Prague in 1900

In 1900, Prague was a rapidly expanding city. Industrialization brought with it an increase in the population, which rose to half a million inhabitants. The city began to expand, and three new bridges were built between 1905 and 1914. Public transport became organized and the first electric tram made its appearance in 1891.

Bohemia was a rich region, the most industrialized in Austria-Hungary. The Czech middle classes were very prosperous, and the building of a number of lavish investment and savings banks was a sure sign of their economic power. The Czech capital was very receptive to technical progress. In 1898, there was an Architecture and Engineering Exhibition during which the first Czech feature film was shown. In 1904, the first Motor Show was held, and in 1907, the Praga automobile factory was created. In that same year, the first purpose-built cinema in Bohemia opened its doors, and by 1910, the number had grown to fifteen.

Technical progress also began to have its effect on housing. Between 1880 and 1885, the first piped water systems brought about improvements in hygiene. Electricity began to be installed in Prague apartments in the 1890s.

During this period, the city council began to devote its attention to town planning. One of its first decisions in 1885 was to demolish the insanitary old ghetto district inhabited by a population of modest means. This was in the northern part of the old city and it was replaced by an elegant modern development. It may be considered that the history of twentieth-century town planning in Prague began the day the first pick-ax set the “Clean up the Ghetto” program in motion.

But Prague was not just a modernizing, future-oriented city. It was also one that still bore the marks of its prestigious past: at every street corner there were reminders that Prague had once been the capital of an independent country the Kingdom of Bohemia. The situation in 1900 was very complex. Bohemia was part of Austria-Hungary and Prague was merely a provincial capital. Furthermore, its population was not homogeneous. The 80 per cent Czech majority of the population had dominated the city council since 1861 and aspired to free itself from Vienna’s influence. Thus, it was hoped, could the city regain the proud status of a true European capital and at the same time flourish as the center of Czech identity. The German and German-speaking Jewish minorities saw things differently and there were often ugly clashes between the two ethnic groups over political and linguistic issues.

Indeed, the situation sometimes became so explosive that the Austrian authorities had to proclaim a state of siege in Prague. These tensions reached their peak at the end of 1897.

After the fall of the Badeni government, which had tried to establish linguistic equality in Bohemia, particularly violent demonstrations took place in Prague during which German and Jewish shops were looted; martial law was declared but not before three people were killed. The situation was further complicated by purely political tensions on top of nationalist conflict: thus in 1905, 150,000 people demonstrated in Prague, calling for universal suffrage, and obtaining it two years later.

The Czechs had a subordinate political status but demanded the same autonomous status as the Hungarians. Their campaign during the second half of the nineteenth century resulted in the asserting of what one might call “Czechness,” a specific Czech identity in cultural and linguistic matters going back a long time. The movement reached a peak in the 1880s with the building of the National Theater (paid for by public subscription) and the National Museum, the latter closing off the end of Wenceslas Square. This trend continued until the end of the First World War. Between 1903 and 1912, the “Municipal House” (i.e. of the City of Prague) was built, and symbolic monuments were erected. These include statues of Saint Wenceslas, the patron saint of Bohemia, in 1912, and Jan Hus, the pre-Reformation martyr burned at the stake in Konstanz in 1415, which was inaugurated in 1915. All of this activity marked the reclaiming of the capital by the Czechs.

The intense cultural life of the city although rich and original, was in fact more complex than is generally realized. The University of Prague was divided into two, a German part and a Czech part, in 1882. Intellectuals from the two linguistic communities had totally separate cultural heritages, studied in separate places, and frequented different theaters and cafés. This cultural segregation is best illustrated by the case of Franz Kafka. Paradoxically although he is without a doubt the most famous writer Prague has ever produced, in his time he was practically unknown outside the limited orbit of the German-speaking Jewish community in Prague. He lived in a sort of parallel world and published
his work in Leipzig. Yet it was not totally unknown for the two communities to work together. Thus the Group of Eight, that brought twentieth-century avant-garde painting to Prague, included Czechs as well as Germans.

From Art Nouveau to Expressionism

Artists as well as the general public in Prague were well informed about literary and artistic trends in the rest of Europe. The Modern Review published amongst other things reports on exhibitions in Paris and familiarized its readers with the work of turn-of-the-century artists such as Odilon Redon, Félicien Rops, Aubrey Beardsley, Edvard Munch and James Ensor. The Manes Society to which most of those active in the fine arts belonged, was tuned in to the rest of Europe. It brought the latest developments in French, German and Scandinavian art to the notice of the Prague public via its journal Free Tendencies and the holding of a series of exhibitions of the work of foreign artists, notably Rodin in 1902 and Edvard Munch in 1905. These exhibitions gave a considerable stimulus to the growth of an original and mature art movement in Prague.

Until the end of the 1880s, the major concern of Prague artists was to assert the identity of the Czech nation. After 1895, that was no longer in doubt and artists were free to express their personal individuality rather than their nationality. Many of them naturally trained in the capital, Vienna, as well as Munich and Paris (where a great number of them had studied ever since 1852). Imbued with the cosmopolitan spirit of a city situated in the heart of Europe, they followed the “modern style” that was currently flourishing in Vienna, Brussels, Paris, Munich, Barcelona, and other cities which went by the name of Secession in Central Europe and Art Nouveau in France. At first linked to Viennese Secession, Prague Art Nouveau harmonized wonderfully with the gothic-baroque setting of the city and developed a specifically Prague form. The Czech nation directly contributed, furthermore, to the richness of Parisian Art Nouveau due to the influence of one of its leading figures, Alfons Mucha (1860-1939).

Prague Art Nouveau was “total” art. Its practitioners designed not just the facades of buildings but also sculptures, murals, mosaics, stained glass windows, wrought-ironwork, posters, furniture, vases, jewelry etc. František Drtikol (1883-1961), one of the great twentieth-century masters of Czech photography made portraits and female nudes in an undeniably Art Nouveau spirit between 1900 and 1913.

All over Prague, architects like Osvald Polivka (1859-1931) and the “father” of modern Czech architecture himself, Jan Kotéra (1871-1923), built apartment blocks, the head offices of banks and insurance companies, publishing houses, hotels, a department store and even the main railway station, all of which were decorated with floral designs and female profiles. The greatest example of Prague Art Nouveau is the “Municipal House,” built between 1903 and 1912 to the designs of Osvald Polivka and Antonín Balšánek (1865-1921). It was designed to be a lavish and refined setting for Czech high-class social and cultural life, and contains cafés, restaurants and saloons, a large concert hall-cum-ballroom, and exhibition galleries. A whole generation of artists with roots in Symbolism, such as Jan Preisler (1872-1918) and Alfons Mucha, designed the decoration, and a specific Czech character was part of the brief Art Nouveau had one last official flourish in 1918, when Czechoslovakia became independent and Alfons Mucha was commissioned to design the new country’s first postage stamps and banknotes.

In sculpture, the eminently poetic work of Jan Stursa (1880-1923), who was also Symbolist and eclectic in his origins, created work presenting an almost dematerialized vision of the human body. His Melancholy Girl is regarded as one of the most characteristic pieces of Czech Art Nouveau sculpture.

The Municipal House was completed in 1912 at a time when the Art Nouveau fashion was in decline and most Prague architects had already moved on to something more sober, or modern, or even begun to embrace Cubism. Just as in other places, it is a mistake to think that the history of art in Prague progresses in a straight line. Between 1900 and 1910, painting could be seen in that city covering a range of styles from the Impressionism of Antonín Slavíček (1870-1910), who painted a series of views of Prague in the Impressionist manner during that decade, to the isolated abstract experiments of Alois Bilek (1887-1961) via the neo-Symbolism of Jan Zrzavý (1890-1977) and Josef Vachal (1884-1969) and the Expressionism of the Group of Eight.
In April 1907, Czech Expressionism was officially born with the first exhibition of the Group of Eight (a second followed a year later). There were five young Czech painters, including Bohumil Kubišta (1884-1918) and Emil Filla (1882-1953), and three Germans. With The Eight, avant-garde art made its appearance in Prague. The group had strong links with the German group Die Brücke (The Bridge), which Kubišta actually joined in 1911. One of their main beliefs was the importance of color and they felt particular admiration for the work of Munch, Van Gogh and Gauguin. In their eyes, a painting was not a realistic representation of the external world but rather something in which intense color effects conveyed the artist’s vision and his deep personal response to that external world.

Experimenting with color did not take them as far as abstraction, even though one of the great precursors of abstract art, František Kupka (1871-1957), was a Czech. Kupka in fact lived in Paris and his work was practically unknown in Prague before the First World War. The only slight impact he had was on Alois Bilek in 1913 and 1914, who had visited Kupka in Paris. Modern art in Prague included a late Symbolist current. It was geared more to introspection, spirituality, and externalized visions trawled from the depths of the subconscious than to experiments with form. It was sometimes close to anarchism and drew its inspiration variably from hermetic philosophy, oriental thought, metaphysics, spiritualism and even satanism; its artistic expression was similarly varied — drawing, engraving, pastel, painting and illustration. In 1910, several of these painters founded the Sursum Group. Among them were Zrzavý and Váchal and in the words of the latter they were artists who “adored the spirituality of the Middle Ages, incunables, both the devil and God, everything that our age rejects.” They were deliberately provocative, good examples being Váchal’s painting Invocation to the Devil and Zrzavý’s Antechrist. The mystical sculptor František Bilek (1872-1941) was also associated with this movement, which was sometimes called the “second Symbolism”.

**Secession Architecture**

Like other European capitals, Prague significantly changed its architectural models in the second half of the nineteenth century. The traditional “historical” styles were called into question, giving way to a new eclecticism, and much attention was paid to the question of ornament. Reacting to political and cultural domination by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prague also raised the issue of its national identity. This legitimate claim was the focus of intellectual life and had a number of new prestigious public buildings as one of its consequences. Despite these converging trends, it was not until the Paris World’s Fair of 1900 that Bohemia was identified as a nation, with Vienna as its capital and Prague as a provincial city. Yet Czech was still not an official language, and literature and theater were not in a position to make a clear statement about Czech culture. Could architecture do any better? The intention of doing so came via what in Prague as well as in other European capitals was known as Art Nouveau or Secession. The Jubilee Exhibition was a sign of a movement of renewal, but it is Jan Kotěra to whom credit goes for designing one of the first Prague buildings in the Secession style; the facade of the Petřínská House was immediately hailed by the Manes artists. Kotěra was a young man who had trained with Otto Wagner and won the Grand Prix de Rome, and was to be a leading light in Czech architecture until his death in 1923. On the site in question, although the building was on a narrow plot of land, the architect conceived the facade in three thin strips stretching upward, creating a new urban scale as regards the roofline. The decorative detail was intentionally restrained and unusual for the time in that it made no allusion to historical antecedents. The stuccowork, standing out from the smooth rendered surfaces of the facade, harmonized with the whole, giving emphasis to the spandrels of the lintels, upper entablature and gables by means of geometrical floral motifs silhouetted against the rendering. The elegant ironwork of the balconies was in characteristic Art Nouveau style.

The champions of modernity ask the question: just how far should the contemporary arts go in breaking free from historical styles? Josef Fanta’s response was the main railway station. The facade and overall design were classical, but an eclectic range of styles, materials and polychrome detail was superimposed upon them. The main concourse displayed the full range of architectural and decorative refinements currently available (two- and three-dimensional surfaces molded and painted, stucco, metalwork, and a wide color range).

One of the ambitions of the Art Nouveau movement was to achieve totally coherent design aesthetically, with the artist/architect being responsible for the furniture as well as the building and making use of vernacular talents being used whenever possible. The Municipal House takes decorative...
detail to an extreme, calling on all the resources of Czech artists and craftsmen. The building is deliberately not aligned with its neighbors at floor level in order to permit a view of the nearby medieval tower and preserve that building’s status as a city gate, underscoring the concern for the city’s heritage. Osvald Polivka, one of the two architects, designed numerous Secession buildings and was a leading exponent of the style, even if his work frequently incorporated historical features.

A purer and more committed approach can be seen in the Hotel Europa, and its neighbor, the Hotel Meran. The lavishness of the decoration of the facades continues in the café inside. The visitor enters an almost bewildering world of swirling decor, free-flowing flower motifs and sculptures in multi-colored plasterwork, with long, sinuous “whip-like” shapes in metal and wood. The Europa explores the geometrical variation of Art Nouveau: the decor makes sophisticated use of right angles and arcs of a circle, which echo the architectural features and underline the rationality of the ground plan and elevations.

Although these architectural achievements are outstanding, they are far from rare in Prague. Art Nouveau is widespread throughout the city, most often in the heart of the historical districts and in a variety of types of building (apartment blocks, commercial enterprises of different sorts, administrative centers, etc). It can be systematically applied to whole facades and interiors, and also added to fin de siècle buildings superficially via the detail of ironwork, ceramics, mosaics, etc. It even commits certain large-scale excesses (the Svatopluk Čech Bridge, or by the sheer number of buildings, the Parizská Boulevard and the Masaryk Quay, for example). Art Nouveau died out in Prague as elsewhere just before the First World War, a victim no doubt of a decorative fantasy that would always be vulnerable to the fickleness of taste.

Architecture: The Rational Beginnings

About the time of the Peterka House feat, Kotěra gave a fresh impetus to architecture. He was completely committed to what was going on elsewhere in Europe and absorbed the teaching of Wagner and of other big names in the profession in the West. He chose above all to take popular art into account in order to be familiar with building methods and local materials. He also incorporated topographical and climatic data, as well as data concerning the purpose of the building. In short, “the purpose, the mode of construction and the location are the driving forces; the form of the building is their result.” Thus he had a double approach: a vernacular Czech-inclined tendency, as well as a rationalist inclination looking toward a new universal architecture. He was highly ambitious but did not get commissions measuring up to his ambitions, so had to be content with modest projects. His own villa and that of the sculptor Sucharda could be described as rational buildings in terms of layout (with the primacy of function resulting in asymmetry and volumes projecting externally), with a sober interior design and use of materials: unsculpted stone surfaces, hare brick, undecorated rendering, etc; yet each of these materials received a decorative treatment by its patterned arrangement or by its textured or polished finish. Kotěra used this style again for the Laichter House and then the Urbánek House: the elevation is bordered by a lateral projection or lip, which gives it the appearance of a framed picture, in which the canvas is the patterned or painted brickwork. With its modest use of materials and pure lines and decorative detail, this façade is thus not devoid of subtlety; if architecture is required to be true to materials, that still does not mean that it has to reveal its structural framework. The final verdict is very positive: by displaying the building materials to the best advantage, dissociating the traditional major volumes (expressing the way space is organized) and rationalizing the plan, this current of thought heralded the modernity of the avant-garde of the 1920s.

Prague Cubism

From 1909 onward, young Czech artists became particularly interested in Cezanne and devoted much attention to the question of form. At the 1910 exhibition of work by the artists of the Salon des Indépendants, organized by the Mánes Society, the City of Prague even purchased Derain’s painting, The Bath out of the proceeds of a collection held by artists in Prague cafés. They were increasingly fascinated by the experiments of Braque and Picasso. Several artists, such as Kubita, Filla, Josef Čapek (1887-1945) and his brother Karel, the writer, went to Paris, as well as the collector, historian
and art critic Vincenc Kramár. The latter’s role was decisive. By forming a sizeable collection of Picasso’s paintings and making them available for study by Prague artists, and backing them up with theoretical writings, he became an ardent champion of Analytical Cubism. The Prague art scene was extremely receptive and became the birthplace of a very original synthesis of Cubism and Expressionism and of a Cubist style of architecture unique in the world.

In 1911, the younger generation of artists decided to form a breakaway organization from the Osma Society, the Visual Arts Group, whose members included painters, a sculptor, architects, draftsmen, a theoretician and writers; it was to publish its own journal, Art Monthly. That same year, one of the members of the group, Josef Gočar (1880-1945), designed one of the first Cubist buildings in Prague, a large store called the House of the Black Madonna, which today houses the Museum of Czech Cubism. These artists were fascinated by the problems of form, and created a distinctively Prague style that is sometimes called “Cubo-Expressionist”. Although not all writers on the subject accept the term, it conveys the spirit of this modern Czech art form very well, especially in painting. For whereas Cubism in Paris is sometimes nothing more than a cold formal exercise in breaking down reality, Prague Cubism is generally imbued with a spiritual or existential mood which comes out in the choice of certain themes, for example Procházka’s Prometheus or Kubišta’s The Hanged Man. In painting as well as in architecture, Prague Cubism has its roots in the baroque. Only Emil Filla really adopted the approach of the Analytical Cubists Picasso and Braque, even if he was seldom as austere as they were chromatically. In 1914, after he parted company with the Visual Arts Group, Josef Čapek attacked him for his servile allegiance to French models during a hostile debate between the two factions making up Czech Cubism.

The first exhibition of the work of the Visual Arts Group took place in January and February 1912 in the Municipal House, which had only just been completed. The galleries, showcases and stands in Cubist style were designed by the architect Pavel Janák (1882-1956). A large sculpture by Otto Gutfreund (1889-1927), Anguish, had pride of place in the exhibition. The Cubo-Expressionism of Prague was a “total art”. It was found in all forms of expression, not just in painting, sculpture and architecture but also in interior decoration, design, furniture, ornaments, table ware, lettering, etc. Many artists were versatile exponents of the style. Thus architects such as Josef Gočar (1880-1945), Pavel Janák and Josef Chochol (1880-1956) designed buildings as well as interiors and furniture, and set up workshops in Prague where their designs could be manufactured. Their furniture had a very sculptural treatment, breaking down into separate planes and multiple surfaces while remaining coherent as furniture. Prague Cubism had a very philosophical basis to it: it was an art aiming to conquer and spiritualize matter. Form took precedence over technical and functional constraints: “The artistic consideration counts more for us than does the utilitarian aspect,” was how Janák expressed it. Prague Cubists were somewhat Utopian: They believed that they were responding to the challenge of modern society, but their achievements could be appreciated only by a small number of intellectuals and rich eccentrics devoted to the avant-garde.

Nevertheless, Prague is the only European capital which can boast of Cubist-style architecture. These are buildings not put up just as prototypes out of all context, but real blocks of apartments which are still inhabited today. The buildings are spread around Prague and perfectly integrated into their surroundings. Right in the middle of Prague, in Jungmann Square, there is even a “Cubist” lamppost to be seen, which was designed by another brilliant all-rounder, Emil Králíček.

The Prague Cubist painters developed in different ways. After 1912, Kubišta became much more Futurist, introducing dynamic features into his canvases to convey action and movement, as we see in Mountain Locomotive, Waterfall in the Alps, and Coastal Artillery Opening Fire. A year later, he went so far as to accuse Cubism of being “superficial” because it was mainly concerned, as he saw it, with the “envelope of objects.” The undeniably baroque Cubo-Expressionism of Procházka after 1915 evolved toward Orphism, experimenting with color and displaying prismatic progressions in semi-circular shapes. For others, such as Josef Čapek, Václav Špála (1885-1946) and especially Otakar Kubin (1883-1969), Cubism was above all a vehicle for a personal style, imbued with poetry, especially in the case of Čapek. It was a form of grammar; they used it but did not allow it to dominate them.

As for the sculptor Gutfreund, who took the three-dimensional decomposition of forms a very long way, he can be credited with creating a number of masterpieces of European Cubist sculpture. He took this process so far that his work produced at the end of the war is almost abstract.
On the eve of the First World War, Prague was really the second great center of Cubism, and the city’s avant-garde was fully integrated into the European art network. In the autumn of 1912, the second exhibition of the Visual Arts Group included work by Derain and Picasso as well as artists of *Die Brücke*, such as Kirchner and Schmidt-Rottluff. In the same year, several Czechs, Kubišta Filla, Vincenc Beneš (1883-1979) and Prochůzka, took part in one of the most important European art events of the time, the International Exhibition organized by the Cologne Sonderbund. The third Visual Arts Group exhibition, beginning in April 1913, actually took place in Munich in the Neue Kunst (New Art) Gallery. The fifth, in October, was held in the Berlin gallery *Der Sturm* (The Storm), where several of the members of the Prague Group had already participated in the prestigious first German Autumn Show that exhibited the work of seventy-five artists from twelve countries. In December 1913, the Havel Gallery in Prague hosted an exhibition of Italian Futurist work. In February 1914, just a few months before the conflagration that was going to engulf Europe, Prague was the scene of two exhibitions at the same time. One was organized by the Manes Society and called just Modern Art, concentrating on the *École de Paris*: Gleizes, Metzinger, Villon, Duchamp-Villon, Archipenko, Delaunay, Mondrian, Brancusi, Dufy and Rivera. The other was by the Visual Arts Group and included work by Munch, Picasso, Derain and Braque.

**Architecture and Cubism(s)**

When the arabesques of the Secession style were beginning to sag, a new architectural language emerged. Josef Gočár immediately provided a striking example of it with his House of the Black Madonna. It is a building that the visitor comes across all of a sudden and is then astonished by because of its impressive, even overpowering, red mass. With the uncompromising Brutalism of the lintels and pillars, and the hugeness of the stringcourses and cornices, this building has the kind of dramatic impact that will be one of the essential features of Cubism. Another of Gočár’s innovations was the use of triangular geometric shapes; this is discreet on the low surrounding wall at ground floor level and the tops of the pillars, but more visible around the door and the dormer window surrounds. There is little applied decoration: rather the ornamental effect comes from the way the structural mass is controlled and contained.

How do we account for this radical new development? It was certainly the work of young architects who refused to conform to existing modes and sought to announce their arrival in as spectacular a way as possible. In 1911, they formed the Visual Arts Group, which challenged rationalist premises. What was at the heart of their beliefs? For one of its theoreticians, Vlastislav Hofman, “Form is absolute and comes before function, which is most of the time a variable depending upon the age” So it was a matter of inventing a form that coincided with timeless cultural values. They had their snappy formulation: “It is more accurate to say that form determines function than to say the opposite” (reversing Louis Sullivan’s famous aphorism that form follows function, or the modernist teachings of Wagner). What we have here is an attempt to express architectural theory in its relationship to Czech Cubism. But how was its form to be devised? In the view of Pavel Janák, rethinking had to begin by challenging something as basic in architecture as the traditional roofing method, two verticals supporting a horizontal beam. Believing that a system like this was immutable caused architecture to be frozen in time, fossilized. His first argument was that there was a case for the triangular structure, and this was consistent with the Prague Cubists’ enthusiasm for the pyramid, a supreme form using a minimum of material and having no superfluous mass. Secondly, Janák argued for the repetition of this motif, which is evocative of the natural process of crystallization. Finally, this overlapping geometrical form should be applied to the whole of the facade to give it unity. The principle is sufficiently abstract to be divorced from the question of the purpose of the building and the choice of building materials and their utilization. The final concern of the Cubists was to “dramatize mass,” a visual or aesthetic objective that was independent of the question of layout. Josef Chochol, in the designs of his villas and apartment blocks, resorted to a traditional arrangement of the space or the layout of the residential building along the lines of Haussmann, whereas his facades were completely Cubist. This is the case with his building in Neklanova Street, where an interplay of acute and obtuse angles is particularly striking with white rendering, creating a giant urban origami. This aesthetic is part of the history of styles, since its laws and formal considerations are clear. In Prague, the latter are doubtless not unrelated to the city’s heritage of baroque architecture, where it is also a question of
blurring the boundaries of space, diffracting the human gaze and concealing the plain architectural truth of a building via the tricks of perspective. In the matter of influences, the status of Czech Cubism can be questioned vis à vis France, which inaugurated Cubism in painting. Duchamp-Villon exhibited a design for a “Cubist house” at the 1912 Autumn Salon, but it was interpreted by Hofman purely as a sculptural work as it did not seem to him to have gone beyond the traditional framework of post and lintel. In short, Czech Cubism was a distinctive phenomenon and brought much acclaim to Prague. At a time when the movement for national freedom superimposed itself upon the vision of modernity, Prague set itself up as a cultural capital while waiting to be a political capital. Czech Cubism was essentially limited to the pre-war years and produced few buildings. It is nevertheless a fascinating subject by virtue of its uniqueness in its time and its place, and also because it anticipated certain aesthetic features of purism (notably in the sober facades designed by Chochol). After the war, Cubism was taken up again in a simplified form and incorporated in a minor way rather than applied to whole buildings. It is found in the detail of many blocks of rented accommodation built with state support. Historians have identified a renewal of Cubism in the early 1920s that can be considered to be a national style known as “Rondo Cubism.” In fact, the term was invented after the event for the purposes of classification and is not really accurate. Although there were undoubted Cubist echoes in it (the use of pure geometric shapes and lines), these quotations were superficial and inauthentic. The end result was more decorative than sculptural, applied to the facade rather than having an organic relationship with the building. The style was found in public institutions and large private companies.

The best known example is the Bank of the Czechoslovakian Legions. Josef Gočár designed it, using large and sober forms of the circle and the cylinder as his motifs. Panels or strips in the national colors of red and white enhance the entrance and the interior decoration of the foyer. In a number of respects, the design harks back to historical precedents: the conception of the facade, sculpted pillars at ground-floor level, mezzanine, monumental cornice and attic storey on top of the facade.

Another iconoclastic architect, Otakar Novotný was more radical with his design of an urban block. The geometry of the segment, the circle and the cylinder is exploited here in a particularly pure way. The facade is devoid of all superimposed decoration (except for the capitals and the semi-circle beneath the windows). The result, somewhat paradoxically, is a combination of an uncompromisingly bare visual design bordering on Brutalism and an undeniably graphic appearance. And finally we come to the amazing Adria Palace. For his design of the facades, Janák called on Italian Renaissance palazzo motifs and also made exuberant use of circular and triangular geometric forms as well as an interplay of color. It is a strange, over-ornate building. The architect conceived the project on a scale that is out of keeping with the immediate surroundings but, perhaps to placate the authorities, had the good sense to design a public passageway at street level.

**Town Planning Between the Wars: The New Appearance of Prague**

Europe emerged from the First World War with the principle of nationhood triumphant. Prague was the capital of a nation and had to justify its metropolitan status. What condition was the city in at that time? At the end of the previous century, there had been the complete reconstruction of the Josefov Jewish district, the careful renovation of the Nové Město (new town) and the construction of stone embankments and buildings alongside the river, as well as some new bridges. Prague had been spared by the war and retained the main features of its medieval character as regards its streets and layout, into which later developments had been inserted. The specific topography of the city, with its hilly terrain and winding curves of the V River, was an important factor. In 1919, a rising force in town planning, Max Urban, put forward a proposal called “An Ideal Greater Prague.” Although there was no follow-up, it gives a good indication of what the new generation felt strongly about and what was at stake for Prague. Urban recommended the preservation of the historic center of the city, with work to be carried out only where it was necessary to preserve and enhance the architectural heritage. Beyond the center, he proposed an unprecedented campaign of radical redevelopment and expansion. His “ideal” metropolis would contain entire new suburbs with highly individualized architectural characters and densities of population, and capable of more or less infinite expansion. In Urban’s
vision, Prague would need new prestige buildings and monuments and become the headquarters for international institutions rather in the manner of the World City envisaged by Andersen and Hébrard in 1913. In this spirit he conceived the idea of a “Cosmopolis” district, complete with a lake, situated on the slopes of the Petrin and dedicated to the ideal of peace. The plans failed to impress Karel Čapek, the friend of President Masaryk and journalist of the national daily Národni Listy. For Čapek rather than “monumentalize” Prague, what mattered was to attend to certain urgent needs in the city: planning laws were a necessity, for example. These would control development in the existing city as regards administration and new building, while allowing plenty of scope for individual initiatives. This was bow Čapek hoped to avoid the “tyranny of plans” that contemporary urban architects were so fond of. He argued that these new planning laws were “democratic” in the new political climate of the country. The model to be followed was the American one: creating a dynamic and varied city. This of course meant the free-style development of a city like New York, not Washington-ton, constrained by the rigid geometry of the aesthetic master plan.

A Planning Laws Commission was set up in 1920, and Max Urban was a member of it. Until that time Prague had grown by absorption: in 1890, it consisted essentially of just the Old City and New City and then in that year it absorbed the surrounding communes. It was a simple administrative annexation, as the idea of a “Greater” Prague did not then exist. At the beginning of the 1920s, a prime objective was to provide extra housing (because of the influx of population) and administrative buildings and the associated infrastructure. Thus it became necessary to devise planning systems in general and to work out a master plan for Prague and its outer suburbs. The precedents were those of Greater Berlin in 1910, Haussmann in Paris and above all Otto Wagner in Vienna. Very soon, as a result of design competitions, the new Prague began to take shape. In 1922, thirty-seven communes in the two outer rings of the urban area were absorbed within the administrative authority of Prague, which set about providing them with the necessary development and infrastructure. Many of these areas were rural, but there were industrial suburbs too, close to the city center, such as Liben, Karlin and Holešovice. Major factors influencing planning and development were the complexity of the topography and the distinction between workplace and residential area. In the new agglomerations, each suburb needed thought as regards its specific composition, scale and atmosphere; if they did not already exist, they had to be devised. The density of population, ratios of built-up areas to open spaces, height of buildings relative to street widths (to improve ventilation and lighting) — all of this had to be planned and controlled. Likewise the public transport infrastructures of road, rail and tram linking suburbs and city center had to be designed. Key elements in this strategy were the railway stations, which were upgraded, and an inner city boulevard encircling the historic center. The latter prevented the need for gashes in the historic fabric caused by clearances, and made it possible to travel around quickly. The overall effect of this program was to create what Hubschmann called a “new visual profile” for Greater Prague. And the ancient heart of the city was not affected, being protected: it was unthinkable that anything should be allowed to impact on the panoramic silhouette of the city which had a historic and symbolic value (especially Hrad hill and the castle in pride of place). The architectural heritage was considered more and more to be a cultural legacy from the past that had to be conserved. The layout of the historic center was virtually untouched from this point onward and the only property development opportunities of any substance — Malá Strana and the Letná heights — went no further than the discussion stage. In twenty years, Prague was transformed into a European metropolis with a population of almost a million inhabitants on the eve of the Second World War.

Architecture Between the Wars: Avant-Garde Projects

Once again, it was a matter of knowing how to invent an original architecture. And once again the eternal question of the place of ornament was the preamble. This time, the fundamental questioning was radical and articulated with a political consciousness for which the Devětsil group provided the theoretical discourse. This avant-garde movement, which was founded in 1920, had a coherent ideological platform that it controlled in the manner of political parties (expulsions, godfathers, patronage) and propagated in journals. The avant-garde was convinced that art had a social role to play, contributing to the organization of the world, and that architecture was the prime expression of this belief. The leader of the movement was the young Karel Teige, who published a manifesto for the new generation, *Images and Prefigurations*, containing all his hopes for the reconstruction of the
country. For Teige, ‘the new form of beauty is born of constructive work, which is itself the foundation of modern life’. Art was henceforth to be regarded as a form of constructive work whose modernity was to be determined by its social function. In 1924, Teige published a manifesto of Constructivism which laid the foundations of this new current and of its relationship with art. Translated into architectural terms, this denunciation of “art for art’s sake” placed all the emphasis on the scientific aspects of building: an end to decoration and crafted fabrication, to be replaced by standard parts and production-line units. In 1922, with reference to Le Corbusier’s Purism, Teige wrote that architecture was above all the art of building and not the art of decorating. In the same publication, another Devětsil member, Jaromír Krejcar, presented pictures of New York skyscrapers and praised their fundamentally new design. Even the old champions of Cubism shared this opinion: Josef Chochol expressed the wish that “form be stripped of the superfluous and that the language of forms should be precise and immediately comprehensible.” And Josef Čapek, likewise, challenged the “national style” and argued in favor of the beauty of ordinary objects and the primacy of usefulness.

This radical campaign assimilated social progress to technical progress. Lest we find this too daunting, we should remember that, although standard production-line parts may sometimes be monotonous or inhuman, the avant-garde did have a heart and was not insensitive to beauty or emotion. Devětsil developed “Poeticism” in which poetry was argued to be a new art of living. According to Teige, this was a “modernized Epicureanism, in which the purpose of art is to assert, sharpen and saturate one’s sensibility leading to the greatest possible perception of the world.” Poeticism and Constructivism were intimately bound together, and together they posited architecture as the linchpin of the new world, uniting emotion and the wonder of creation.

We may observe finally in keeping with the Czech avant-garde, that the Prague of the 1920s was the focus for all the main intellectual and political tendencies of European history. In 1924, in Prague and Brno, a series of lectures was organized by the journal Stoubo on the subject of contemporary architecture. In the view of the participants, Gropius, Oud, Le Corbusier, Ozenfant, Loos and others (although Perret and Wright were absent), the future direction was clear: toward an “international art” that was not a colorless cosmopolitanism. International architecture, which was often a collective activity could be cross-fertilizing: the Czech avant-garde, Bauhaus, De Stijl, Russian Constructivists, Le Corbusier Purists, American production-line houses and giant cities, the theories of Adolf Loos, the precursor of an architecture totally devoid of all decoration, these are just a few examples, but they point to a time of intense activity. We are about to see that in the inter-war period, Prague was the scene of much architectural accomplishment in the design and building of administrative buildings, apartment blocks and private houses. The density of work achieved was exceptional (the same is true of Brno and Hradec Králové).

**Wenceslas Square and the City Center**

“WE HAVE FOUND FOR OUR FUEMS BEAUTIES QUITE NEW […] 
BE SILENT, VIOLINS, LET CAR HORN S SOUND.
MAY MAN SUDDENLY DREAM IN THE MIDDLE
OF THE CROSSROADS.” Jaroslav Seifert

In the 1920s, there were several architectural styles in existence at the same time: the Classical style of public buildings, variations on Cubism, rationalism and ordinary architecture. These types of architecture nevertheless often come off second best by comparison with the avant-garde forms, Constructivist, Functionalist or Purist (terms which are often interchangeable). As we have seen, this type of work was characterized by a degree of theoretical maturity, both in Prague and elsewhere in Europe, and reflected an increasing fascination with technique and its manifesta tions. Movement, speed, automobiles, the whole American adventure was dazzling. Movement, rhythm, electric energy, the New York scene, Broadway at night, all these things fascinated people. In Prague, jazz was all the rage, cinemas were everywhere, and the night sky was shimmering with electric advertisements and even Pesanek’s illuminated kinetic sculptures.

The avant-garde dreamed of doing things on a grand scale, but had to content itself with one restricted site, at least as far as the city center was concerned. This was Wenceslas Square,
With a long oblong shape that made it seem like a boulevard for parades and a natural slope that enhanced the dramatic impact of buildings. In the mid-1920s, a number of big entrepreneurs clearly realized this and chose this site for commercial buildings. The best examples are the Baťa, Lindt and Stybl companies, whose offices were all designed and built by Ludvík Kysela; Pavel Janák’s Hotel Julius, and Jaromír Krejčar’s Olympic Building, this last being an astonishingly precocious example of modern architecture in the very heart of the city. Krejčar — “beauty in modern times resides in mathematics and science” — used reinforced concrete in order to create a facade reduced to pure geometric shapes bare of all decoration. In his first drawings, the facade was smooth, like a giant cinema screen on which advertising would be fixed or projected— modern architecture combining function and propaganda.

The Lindt Building is similarly surprising for a historic city center. The onlooker’s first impression on seeing the glass facade is one of luxury because of the material used and then of order because we can see inside. At the same time we cannot miss the advertisements in rows right across the facade and that are fully integrated into the design of the building, an innovation in displaying a company’s brand name architecturally. The onlooker might feel some sense of embarrassment at the lack of privacy afforded by the glass elevation, and perhaps also worried by the slenderness of the concrete frame, yet in the end the traditional concrete foundation, conventional rows of floors almost all resembling one another and rooftop gallery are reassuring enough. Here Kysela and Janák, designing a new type of commercial building, were faced with a similar challenge to that of Sullivan in Chicago when he designed the elevations of the first American skyscrapers. Devising a type of functional architecture rekindles the issue of form, and the strict rules of a new aesthetic have to be worked out. This also applies to the shape of the ground plan and to the building’s relationship to the city as we shall see. Kysela was very much at the heart of a contemporary debate: how was Prague to be turned into a capital city? It was his belief that “transforming the big city centers of America and Europe is the number one problem in city planning in modern times. The architect of the Lindt Building, just like the Olympic’s Krejčar, argued that the static concept of public spaces was out of date and regretted that the enclosed spaces of ancient cities could not cater for modern man’s needs. And whereas Prague had an almost mythic dimension as a large city in fact it was seriously impaired by the narrowness of the streets, which could not cope with modern traffic. And the fact that so many of the building plots were long thin irregular strips of land perpendicular to the street was in no way conducive to orderly reconstruction, or convenient for pedestrians and shoppers. How could Kysela cater for contemporary needs and resolve that problem? There was in fact a type of construction that got round some of the obstacles, and that was the covered shopping arcade that had been so successful in Paris and certain other cities, appealing to the imagination of writers and idle strollers. Buildings and cities had to coexist in osmosis... An ancient and modest plot of land thus became a stimulus to an imaginative and poetic creation of a place. The edifice was built within the constraints of the site: Kysela removed the boundaries between building and public space, the street, by designing a ground-floor arcade to run through the site from the front to the back of the building. There are numerous pedestrians; the arcade is wide. The city is full of life; the artistic avant-garde is fascinated by images, so the arcade contains a cinema, the first sign of modernity Czechoslovakia is one of the most industrialized countries in Europe: the interior volumes crowned with concrete beams and glass panels, and the delicate metal-structured frontages are appropriately bold architectural features. Load-bearing steel columns are also used, as in the Ara store. Finally mention must be made of two later buildings, on the margins of the city center: the House of the Czechoslovakian Union, Dilo, and the department store Bílá Labuť. Both put a final touch to the transparent-facade debate: the metal doors, windows and frames are the essential structure and the cloak of glass both reflects the city and reveals what is happening within.

And so this functional and commercial architecture was one of the prime factors in the transformation of Prague, which was a major event during these inter-war decades.

The Making of a Capital
The newly fledged capital could not break with its much admired Gothic and baroque heritage, nor renounce on its ambition to reclaim a leading role in modern Europe. And so what could be more impressive than architecture as a visible demonstration of cultural and technical skills to advertise the
political and economic strength of a nation and the aspirations and successes of its people? Masaryk
was wise enough to realize the importance of endowing Prague with the appropriate facilities and
public buildings. Planners and architects set about enhancing the city’s image with ambitious buildings
of considerable scale. In an article published in French on the subject of contemporary Czech
architecture, Janák expressed the opinion that in the wake of the revolution it was via massive building
programs that modern architecture had come to dominate public opinion. For the great buildings that
were to be put up in Prague, certain architects such as Gočar, Hübßmann and Janák were in favor of
an architecture imbued with the democratic spirit: it should be easy for the public to assimilate and
also commemorative, even monumental. Hence we find echoes of classical architecture: a monumental
feel created by the sheer size of certain buildings, the rather conventional symmetrical design, and the
heavy reliance by certain architects on verticals and horizontals. The dignity and importance of certain
buildings lie in the symmetrical design of facades and openings, and the virtues of the state are
incarnated in allegorical statuary. In general, it is an architecture that the public can indeed assimilate,
if without much enthusiasm. Examples of this are the squat Ministry of Trade and Industry building
and the massive Ministry of Czech Railways. Then there is a more modern classical vein opened up by
the elegant and sober palace of the Viennese Banking Union. This was followed by: the city library,
with an austere travertine facade giving no hint of the luxurious Art Deco interiors; the imposing
Ministry of Agriculture; the rather meek Commercial Bank; and the assertive Czech National Bank.
We should also mention in this context the uncompleted design of the Palackého Palace and the
surrounding buildings, which freed the perspective toward the towers of the Emmaüs monastery.

There were other tendencies, notably of an avant-garde nature encouraged by the Devětsil
Group and personalities such as Honzik and Krejc. As they saw it, architecture had to reflect above
all (but not just) the new organization of society, and thus break with the monumental tradition. The
competition for a new parliament building on the empty site of the Letna heights was very revealing in
this respect. Most of the designs rejected the monumental concept. This was no doubt due to the
political context: the building had to be consistent with the institutional image of the new state, i.e.
modern and democratic. Hence the formal sobriety recommended by the young Jaromir Krejč. Neverthless, the project proved abortive.

A design that was executed, however, was Fuchs and 13d’s spectacular Exhibition Center. Le
Corbusier came to the opening and departed with the waspish verdict: “it’s a very grand building, but
it’s not yet architecture.” Grand indeed, and bursting out of its site. As if that were not enough, T
intended it to be a far bigger design with a second building identical to the first! Even without the
extension, the impact was enormous as the building imposed a metropolitan scale on Prague in
comparison with the scale of the historic city. With its mass, sobriety and receding lines, it was
designed to be seen from a passing automobile, perhaps anticipating Týl’s vision: “with fast modern
transport we can envisage open spaces, star-shaped cross-roads, in keeping with the mood of modern
man.” It was built in reinforced concrete, and with its rooftop terrace, striking elevations and
continuous windows, it brought modern architecture to Prague. The journal Štvba, of which ‘134 was
the editor, made the case for industrialized architecture and the primacy of function. It got what it
wanted here.

Not far from this site, the Electricity Supply Building clearly reflected two approaches. While
its design kept the internal courtyard or atrium, it nevertheless did not adopt the current monolithic
style of the Exhibition Center or certain classical buildings. With its division into three
perpendicularly aligned parts, all clearly differentiated as regards size, shape and purpose, it marked a
new concept of urban facade. At ground floor level, the alignment along the boundaries of the site is
respected, but the differing elevations extend beyond these limits. The client for this project is highly
significant. With many buildings equipped with elevators, lighting, domestic appliances etc, the
tramway network, and transformers in many places, electricity is a key symbol of modern
industrialized Czechoslovakia.

Another piece of representative functionalist architecture was the Social Insurance Fund
Building. It was the work of two young men, Havlicek and Honzik, who adopted a cruciform ground
plan and wings of different height, extending over the limits of the plot. They consulted Le Corbusier,
who approved of their design and included a drawing of his own with his reply. Perhaps his influence
can be seen in the fact that the building is raised on piles, thus freeing the ground floor, and in their
wish to design similar buildings in the vicinity. Be that as it may the isolated siting of the building and
cruciform design ensured plenty of natural light in the offices and obviated the need for a light well. These architects also worked in another functionalist mode, which gave freer reign to more plastic visual effects while being technically explicit. In their work for the airport at Ruzyne or the Brandlejs department store, for example, there are formal borrowings from the esthetics of machines, notably passenger liners and aircraft. The buildings are almost completely in white, with volumes curved like ships’ smokestacks or angled like aircraft wings, and there are other thematic details, such as metallic tube railings and portholes.

Finally in the realm of significant achievements, there is the home of the Manes Society designed by Otakar Novotný situated on the Vltava River between the quayside and an island, it was also a bridge between two currents of the avant-garde, a sophisticated synthesis of the various formal and theoretical schools that were shaking up European architecture.