

2 June 2021

Review (*posudek*) of **Město v bouři. Urbanismus a architektura historického centra Prahy 1830-1970** by PhDr. Richard Biegel Ph.D.

To the Habilitation Commission:

As an appointed reviewer (*oponent*) for the habilitation written by PhDr. Richard Biegel, Ph.D., I write this review to provide my opinion to the commission. As an architectural historian of Czech architecture and urbanism, it has been a pleasure to read the text provided by the author. **My professional assessment is that the work unambiguously fulfills the requirements of a habilitation.** Therefore, I recommend that the habilitation continue to the next step in the approval process. I will summarize some of the reasons for my positive assessment of the habilitation in the following pages.

A study of this scale and scope is ambitious and requires the author to navigate two centuries of history and at least three significantly different political systems from the Habsburg period, into the interwar Republic, through the occupation, and then into the Communist period. Just conceiving of this project, in such contested periods of history, shows PhDr. Biegel's extraordinary abilities as a researcher and chronicler of Prague's urban fabric to develop his argument at the most intimate scales of individual buildings and blocks. The methodology that he has chosen is what I would call forensic investigation, with the research questions being directly related to how each block and riverbank came to be as it is today. The analysis starts from the historic city as it was in the early 19th century, looking at maps and images, to establish a baseline of what Prague looked like and how it worked as an urban system at the time.

Each section then dives deeply into the ways in which existing buildings, new buildings, and the spaces of streets engage with each other in a remaking of the city. This was not from a tabula rasa proposition of clearing space for rebuilding, but instead a surgical approach to intervene on individual lots to achieve an overall desired outcome. Biegel's methodology focuses on individual buildings and streets but with the clear intention of describing the historic city's unified urban form at a larger scale and its volume and silhouette as a cohesive and calibrated cityscape. For example, in writing about the bridges that connect Old Town to Malá Strana, Biegel shows that what now seem to be obvious routes were in fact controversial around the turn of the century. The construction paths required destruction of older parts of the neighborhoods along the riverbanks and also determined patterns of traffic and commerce. Old Town might have been different in the 20th century if Čechův most had made the intended connection across Letná to Bubeneč directly from the bridge.

Biegel writes about the early support among Prague intellectuals to save Malá Strana and Old Town (Staré město) from demolition. The modernization efforts of the *asanace* period in the late 19th century could easily have overtaken the voices of those who saw the value to the nation in the physical infrastructure itself. The destruction of most of Josefov emerges here as only part of what some of the more aggressive modernizers would have wanted to do, and in many ways a necessary choice due to neglect of the buildings. The debates about the value of keeping historical buildings, even those in poor condition, can be linked to thinkers such as John Ruskin in 19th-century Britain who argued that buildings register the labor of the craftsmen who made them as well as the passage of time in their materials. Similar to Ruskin, preservation-minded architects in Prague saw the picturesque facades and irregularities of the buildings in the historic center as the expressions of a truth about the place that a new city could never reproduce. As a method to emphasize the contested character of the historic city over time, the text moves between proposals made by preservationists

and those by architects and urban designers who wanted to build something new. The many unbuilt plans discussed actively among the professionals and also the public form a backbone of the narrative as more was left unbuilt in these neighborhoods than came to fruition. Biegel shows consistently that interventions such as regulating building heights and facades, even when not implemented for every building, solidified the conception of the city as a unified whole, rather than as a set of individual elements.

Biegel comes to the topic with a preservationist's perspective, lamenting the loss of many buildings, especially those from the Baroque period which he studied in his previous research. The important role of the Club for Old Prague is highlighted throughout the text. The group saved many buildings, and also kept alive a vigorous conversation about preservation, even though many demolitions they tried to stop went forward. The loss of historic buildings, and the construction of speculative apartment blocks in what Biegel and others see as undistinguished, generic decorative style, is presented as a failure to recognize the value of what was already there. These newer buildings, built mostly in the decades leading up to 1918, are embedded relatively seamlessly within the fabric of the Old Town. This happened in many cities for pragmatic reasons, not every building can or should be saved. Many of the early 20th century speculative residential and commercial buildings in Old Town are now renovated and have increased significantly in value since the end of communism, because it is exactly the Habsburg-era decorative style that newcomers and visitors interpret as authentic and desirable.

The architectural styles that can be found in the historic center are eclectic. Many projects, with potential for good and bad results, were proposed and never completed over many decades. Inaction and indecisive leadership undermined projects as politicians and the city changed their minds often, but this also protected the neighborhoods from massive redevelopment. Projects such as the ministry proposal for *Petrská čtvrť* also provide a more complicated picture of modernism as a style in the 1920s. Architects like Bohumil Hypšman worked primarily in a modern classical style that was a rebuke to the avant-garde position that only revolutionary architecture would have value in the future city. Eclecticism is viewed critically in the work of architects such as Pavel Janák, Josef Gočár, and Bohumír Kozák, who attempted to bring together historicism with modernism. Another way to interpret their façade-focused renovations, which emphasize the urbanism of the building separately from the interiors, is to link this approach to 1970s postmodernism—these buildings are decorated sheds that would have delighted architects like Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

An important observation that comes from this research is that the early generations of 20th century architects took it upon themselves to work within a historicist mindset as no historic preservation regulations were in place to stop demolitions and other major changes. The lack of regulation becomes a problem when in the late 1920s when the next generation does not have the same dedication to mixing the old and the new, and the pace of change speeds up quickly. Tax policy also played a role, as new buildings had a more favorable tax structure that discouraged investment in rehabilitation, and encouraged new construction instead. As the avant-garde voices became louder, and advocated for a more radical approach to change in the city, a project like the Mánes Gallery stands out for its quality and sensitivity to the urban context of the river and the embankment, and showed that demolition followed by new construction could be successful. On the other hand, Biegel argues that many of the new buildings in the interwar period were unremarkable and that they replaced older buildings with more formal presence, creating average places out of what had been special areas.

During the war and in the immediate aftermath, the battle between a preservationist approach, and the avant-garde position, never disappeared, and this is useful context for understanding the competitions and projects just after the war when projects like the reconstruction of City Hall appeared to be completed using an unexpectedly historicist form. In writing about the city after the Nazi occupation and heading into its socialist decades, Biegel reinforces the importance of the preservationist perspective on the city, and also a technocratic interest in improving transportation that failed to implement major changes until the subway was built in the 1960s and 1970s. This meant that the Old

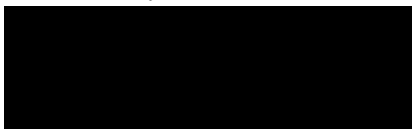
Town was saved from more destruction to prepare its street for cars; a decision that now seems especially intelligent given how many other cities sacrificed urban space for cars with negative consequences. Even the Stalin Monument resides at a critical juncture in the historic city, at the location where a massive gate was proposed for Letná earlier in the century. This gives the statue's placement a different kind of symbolism than one might associate it with, as a marker of ambitions that failed to materialize.

The history of preservation's integration within the modern movement provides a new and fascinating context for the Communist Party's interest in reconstructing historic buildings and monuments. Biegel shows this to be a continuation of the interwar advocacy among some modern architects for the value and importance of protecting the city's heritage, which finally becomes official policy with the new statutes written in 1958. The early interwar generation was still very active in the discussions through the 1950s, especially major figures like Zdeněk Wirth and Bohumil Hypšman. In highlighting these connections, one of the important methodological decisions in the project is to treat the political boundary lines as secondary in many ways to the continuity in architectural ideas among the preservationists. There is more to be written about the political context of this architecture, and how the goals of the Communist Party to pursue a nationalist approach in the period of socialist realism fit with the goals of the preservation movement leading to projects such as the reconstruction of Bethlehem Chapel.

Biegel follows the discussions about the implications of new construction on the historic center through iconic postwar projects like the construction of the Magistrála, the plans for the National Assembly Building on Wenceslas Square, and new stores like Kotva and Máj. The construction of the Prague metro provides a striking example of how even in a highly prized and protected area of the historic city, its transportation needs made it impossible to avoid major interventions. Although the Magistrála as built was destructive to the neighborhoods along its path, one of the conclusions I took from the discussions about the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s is how restrained the Communist government remained in the oldest parts of the city. The metro construction, and its placement underground in sensitive areas of the city, was a feat of engineering to be admired, and one that allowed the city center to remain a vibrant cultural and economic center even as most of the residential construction at the time was moving to the edges. The 1971 creation of the historic reserve in the city center, which protected most of the buildings discussed throughout the text, is a fitting end for the narrative. This is proof that the preservation movement, starting as early as the 19th century in Prague, was always present to protect the unified view of Prague and in many ways stood outside of politics.

This habilitation is a major contribution to the history of Prague, providing new understandings of the city as a fluid urban landscape that is both old and new in unexpected ways.

Sincerely,



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