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ARCHITECTURE AND IDENTITY

What is the relationship between architecture and identity? In reply, let us cite Martin Heidegger. Suffice it to quote several sentences from his text *Hebel – Der Hausfreund* (1957) in which he defines the concept of habitation in the following way:

If we consider the verb “to live” wide enough and try to understand its essence, it will suddenly become a name of the way in which people here on the earth, under the vault of heavens, undergo their journey from their birth to death. This journey has various faces and is subject to numerous changes but it always makes a basic trait of living as a human way of being between heaven

and earth, between birth and death, between joy and pain, between work and word. If we call this manifold “between” a world, the world will become a house inhabited by the mortals. Particular houses, villages, cities in comparison with it are mere buildings, concentrating in and around them manifold “betweens”. Only the buildings bring the earth closer to people as an inhabited landscape and, at the same time, they open the proximity of neighbourly inhabiting to the vast heaven. Only if a man inhabits the house of the world as a mortal, he is given the opportunity to build a house to the heavenly beings and a homestand for himself.¹

In his book *Genius loci*, published in 1979, the Norwegian historian and architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz (1926–2000) aptly supplements Heidegger’s definition of habitation and demonstrates the extent to which individual identity results from belonging to a place. He also shows how hu-

¹ M. Heidegger, *Básněcky bydlí člověk*, Praha 1993, p. 143.

Advent is also a time of consolidation of identity. Prague, Old Town Square, Christmas fair

ALL PHOTOS IN THE ARTICLE: V. CZUMALO





The interest in monuments on the Czech lands does not fall. Cheb, George of Poděbrady monument

man beings create objects of identification in the process of building and how they refer to discovery of identity. At the end of the chapter on Prague Norberg-Schulz formulates an idea that makes it possible to approach the problem of the relationship between architecture and identity directly, without preliminary conceptual definitions (which tend to be extremely complicated in the case of such a vague concept as identity). The author examines the transformations that take place in the city as it adjusts to new functions, including institutional roles (we should bear in mind that Norberg-Schulz is referring to the Prague of the 1970s, capital of socialist Czechoslovakia). He writes:

But the place is still there with its urban spaces and its character, beautifully restored with its Late Baroque polychromy, allowing for an orientation and identification which goes beyond the security of threat offered by the immediate economic or political system. From the new residential neighborhoods people go to old Prague to get a confirmation of their identity. Without the old centre, Prague would today be sterile and the inhabitants would be reduced to alienated ghosts.²

² Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci*, London 1979, p. 109.

Identity is closely connected with memory. In our study of collective memory we shall refer to the concept of *mémoire collective* introduced in the 1920s by Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), pupil of Henri Bergson and Émil Durkheim. Individual memory is formed through socialisation. Individual memories are organised within *cadres sociaux*, a social framework. Memories filter into a social group through communication and interaction. *Figures of memory* are the foundations of collective memory. This is always concrete in space and time, related to the forms of communication in a given social group, and reconstructive, in that it is constantly reorganised by the present, which provides it with a frame of reference. Jan Assmann (*1938), the German Egyptologist and culture expert who revises Halbwachs's concept in his own theory of cultural memory, explains that collective memory not only reconstructs the past but also organises the sense of the present and future⁴. To Halbwachs, a social group transforms its past into future,

³ See M. Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris 1925, and, by the same author, *La mémoire collective*, Paris 1950. English translation: *The Collective Memory*, New York, Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1980.

⁴ J. Assmann, *Pamięć kulturowa: pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, Warszawa 2008, p. 58.

thus depriving it of any mutability. Collective memory works to sustain continuity, and shapes the past so that the group can recognise itself in it now and today. Since it eliminates change, it behaves conversely to history, which focuses solely on change. Juxtaposition of collective memory and change also stems from another issue: the social group recreates its own past and thus differentiates itself from other groups, while history eliminates differences and forms a homogeneous whole. There are many collective memories but there is only one history trying to remain unbiased and objective.

What is the role of architecture? In the unfinished chapter on collective memory and space in his book *La mémoire collective* (published posthumously), Maurice Halbwachs writes:

When a group is situated in a certain space, it transforms it in its own image but also subjects and adjusts itself to the material things that resist it. It closes itself in a framework it has constructed. In the image of itself that it forms the external environment and the fixed relations that the group sustains with it come to the fore. The image permeates all layers of its consciousness, decelerates and regulates its evolution. The image of things is co-responsible for their inertia. In this way, material culture affects not the isolated individual but the individual as a member of the group which participates in its balance.⁵

Jan Assmann founded his thought on the basic precept of Halbwachs's theory: the past as a social construct shaped by the need for

⁵ M. Halbwachs, op. cit., p. 132.

The Czech audience is fighting for its monument as a source of identity. Prague, New Town, St. Vaclav Square, 7 June 2011 - demonstration against the minister of culture's decision regarding demolition of a building from 1920

meaning and a frame of reference for the respective presents. The past is considered not a product of nature but a product of culture⁶. Things enter the collective memory if they do not serve practical purposes but exist as symbols, icons or other types of representations of meanings. These retain memory differently than things because they refer to the past *explicite*, rather than *implicite*, when they reveal their users' identities⁷.

Assmann distinguishes between *communicative memory* and *cultural memory*. The former retains memories from the recent past, which people share with their contemporaries because these memories are also a part of the people's past. Memory disappears along with those who keep it, and makes room for new memory. Cultural memory is oriented towards fixed points in the past. It cannot retain the past as such, and instead transforms it into symbolic figures, which uphold it⁸.

Jan Assmann draws attention to the basic sacral dimension of cultural memory: the difference between daily and festive communication. Participation in these two types of memory is different: participation of a group in communicative memory is diffused, and participation in collective memory is diversified. While everyone has the same competences in the field of communicative memory, cultural memory is possessed by the initiated few.

This brings us back to the introductory section of Christian Norberg-Schulz's book *Genius loci: 'From the new residential neighborhoods*

⁶ J. Assmann, op. cit., p. 63.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 37.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 68.



people go to old Prague to get a confirmation of their identity.⁹ Here historical buildings take on the role of symbolic figures on which cultural memory is founded, and contact with them is an act of ritual communication. The turbulent development of cities in the 19th and 20th centuries resulted in their spatial and semantic division into residential habitable quarters and places of contact with the city. Obviously, their spatial division renders the process of identification with the city more complicated, but it also helps to balance ritual communication. What might otherwise lose attractiveness becomes unique, and in this way acquires a solemn quality. I am writing these words during Advent and, as every year, I rediscover this rule: a Christmas tree is placed in a privileged location in the Old Town Market Square. A Christmas market is in full swing under it. In daylight it is disgusting tourist kitsch. Yet later in the afternoon and in the evening English is suddenly replaced with Czech (and this year even more often, by Russian) and the site becomes more and more beautiful as dusk sets in. Residents of Prague's housing estates take a stroll to the historic city centre, as visiting nativity scenes in Prague churches is one of the attractions of historic

⁹ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, op. cit., p. 110.

buildings as objects of identification. The attitude of the public towards architecture is always a sensitive indicator of its attitude to modernity. Modern architecture may at times be a projection, a substitute product of the current political and economic situation, of civic awareness and the quality of life. If the present is hostile, then the attitude to architecture is also hostile. If the present is unfriendly, there are only two options: resistance or escape. The past is a perfect space in which to seek shelter from the present. Historic buildings are living testimonies to the prosperity and good taste of former times. And since these were once possible, they may yet return. Historic buildings raise hopes and reconcile the past with the present.

Protection of historic sites is also a way of reconciling the past with the future: we take care that they are not degraded by the present so as to preserve them for the future. Looking in from outside, it might seem that the keen interest of the Czech public in historic buildings was artificially stimulated: generations of people living under socialism were familiarised with their national heritage at school and on school trips, which were often followed up with family outings. Historic sites were presented on TV programmes, short films

Building of the identity of Czech architecture. Praga Dejvice, new building of the Architecture Faculty of the Czech Technical University, designed by Alena Šrámková, Lukáš Ehl i Tomáš Koumar, 2005–2010

and weekly newsreels: they afforded a means of escape from the grey issues of the building industry to both film makers and viewers. Major ones made their way into the educational canon as themes for or backdrops to fundamental works of Czech literature, music and theatre. A characteristic follow-up to this school education were trips to work collectives and societies of friends of historic monuments. Post-November developments showed that nothing had changed and the Czechs' attitude to heritage was sincere. Although following the opening of the borders in 1989 the number of visitors to historic sites in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia dropped, in the second half of the 1990s this trend reversed and levelled out, even though ownership of many sites changed, prices of entrance tickets rose, and leisure time diminished. Can this trend be justified by a rise in the number of sites open to the public, improvement of services and the intensity of the propaganda? Or was it perhaps another escape, or a need for identification?

When I am in the country, I often recall a text by an 11th century chronicler, Rudolf Glaber, with his highly evocative image of a world dressed in a white mantle of churches. In these times of declining agriculture the Czech countryside is still (or once more) sick and dying in places, yet over the last twenty years

churches have reclaimed their place in the rural landscape: gleaming after restoration, they attract attention. In the context of the most atheistic country in Europe this cannot be interpreted as a sign of a revival of the Church's authority in society. But it is evidence of a search for support for a local identity. There are villages here that are remote managed by civil servants because they cannot compile a list of candidates for the commune council. Yet there are also other localities where old organisations are being revived and new ones established, books on local history published, small museums opened, old paths retraced, and churches and chapels once abandoned by the church restored.

Heritage protection belongs in the sphere which I tried to outline in the introduction, quoting several otherwise different authors. It is a kind of appropriation of the past. If a historic building is restored, it is transferred to the present time, to modernity. The continuity of its existence is channelled into the present. Reconstruction is ultimately a reconstruction of meanings, a translation into contemporary language. It is a form of legitimisation of the present and of the work of those who manage a given site. In fact, it is also a source of identity. Except that during this operation the horizons of the past and future are blurred



because reconstruction of a historic building draws it into the current circulation of profits and turns it into a source of income. On the one hand, all kinds of building initiatives, often EU funded, are undoubtedly attractive; but on the other, there remains the problem of exploitation of historic sites by the tourist industry. Can a historic site – cleaned up and hygienically packaged for use by the industry – continue to be a source of identity, by which I mean local, regional or national identity? It is also in this sense that authenticity is crucial to protection of historic sites.

In the Czech Republic institutional protection of historic sites is not prominent and in practice is limited to issuing permits and prohibitions. Due to the debasement of its mission it has become a front line of struggle between the old and the new. Historic sites are protected because we like them: that is what we are told by the founding father of modern theory



In the most atheistic country in Europe, the churches are shining. Nicov, sanctuary of Virgin Mary, designed by Kilián Ignác Dientzenhofer, 1717–1726



Architecture for reborn democracy that preserves memory and identity. Benešov, alteration and expansion of the City Hall, designed by Josef Pleskot, Radek Lampa, Vladimír Krajíc and Jana Vodičková, 1993–1995

of conservation Alois Riegl (1858–1905).¹⁰ In Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, however, media reports suggest that it is otherwise: historic sites are protected because conservation officers do not allow anything else. Fortunately, there is the other side of the coin: since the 1990s there have been more and more civic initiatives either to protect one particular site or to run larger projects. The public protests more actively against the pressure of developers and their political manipulations aiming to do away with historic buildings. We are already aware that we are living in a time when the historical environment of our settlements – indeed our very identity – is under threat. A hundred years ago resistance to sanitation in historic cities resulted in the birth of modern protection of historic sites and the modern civic society. The second analogy has its roots in more recent times: in the 1980s the then socialist Czechoslovakia saw a wave of popularity of the green movement, which was in fact political, since its concern quickly passed on from the degradation of the natural environment to its causes. In both cases politics is inseparable from culture, yet environmental

¹⁰ A. Riegl, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung*, Wien und Leipzig 1903.

The socialist state was still building its identity. Alteration of the Prague Stock Exchange (designed by Jaroslav Rössler, 1936–1937) for the purposes of the Federal Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovakia (Karel Prager, Jiří Albrecht i Jiří Kadeřábek, 1967–1973). Today, the second building of the National Museum

protection is in the foreground as a foundation of our identity.

Why have I devoted so much space to protection of historic sites and architecture instead of writing about new construction projects over the past twenty years? Because such is the reality: historic architecture has been entrusted with many functions normally performed by new buildings which are specially built for such purposes. Obviously, this is not a rule because it does not concern all aspects of the building industry. The house has always been an architectural representation of the family; belonging to a house and the house belonging to a place has always been a source of individual identity. The house belonging to the locality is a natural link

between individual identity and the collective identity of a rural or urban community. The mass escape from the collectivism of socialist housing estates to the individualism of new detached houses characteristic for the 1990s is also an indication of a (subconscious) search for identity. It also accounts for bad taste or even kitsch: in a neglected, run-down building culture everything that evokes the long-discarded archetype of the native cottage sells well. Identity is part of the invasion of another layer of architectural kitsch of the 1990s: newly erected bank buildings reflecting the identity of actors in the new economy and the new social stratification. At the opposite pole, with delayed rusticification of classical postmodernism by banks, was neomodernism. In the 1990s neofunctionalism, which had been developing since the 1980s, could be interpreted as a reference to the young democratic republic and as a manifestation of its belonging to Western Europe. Native tradition was not a strong theme, and in the public view the new European identity is expressed by the kind of architecture that is an exponent of globalisation. After all, a sumptuous feast will always be more appealing than a modest, low-calorie dinner.

A special layer comprises buildings that are



The Dancing House did not become neither a symbol of the revolution, nor a source of a new identity. Designed by Frank O. Gehry and Vlado Malunić, 1993-1997

focal points of local identity: town halls. One splendid example is the reconstruction and merging of two older houses to serve as the town hall in Benešov's market square (Josef Pleskot, Radek Lampa, Vladimír Krajíc, Jana Vodičková, 1993–1995). The memory and identity of these buildings have been preserved but they acquired an additional contemporary significance through references to the tradition of the democratic First Republic of Czechoslovakia, reflecting hopes vested in the return of democracy. This model, however, did not find many followers willing to found the new identity of urban communities on their existing identity. It does not have to be a town hall; this function can be performed by a school, a library or a new church. The object of identification may of course be a building which does not enter into dialogue with the locality or its tradition, or is perhaps devoid of any local identity. The public response to architecture cannot be foreseen accurately, and moreover, it changes over time.

It is different in the case of buildings connected with national or state identity. We shall put aside considerations of national architecture, as they go beyond the set time horizon. A national sense can certainly be found in the Czech architecture of the past two decades; however, seeking it would solely be an intellectual exercise, as the public does not derive any national meaning from works of architecture. What is more, national identity is a taboo topic even as an element of intellectual exercise because the national card is played by Czech populism with its fascist tendencies.

Ever since its establishment in 1918 the Independent Republic of Czechoslovakia sought a

means of expression through architecture, a style that would represent both the ideas on which it was founded and the nations who constituted it. Josip Plečnik carried out the task with which he was entrusted by Masaryk: to 'transform a purely monarchic edifice into a democratic construction'.¹¹ The state was represented not only by the new ministry edifices but also by the whole spectrum of buildings from railway stations to schools. The democratisation of socialism that culminated in the Prague Spring found its expression in the conversion of the Prague stock exchange into the seat of the Parliament (Karel Prager, Jiří Albrecht, Jiří Kadeřábek, 1967–1973). The Velvet Revolution, the restoration of democracy in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, did not even attempt to create its own architecture. Milunić's Dancing House (Frank O. Gehry, Vlado Milunić, 1993–1997) was originally intended to glorify the revolution in a humorous way; however, this idea is somewhat blurred by the fact that it houses the seat of the Nationale-Nederlanden insurance company. The lower chamber of the Parliament of the Czech Republic is situated in a complex comprising a baroque Jesuit gymnasium, the Royal Exchequer, bourgeois houses, two noble houses, and the former parliamentary house, which was originally a noble palace. When the upper chamber, the Senate, was established, it was located in the early baroque Albrecht Wallenstein Palace (Andrea Spezza, Giovanni Pieroni, 1623–1629), and the royal stables were converted into the Senate session room. The Minister for Culture resides in a baroque noble palace but the Ministry also holds sessions

¹¹ T. G. Masaryk, *Světová revoluce za války a ve válce 1914–1918*, Praha 1925, p. 563.



in the early modernist former Archduchess Gisela Orphanage and in the functionalist Palace of Exhibitions. When districts were reintroduced, their seats were located in existing buildings adapted for the purpose, ranging from a brewery to the Baťa factory administrative offices. This is reminiscent of the situation after the reforms of Joseph II: in the Bohemian lands the new needs arising from the modernisation of the state did not lead to the construction of new buildings and new architectural typologies because the vast, disused spaces of dissolved monasteries and church grounds could be adapted for the purpose.



The Senate of the Czech Republic debates in an early Baroque stable of the Wallenstein Palace, designed by Andrea Spezza and Giovanni Pieroni, 1623-1629

relationship of man to his environment, identity as a unique place in the world, derived from that relationship, inevitably disappears, too.¹²

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY ANNA MIROSŁAWSKA-OLSZEWSKA

¹² V. Havel, *O lidskou identitu*, Praha 1990, p. 349.

At that time it was a typical manifestation of enlightened pragmatism, but what should we call it today? Obviously, we could say that over the last twenty years architecture has not been a topic of interest to the political class, and as a consequence the state has not learned self-representation through architecture. The cause, however, lies much deeper. A work of architecture can substitute the state as an element of identification but on condition that between the building and the state there is an intermediary concept of state, or rather a set of ideas which form the concept of state. And here is the rub.

aware that in the way he drew on the great architectural oeuvre of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, he was isolated – and hence also solitary. In his text *O lidskou identitu* [The Crisis of Human Identity], written in March 1982 in Bory prison, he formulated an idea closely connected with the issue discussed in this article:

A crisis of the experience of the absolute horizon usually also leads to a crisis of man's existential responsibility towards the world and for the world, which means towards himself and for himself. Where such responsibility does not exist as a justifiable foundation of the

We have the right to expect architecture to create an environment in which we can find our collective identity. However, we cannot blame architecture for loss of identity, or demand that the state create it for us. This is what architecture cannot do by itself.

I am writing this during the sad week following Václav Havel's demise. I am painfully

To the right: an old brewery has been altered and expanded for the purposes of the County Office in Hradec Kralove. Designed by Pavel Tušl, Jiří Dařbuján i Miloslav Dědek, 2005–2007

Next to: County Office in Zlin is situated in a comfortable building of the Bata company, designed by Vladimír Kalfík, 1938

