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ARCHITECT VLADIMÍR KARFÍK , HIS PERIOD AND ARCHITECTURE

**/Overview of the life and work of the architect
Karfík, one of the most important Czechoslovak
architects/**

Abstract

Architect Vladimír Karfík was one of the most influential Czechoslovak, and Slovak architects. His life, professional career and his work reflected a lot of changes characteristic for the 20th century. He cooperated with many famous creators of the modern architecture all over the world. His personal enchantment and his participation in well-known studios of the first half of the 20th century helped preserve legends about him. As a developer of the functionalistic architecture style in Zlín he became one of fathers of the modern Czechoslovak architecture.

His main legacy does not lie only in the field of the architecture, he was also very productive as an educator, university professor and writer. He assisted to base and create the first Slovak faculty of architecture – The Faculty of Architecture at SVŠT /Slovak University of Technology/ in Bratislava. As a pedagogue and cooperator, he always introduced a direct and open version of the liberal discussion. He always held his typical pragmatic attitude, what helped him, thanks to his long life, to get all over the 20th century, rich for many complicated periods and epochs. Vladimír Karfík understood architecture as a concrete result of various components and the architectural task, which is determining. Out of components, the most important task was always played by function, construction, economy and beauty. Because of this, his architecture is very understandable and universal in all periods of his life and even today.

Introduction

The Phd. thesis, named "Art and Functional Impulses in the Transformation of Modern Architecture, Vladimír Karfík – the Architect, his Period and Architecture", is going to

summarize the professional career of one of the most important Czechoslovak, as well as Slovak, architect – Vladimír Karfík. It will try to sum and explain kinds of different inputs that have influenced his work and his personal life. The Phd. thesis will mention all of his architectural works and designs, books and other writings, his main achievements, experiences and his contribution to the modern Czechoslovak and Slovak architecture.

This article will outline the life and work of the architect Vladimír Karfík, state his main achievements and the most important architectural designs. The research work on Karfík, which has been done so far and which can be used as a base for this research, will be started. His constant pragmatic attitude during his life and career will be explained as well. The main aim is to make a serious research in the field of the inputs and different kinds of the attributes that are reflected in his architectural objects. Explanation of his attitudes and reactions, which he had presented in his architectural solutions, will be outlined very briefly.

Biography

He came from a family of a mining doctor working in Idrija, near Ljubljana, Slovenia, where he spent his early childhood. From Slovenia, the family moved in to the hometown of his parents – to Prague. In its part Žižkov, Karfík attended the elementary and the secondary school. Since his youth he was interested in many different things, piano playing, foreign languages, literature, drawing, painting, photography and field trips, which later helped him to coordinate and fulfill his personal and professional life.

School

He continued the studies at the University – the Faculty of Architecture at ČVUT /Czech University of Technology/ in Prague. In his

class were concentrated many of the future architectural personalities like Karel Honzík, Jozef Havlíček, Ada Beneš, Evžen Linhart Vít Orbel, Ferdinand Fencel, Jan Rejchl, Jaroslav Frágnér and Emil Belluš, his following fellow architects at the Faculty of Architecture at the SVŠT in Bratislava.¹⁵

The period of his study at university was characterized by the contradiction between the followers of the traditionalism in architecture and the enthusiasts, like Karfík, of the new radical modern waves coming from the east and west. It led to the disagreements and rows, especially with classically orientated professors, for example with prof. Antonín Engel and Jozef Fanta.¹⁵ At the university Karfík came to know all the important and world famous architects like, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos, August Perret, who he met continuously, but also the other architectural personalities that have formed his opinions and attitudes, like Mojsej Jakovlevič Ginzburg, Konstantin Melnikov, the Vesninov brothers, Mies Van der Rohe, Theo Van Doesburg, Jean Paul Oud etc.¹⁴

Architectural practice

During his studies he traveled a lot and he recognized that knowing the places and collecting the experiences are the most important practice for the profession of an architect. His father supported his suggestion to obtain the training abroad. In 1924 he came to Paris. Karfík could either continue studies at one of two schools of architecture: the École des Beaux Arts or at the École Spéciale d'Architecture¹⁴, which both he found too traditionalistic, or he could start his architectural practice at a studio. After the failure in the office of August Perret – the pioneer of the reinforced concrete building, he applied at the newly established studio of Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret. They accepted him and Karfík started to work on an urban commission of the city for three million people - The Plan Voisin. He worked for Le Corbusier for one year and in the summer of 1926 he returned to his home country.¹⁵

Through the Masaryk academy of the Labor and the Czechoslovak embassy in Washington D.C., he applied for the three

year practice in the USA. Together with his colleagues Jozef Franc and Jaromír Souček, in April 1927, he sailed to New York City. The place of their stay was Chicago – the cradle of the modern American architecture. Karfík started to work in the studio of Schmidt, Garden & Ericson, but after few months he left the studio and went to work for a prestige firm Holabrit & Root.

Work for Wright

Thanks to his fiancé, Jaroslávka Žižková, he got in touch with the master builder – Frank Lloyd Wright. In that time he had his office in Spring Green, Wisconsin, but after he received a big commission in Arizona, he promptly moved his studio 3 000 miles to the South - West. Karfík stayed with Wrights' architectural family for one year and he realized, that it was the best opportunity to recognize the work of this worldwide known architect. If we consider disposition and personal potential of Vladimír Karfík, this was really the best way how to learn all the principles of the American way of the modern architecture. Wright, in spite of the theory of Le Corbusier, claims that in architecture, it is not possible to copy the historical styles. He respected his teacher Louis Sullivan, who formed the slogan "form follows function".¹⁵ This motto became a principal of the newborn architectural style in Europe, the functionalism. Karfík helped to create its special branch, the Czechoslovak functionalism in Zlín.

Meeting with Baťa

Karfík's return to Czechoslovakia was caused not only by the escalated economic crisis after the September 1929, but also by the attractive offer that he received from Jan Baťa, the son of Tomáš Baťa senior, the founder of the famous shoemaking empire. They created a projection department, in the home city of the company, the city of Zlín. Karfík started to work for Baťa in 1930 and after a three-month probative period, he became the head of the Projection department for 16 years. Karfík's department designed hundreds of the architectural projects including whole new cities, the industrial areas, individual and

collective houses, department stores, hotels, houses of culture, office buildings, hospitals, buildings for traffic and sport.¹²

Architecture of Zlín

The functionalistic inter-war architecture of Zlín was always linked with the Baťa Company and its requirements closely related with the development of this town. Zlín is a very special example of the holistic urban scheme, as the concept of new industrial town. It was something like the realization of visions of the generations of the functionalistic architects. During Karfík's performance at Baťa Company, the "Architecture of Zlín" became a remarkable phenomenon not only for the Czechoslovak, but also for the world interwar architecture.¹⁶ Karfík's most important designs from this period are: The Church in Bratislava-Petržalka from the year 1930, The Hotel in Zlín, from the year 1931, Baťa Department stores in Bratislava and Brno from years 1931-2, The Baťa Headquarters in Zlín, from 1938 and finally The Church in Partizánske, Slovakia, from 1943-7.

Characteristic feature of the Zlín architecture is the standardization and unification. They organically grew from technology of industrial architecture, its functions and operations. The economy always played the very important role. The basic element of the architectonic expression and technical solution became the unified module of construction 6,15 x 6,15 m. Construction standards were joined with the utility standard with the result of the maximal flexibility and variability. The next important aspect is a speed of the realization and of course the standardization. Tomáš Baťa tried to hold the universal and unified architectural style for his company, due to the principle of the corporate identity. His methods and Karfík's personal inclination had the mutual pragmatic platform and Vladimír Karfík, based on to his American experience, did not have any problems, to adopt to this requirement. With his personal attitude, respect and authority, Karfík helped to create an outstanding architectural studio, where some other notable architects like Jiří Voženilek, Robert H. Podzemný, Miroslav Lorenc or Václav Kubečka took part. From the other cooperators we can mention

Emanuel Hruška, Josef Havlíček or Le Corbusier, who has been invited to Zlín as a consultant, in 1935.¹⁵

Years in Bratislava

The social conditions after the World War II have changed dramatically and Vladimír Karfík, working for Baťa Company for 16 years was forced to accept the offer from Slovakia. In 1946 he came to Bratislava for the invitation of his friend, engineer Ríša, to design the new industrial complex for the synthetic fibers, Dynamit Nobel. He knew Bratislava, as well as Slovakia, from his previous architectural realizations. The second, but not less important reason to come to Bratislava, was the invitation from Emil Belluš. He knew Karfík from the study at the university in Prague and he wanted him to cooperate on the concept of the first school of architecture in Slovakia – the FAPS SVŠT /Faculty of Architecture and Structural Engineering at The Slovak University of Technology/

Vladimír Karfík, the pedagogue

Vladimír Karfík was the only professor who missed pedagogical and teaching experience. Maybe this fact helped him to create a very friendly and open relationship with students and colleagues. Karfík helped to implant the new principles to the structure of the study, according to the modern European teaching standards. Karfík lectured typology and grew few generations of Slovak architects in the spirit of modern functionalistic architecture. Karfík always accented the need for the combination of the pedagogical work with the scientific research and projection, to which he enticed a lot of his students and assistants from the faculty. He had a lot of international contacts in architectural studios, and at other faculties and schools of architecture all around the world.¹³

Architecture after 1948

From the architectural point of view, the first period after the year 1945, is characteristic with the establishment of the progressive functionalistic architecture of the thirties. This was very characteristic for the architectural designs of Vladimír Karfík from that period. After the year 1948, new social

relations came that affected the organization of the architectural work, as well as all the human activities in the socialistic society. Elements of the socialistic realism with the history like forms, preferring the emotive factors, following the soviet model, have been implanted to architecture. They brought the stagnation into architectural shapes and dispositions. The context of the building used to be understood in the wider relations so called "normalization".

"Normalization" became one of the most important determinants of designing. It predetermined the urban relations, composition of the whole building, exterior shape and also the timetable of the construction, what should lead to the discipline and the economy in the field of the architectural expressional tools. Generally, it led to the general distaste.

Vladimír Karfík was against these principles, but his designs were originally so well composed, that he did not have any problems with his architectural solutions. He kept his pragmatic attitude, what had helped him to get over the problems and failures. He designed a lot of buildings that represented the designers' architectural culture. The predominant number of the typologically various realizations, were in Bratislava, but we can find his designs also in different cities in Slovakia. We can mention the most important realization from this period: The Plant of Dynamit Nobel /CHZJD/ in Bratislava, with its residential colonies from 1947-1950, The Building of the Faculty of Chemical Technology, on Kollárovo square in Bratislava from 1950, The First Panel House in Slovakia, on Kmeťovo square in Bratislava from 1952, and from the later period for example the Building of the Laboratories VUMA in Nové Mesto nad Váhom from 1963, or The Administrative building ÚAK /Institute of the Applied Cybernetics/ in Bratislava – Dúbravka, from 1971-8.

Vladimír Karfík was very active during his entire life, and also after he retired from his pedagogical practice. As a respected architect and university professor, he involuntarily left the faculty and continued working in design work in The Projection Studio of URBION – the public institution for

the urban planning. In this urban studio, he dealt with prognostic urban visions, urban architectural studies and also with architectural studies of industrial zones, normative works and several architectural projects. He cooperated with some of his students from the Faculty; he excelled in the teamwork. Through his professional and personal authority, he used to be just a member of the team, not its leader. He embodied the well-known thesis, which the greatness of an authority does not depend on the place in hierarchy.¹¹

Malta experience

The government of Malta made a political decision with the consequence of unwished departure of the British intellectuals, from the Island, in 1977. As a result, in 1978 Karfík obtained a very interesting offer, to work as a professor at The University of Malta. He greeted this challenge, and helped to create the new teaching structure of the local faculty of architecture. His 5-yearlong mission was really successful.

He worked also in projection with several architectural realizations, during his stay there. We can mention The National Stadium in Ta Quali, from 1980 or The House for the President of the Republic, Aghata Barbara, at Gozo Island from 1982.

He also published the typology textbooks for architects there.¹⁵ He returned for a short time to USA, in 1984-5, where he did a lecture tour to few important American universities. In the USA, he is still known as a representative of a famous period of Czechoslovak interwar architecture, especially the functionalistic architecture of the city of Zlín. He spent his last years with his wife in Brno, where he died in 1993.

Sources, summary, inputs

Most of information about Vladimír Karfík has been drawn from the book of his memories "Architect recalls his memories", which he brought out in 1992, one year before his death. As well as from the memories or his colleagues', students' and adherents' articles. There is no other book or monograph about this great architect and author of publications from the field of architectural typology.

Conclusion

Vladimír Karfík understood architecture as a concrete result of various components represented by the architectural task. Out of these components that have been manifested in different periods and in different ways, the most important were the function, construction and economy. His uniqueness, for us, was in the extent of his specialization proved in high number and rich typology of architectural designs realized in many countries - in Slovakia, Czech Republic, Great Britain, USA, Holland, Yugoslavia, etc.

Karfík's resistance against the retarding pressure of socialistic realism and the cross-border impact of his masterpiece is still admired by his followers.

To his personal features belonged generosity, empathy towards the requirements of developers, excellent language skills, foreign experience in various studios, contacts with the top celebrities of architectural environment, artistic education, constant psychic and physical activity, communicativeness, as well as good sense of humor. His pedagogical asset stuck in the great contribution to the organization and development of the Faculty of Architecture at the contemporary Slovak University of Technology.

Architect Vladimír Karfík created a special type of unique architectural heritage with the great importance for next generations. His life has been the reflection of all the peripeteia that the modern architecture had to get over during the 20th century. The period was very dynamical, and so it needed equally dynamic architects, and this is what Vladimír Karfík really was. The contribution of this great man, the member of Czechoslovak avant-garde, to the development of modern Slovak, as well as European architecture of the 20th century is indisputable.

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