

## **A Landscape with Furniture. Designs, plans, and buildings of Jan E. Koula (1896–1975) and his notion of a “people’s dwelling”.**

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### **Abstract (EN)**

The thesis focuses on the professional and personal course of life of a Prague architect, designer, painter, documentarian, teacher, theoretician and editor of specialized magazines on architecture and housing culture in the interwar and the onset war era and in line with the avant-garde thinking. Nowadays, the theoretical and artistic legacy of Jan E. Koula (1896–1975) is seen in his remarkable ability to popularize ethics and aesthetic in the contemporary housing culture, and in his capability of pragmatic characterization, evaluation and promotion of modern style of living. He was very consistent and unceasing in doing so, while having the model of Le Corbusier’s functionalist purism in mind. An analysis of the then publications, archival documents and Koula’s autobiography allowed us to compare his singular interventions in architecture and design as well as the interior housing or exhibition concepts, not to mention the circumstances of their origin and ideological contribution in the plurality of activities, interests, and the social and cultural background of the period between 1920’ and 1940’.

Jan E. Koula dealt with the issue of housing culture not only in theory while studying contemporary trends, but also in practise while working as an architect and designer. He tried to respect the architectural space of exterior together with the then standards suitable for the interior. His designs gave an impression of exquisite serenity and almost conservatively observed harmony between practical design and artistic approach, design and neutral-colour treatment. He undoubtedly belonged among those who – in the era of an apparent diversion from everything considered old and in the period of the re-evaluation of the traditional folk art, conceived as an ideological weapon of architecture in the national, even in a folk style, and the Svěrák movement – understood functionalism as linked with the ideas of democracy and humanism. The main goal of Koula’s concepts was a clear standard of living in a module of a family house and attainability of this standard to all strata of society. Together with his father Jan Koula, who served as another of his models, and who was also an architect, teacher, and folk art propagator, Jan E. Koula later shared similar residues of cognition in simplicity and functional effectiveness stemming from the folk art and vernacular architecture.

Koula’s name can be found in all available and fundamental Czech and Slovak, or Czechoslovak biographical art dictionaries, encyclopaedias or compendiums of art history, especially in those on the inter-war avant-garde. It’s surprising that so far – several decades after Koula’s death – nobody has ever objected to the ill-founded personal data or has tried to reveal Koula’s real name. The culture historians as well as architects and editors of the mentioned dictionaries can be divided into two groups based on their opinion – one group

thinks his name was Jan Evangelista Koula, the other one believes that he was Jan Emil Koula. There are some who even mistake him for his father. Koula himself explained the letter 'E' he inserted in the middle of his name only in his last biography in the end of 1970': *To differentiate myself from my father who was also an architect and whose name was also Jan, I added the first letter of my second name 'E' to my full name, and that's why I am 'J. E. Koula'. I use this name when signing my works of architecture, literature and painting.* What is interesting is that at baptism Jan (E.) Koula was given the names Jan Křtitel, not Jan Evangelist!

The following part of the thesis focuses on Koula's understanding of architecture in terms of exterior and interior, on historical and contemporary perception of architectural space, and time-and-space shifting of the concept of folksiness in the sense of the traditional, national, distinctive (Svéráz-like), and democratic in the then criticism, and on the solution of the housing crisis of the inter-war period. Examples ranging from the „Czech“ interior showed at the Paris Exhibition in 1900, to concepts of designing the people's housing for workers in the style of the national curved, rondo-cubist style, to a more specialized type of a civil people's dwelling which would be accessible to everybody were used to illustrate it.

Chiefly three platforms using different tools for their aims and orientation were the trendsetters attempting at creating a new, modern and at the same time Czech interior, and the main movers or protagonists of the developing housing culture par excellence from 1920' to 1940': the Prague Club of Architects, which was grouped around the magazine called *Stavba* (1920–1938). The initiator in shaping the principles of interior, mainly the minimalized version of it, and to a certain extent the current appearance of the minimalist apartment interior (while being influenced by the international housing exhibitions), was a pre-war Svaz českého díla (the Czech Workguild/Werkbund, 1914), and then the Svaz československého díla (Czechoslovak Workguild/Werkbund, 1920–1948). Under its supervision a whole myriad of usually very clearly focused exhibitions of decorative arts was showed, and from the end of 1920' there were also housing exhibitions held which constitute the principal pillars of modern, constructivist, or more precisely functionalist postulates of the housing standardisation, and typification and rationalisation of a dwelling place. The third protagonist and interwar representative of a „civilian housing democracy“ was also an organisation called Družstevní práce (Cooperative Work, founded 1922) and mainly its *Krásná jizba* (The Beautiful Chamber, 1927–1992).

In the years prior to WWII, new modern housing requirements were being formed in the work of Czech interior designers. The house was no longer a monument, but a machine – this was the premise of that time – and furniture was conceived a tool for living. Aspects such as hygiene, sleeping, and work of each individual in the family were taken into account, moreover, architects were also concerned about their client's relaxation and entertainment. The first principles of space rationalisation were applied on the concept of modern kitchens.

The avant-garde also deliberately tackled gender issues. The focus was being moved towards housing not only in the city but also in the village, and in the beginning of 1940' it reached its climax in Jan E. Koula's concept of making the rural living and housing healthier. The chief principles of a contemporary dwelling – cleanliness, usefulness, easy maintenance, perfect operation and harmony – were supposed to be applied in both types of the dwellings.

A great inspiration source for modern European housing was the model of harmonious interconnection of an interior and exterior as seen in traditional Japanese houses. The Japanese influence reached Jan E. Koula also thanks to his friend Bedřich Feuerstein. The traditional Japanese house was an inspiration for the new architecture even when solving complicated construction issues, and was a model for clarifying the storage spaces, and standardization or modulation of a house.

Prague villas designed by Koula in line with the purism movement in architecture, his white cubes with horizontal windows, outside staircases, and steam-boat-like railings, not to mention the nearly minimalist treatment of their interiors in Lipence near Zbraslav, in Smíchov (Hřebenky), in Hanspaulka and in Dejvice, in the Baba Colony or in Hvězdovice, have remained a clear legacy of his personality and vast theoretical knowledge as showed in his book titled *Obytný dům dneška* (1931), which was a significant editorial work in the period when opinions were being formed; opinions about family houses with specialized rooms, about minimal dwellings in blocks with central joint washhouses, or kitchens to collective houses with residential cells, centralized maintenance and operation, and collectivized social life. Koula was unintentionally an antipode to the social minimisation of a dwelling as proposed by the author of the books titled *Stavba a báseň* and *Nejmenší byt* (Karel Teige). In this way Koula – and not only him – indirectly revealed the inherent antisocial paradigm of Czech functionalism.

The following 1930' were affected by both economic and social crisis and anticipated dramatic changes and premises of life securities of Jan E. Koula. With a pragmatic precognition which was typical of him, Koula changed his work as an architect and a builder for a teaching career and devoted more and more time to theory of architecture. In the position of a renowned housing design advisor, he put greater focused on interiors, on its adaptability and variability, and always applied a clear imperative of hygiene standards. Moreover, Jan E. actively participated in both significant local housing exhibitions and visual presentations of the new architecture: both in the *Výstava soudobé kultury v Československu* (An Exhibition of The Current Czechoslovak Culture) in Brno in 1927 and in *Výstava bydlení – Osada Baba* (*The Housing Exhibition – The Baba Colony*) in Prague in 1932.

In 1941 and 1942, during the Protectorate of Czech and Moravia period, the architecture platform titled Svaz českého díla (The Czech Workguild/Werkbund) attempted at flexibility and variability of a dwelling – based on new approach to dispositions – when tackling the minimal dwelling space. Their members, including Jan E. Koula, tried to create model dimension regulations and functionally standardize the furnishing in their exhibition

concepts of “a people’s house with people’s furniture”, no matter if it was a house in a city or in a village. This trend followed up on the pre-war activity and efforts to improve the housing culture across the whole public and social sphere. At the same time they were certain program manifestations of progressive housing as opposed to clear return to folksiness and housing ruralism in the official politics of the Third Reich. It was also in 1940 when Jan E. Koula published his two books: an editorial work, compendium and an outline of contemporary development in architecture titled *Nová česká architektura a její vývoj ve XX. století* (1940) and an almost philosophical guide book of housing culture called *Abecední průvodce po bytě aneb Bytový slovník* (1947).

The analytical part of my work is complemented with a timeline giving an overview of Jan E. Koula’s life, works of architecture and his publishing activities. The text supplement offers a possibility to compare data and events given by Koula himself, in his autobiography with his literary, fine art, and artistic activities and his teaching practice from 1930 to 1970. The selected images closing the whole thesis are its essential visual part illustrating individual concepts, projects and realisations, as well as publications of Jan E. Koula, a notability in the Czech and Slovak theories of architecture and housing culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.