Republic have mostly optimistic tendencies when it comes to how the countries look today. This is also applicable in the realms of art and architecture. Especially in the Czech republic architecture and approach to architecture are now on a decent level. Some aspects, however, take time to recover; for example, political culture in both countries is making only minor progress, with some exceptions. Unfortunately, when it comes to the political management of culture it has been abysmal and one may say that it has been worse now than during Communism. This fact has resulted in a skewed national outlook when it comes to culture and art in general. A large part of the public does not consider these two things as important and it is sadly visible in the state of many cities in both of these countries. On a more individual level, this can be observed in the approach of the government to managing its public buildings; Especially those that were left from Communism. An example of this can be seen in the case of the Hotel Thermal which has been discussed in the last chapter.

So in conclusion, Czechoslovakia would certainly be better if communism never happened. It is extremely hard to find any arguments for any kind of benefit that the regime would have on both countries. Despite this, it is impressive that people have managed to create works that merit everyone's attention despite all odds. Communism's damage is irreversible, but it can at least be used as a remnant. The new generation can learn from its past and architecture can be one of the monuments that show both the negative and positive. It's encouraging to see young people in both countries begin to respect shared ideals once again, resulting in a positive outlook worth pursuing.

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Appendix

Appendix A

The original plan was to try and get scans or at least images of the original drawings from the Federal Assembly building. Unfortunately, This was not possible due to pandemic restrictions that are currently in place in the Czech Republic (As of writing this thesis; 15th of April 2021) I managed to get in contact with the lady who is managing the files at Prague's National Library but she stopped responding to me after a couple of emails. As I found out later, nearly all of Karl Prager's drawings and documents are in the National Gallery, mainly because of Mrs Sedlackova. Mrs Sedlackova is a person responsible for managing Prager's works since he passed. I tried calling the Prague National Gallery several times for the past two weeks but no one ever picks up. I was planning to go there myself because I was supposed to travel through Prague to go back to the Netherlands but I could not reach anyone there. I also managed to get in contact with Mrs Sedlackova and she gave me a suggestion to read her books, so I bought it and it's been my largest source ever since. She also offered me to answer any additional questions I might have but I did not have any because of the book which was more than sufficient.

I also contacted the granddaughter Machoninová's (Mária Kordovská) and Daughter of Prager (Helena Loudová)but the interviews never went through. They did not respond to me after the initial exchange of emails.

In the end, I used quite a few sources. Mainly from Mrs Sedlakova and Vladimir 518 (he has a weird alias, he is quite a famous rapper in the Czech Republic, but for 20 years he is super into the architecture of Communist Czechoslovakia and he is regarded as one of the foremost experts, even though he never studied architecture nor anything related.). Vladimir 518 did a series of lectures which was a good source.