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ARCHITECT EUGENE ROSENBERG

Introduction

Architect Eugene Rosenberg (1907-1990) was born in Topolcany, Slovakia (than Czechoslovakia). He studied architecture in famous Gocars' class at Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. He travelled a lot during his studies and spent couple of months working for Le Corbusier in Paris. He also worked for Honzik and Havlicek in Prague. He established his first own practice in 1934. He only worked 4 years in Prague and than immigrated to England. He left Czechoslovakia shortly before the Nazi invasion in 1938. After difficult war years, he established partnership with architects Yorke and Mardall. Partners worked separately on their projects at the beginning, but they soon changed the policy and acted more under the YRM sign. Rosenberg worked until 1975. He mostly led the projects of hospital and industrial buildings. Yorke Rosenberg Mardall, later called YRM, went through couple changes and exists up to this day.

The following text results the current research of architects' lifelong work. It is mainly based on the search in Czech, Slovak, French archives and published works that mention Rosenberg within YRM or Czechoslovakian interwar architecture.

1. Journeys and practice, schools: Practice at Le Corbusier. Corbusier's influence on Rosenberg's further work. Rosenberg's aesthetic functionalism. Rosenberg at Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture. Practice at Havlicek and Honzik.

1920s and 1930s were typical for their internationalism. Travelling and connecting with foreign architects became an obvious part of the profession. In late 1920s, Rosenberg studied at the Technical University in Prague. As a student he travelled to France, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland and Belgium¹. He also had an opportunity to meet reputable architects from other countries in Prague, which was a very attractive centre of avant-garde then. One of the architects, who enjoyed Prague a lot, was Le Corbusier. When Le Corbusier came to give his second lecture to Prague in 1928², Rosenberg applied for a job in his office. Three months later, in January 1929, he got a chance to work for him. A couple of Czech and Slovak students and young architects gained similar experience in longer period of time. During he practice, Rosenberg worked on the designs for Villa Savoy in Poissy, Draeger factory and Centrosoyuz building in Moscow. Le Corbusier influenced his further work significantly.

After Rosenberg came back from Paris to Prague he joined Gocar's class at The Academy of Fine Arts, The School of Architecture.

Before Rosenberg started to work on his own in 1934, he tested his architecture skills in the office of key figures of Czechoslovakian avant-garde Honzik and Havlicek. This time they were designing the Pensions Building in Prague. He also worked for other successful architects - Jan Gillar and Josef Štepanek.³

2. Start: first independent works in Topolcany

His first independent work was created by the time of his stay by Le Corbusier. It was a dentist's surgery interior in Topolcany.⁴ After he co-operated with other architects in various architectural practices all over Prague, he executed another work in his hometown. He designed Czech Red Cross hospital in 1933. One year later, he worked on designs of Villa for doctor Mokry - it was a house and an office for a public provincial physician.



3. Blocks of flats: Apartment houses in Prague

Rosenberg's first executed building in Prague was an apartment house at Letohradská Street. It was followed by other apartment houses and low-cost flats in surrounding of Holesovice. They all have similar features derived from the ideas of aesthetic functionalism. The facade is composed of a combination of glass and solid surfaces; it combines such features as raised middle part, horizontal windows and loggias on sides. Spaces in flats seem to be generous, whether we come to small, medium or large flat. First of all, this is enabled by clever spatial arrangement, careful choice of materials and use of new technologies. Rosenberg designed luxurious city apartment houses with new type of flat, which reminded of one-family house. It became



a specific building type in Prague. Historian of architecture Vladimír Šlapeta believes that it was inspired by Corbusier's own pent house at Porte Molitor in Paris. He writes: "[Rosenberg] is mentioned among Corbusier's co-workers on the project of his own house at Porte Molitor next to Stade des Princes in Paris. When he came back to Prague in 1934 he introduced himself with series of luxurious apartment houses built at Letná, in Holesovice and in Nove Mesto and he created a new type of a comfort city apartment house which was undertaken by other architects. They followed his precedence." (Šlapeta, Jendáček, 2004)



Block of flats Stepar - Hanak, Holesovice , Prague.

4. Yorke in Prague. Links between Czechoslovakia and England

English architect Yorke was fascinated by Czechoslovakian functionalism. He was coming very often to Prague. He kept meeting Czechoslovakian architects, artists and poets. He also travelled to other countries, collected materials for his book - *The Modern House*. This publication should give more publicity to functionalistic architecture into yet relatively conventional England. He worked with architect Honzík on this book in the same time when Rosenberg worked for Havlíček and Honzík.

5. New beginnings for Rosenberg: Immigration to England, internment in Australia

In his publication⁵ architectural historian Zdeněk Lukeš explains that it was not easy for a non-Czech architects to work in Prague. It became even worse with rising anti-Semitic moods in late 1930s. In relation to this, Rosenberg was exceptional. In short time period, many of his buildings came into existence.

He left Czechoslovakia shortly before the Nazi invasion in 1938. When he came to Great Britain, he started at Liverpool University. He and Yorke were members of a team involved in building munition factories and workers' hostels. "The hostel building team, largely based on MARS Group members, was notable for its high level of expertise" (Powers, 1992)

In 1940 under the "enemy nationals" restrictions he was taken to internment camp to Australia. During this stay he also made a couple of studies of block of flats. He came back to England two years later. First years after his return Rosenberg worked with Jane Drew, later with Rodney Thomas and again with Yorke.⁶



6. Practice Yorke Rosenberg Mardall: Career of Yorke and Mardall. Three in one - running practice

Rosenberg and Yorke spoke to anglo-finnish architect Mardall. Inter alia he had great ability to bring a contribution to their plans of designing a prefabricated house, thanks to his previous experience in building pre-fabricated timber houses. He had already refused a job offer in Finland from Alvar Aalto and Eliel Saarinen but he accepted the offer for work from Yorke and Rosenberg. Since the beginning their work was based on a principle of three independent studios— separate but equal. They established formal partnership YRM (= Yorke Rosenberg Mardall) in 1944.

7. New start. Transformation. Gatwick airport. Schools. Hospitals. Internationality

"Mardall recalls that at the beginning of the partnership "we knew precisely which way architecture was going to go. We knew Aalto, Corb and Wright personally. We had no hesitation." There was certainly no question of any eclectic or historical tendency in the firm's work. The battle for Modernism as a principle in England had been won, but there was less clear agreement about what Modernism meant." (Powers, 1992) Compare to other pre-war contemporaries Yorke's post-war carrier was even richer than it was before it. He started his new office with great enthusiasm and succeeded to realize number of buildings. YRM designed schools, universities, hospitals, shopping centers, offices and industrial buildings in that time. Hospitals and industrial buildings became Rosenberg's domain.

In the mid 50-ties, a new generation of architects came to office. As historian of architecture Alan Powers explain, especially architect David Alford was pressing for changes and started to criticize lack of strength, compromises and "Englishness". The office succeeded in adaptation on some changes and the first results of transformation were notable in their new design for Gatwick Airport terminal. They started to work at designs of the first stage of the airport in 1955. It was built in less than three years. The airport integrated, as the first in Europe, three different forms of transport— air, road and rail. This stage was exceptional also in the use of the "finger" access to the airplane stands.



Simplicity, serviceability, sophisticated use of materials and emphasis on perfect detail remained in the core of transforming architecture of Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardall. One of the outstanding materials of coming period, the white tile, became the trademark of YRM.

8. Architect's choice: Art in architecture

After his retirement in 1975, Rosenberg concentrated his whole-life passion on art. Together with his wife Penelope Wilkinson (he got married in 1946) he collected materials about art in architecture. He was working on a book about post-war art in architecture in Great Britain. Unfortunately, he didn't live its publication in 1992.

"Rosenbergs' buildings stand above those contemporaries - a time when Czechoslovakia nurtured any flourishing talents and yet Rosenberg was the best of an already good bunch." (Kaplicky, 1990)

Notes

- 1 mentioned in: Powers, A.: In the line of development: FRS Yorke, E. Rosenberg and C. J. Mardall to YRM, London :RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1992.
- 2 for Corbusiers lectures in Prague see: Šlapeta, V., Jendáček, V.: Stavební kniha 2004, Český funkcionalismus, Eden 3000, 2004.
- 3 working for Gillar and Štepanek mentioned in: Benton Ch., Elliot D., Harwood E.: A different world: Emigre architects in Britain 1928-1958, London :RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1995, p. 203.
- 4 mentioned in: Powers, A.: In the line of development: FRS Yorke, E. Rosenberg and C. J. Mardall to YRM, London : RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1992.
- 5 Lukeš, Z.: Splátka dluhu – Praha a její německy hovořící architekti, Fraktaly publishers, Praha, 2002, p.1.

Literature

BENTON, Ch. - ELLIOT, D. - HARWOOD, E.: A different world: Emigre architects in Britain 1928-1958. London : RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1995. 232 s. - ISBN 1872911501.

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POWERS, A.: In the line of development: F.R.S. Yorke, E. Rosenberg and C. J. Mardall to YRM. London : RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1992. 108 s. - ISBN 187291120X.

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