

Marek, Michaela: *Universität als "Monument" und Politikum. Die Repräsentationsbauten der Prager Universitäten 1900 - 1935 und der politische Konflikt zwischen "konservativer" und "moderner" Architektur (= Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum; 95)*, München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag 2001
ISBN-10: 3-486-56518-4, 211 S, EUR 39.80, sfr 61.00

Reviewed by: Cathleen M. Giustino, Auburn University

The Persistence of Tradition in Twentieth-Century Prague: Learning from the Architecture of the Charles University

Michaela Marek is a professor of art history at the University of Leipzig who has produced a work that social historians of culture will appreciate. In her *Universität als "Monument" und Politikum* she analyzes the character of and factors shaping the design of two public buildings constructed in Prague during the 1920s, in order to demonstrate and explain the persistence of Czech architectural conservatism in the decades both preceding and following the First World War. The public buildings are the Charles University's Philosophical Faculty and its Law School.

Marek's explanation of these two structures' facades, which are marked by emerging modernism's retreat in the face of unrelenting historicism, moves beyond a reductionist focus on the Czech-German nationality conflict as sole cause of Czech cultural conservatism. It suggests new ways to think about how conflict and consensus-building within the fragmented Czech community, with its diversity of competing interest groups, also helped tradition to triumph over innovation. In addition to providing a stimulating work on the politics of Czech architecture, Marek also helps to put to rest the argument about "artistic progress" (p. 15), less and less presumed to be a law determining high-cultural change, which contends that during the modern era progressive design necessarily had to replace historicist design. University records, imperial, provincial and municipal government documents, newspaper and journal articles, and personal correspondence provide the author with the evidence informing her book's three main chapters.

The impetus for the construction of new buildings for the Czech Philosophical Faculty and the Czech Law School, in addition to a new German University building, began shortly after 1882, the year in which Austria's imperial government divided the Prague University into separate Czech and German halves. Indeed, before 1918 it was the imperial government that had the highest jurisdiction over this educational institution. In 1908 ceremonies laying foundation stones for all three buildings were held in Prague's Old Town on parcels of land cleared as part of the Czech-dominated municipality's urban renewal of the city's former Jewish ghetto and surrounding territories. Construction on the Philosophical Faculty and the Law School started in 1925, the former structure first being used for study during the 1928/1929 academic year and the latter being officially approved for use in 1931. The German architect, Josef Zásche, produced numerous plans for the German University both before and after World War I, but this structure was never built due to the weakness of German interest groups in Bohemia after 1918. Between 1970 and 1974 the Hotel

Intercontinental arose on land originally designated for it.

Marek begins to illustrate how conflict and consensus-building in the fragmented Czech community shaped the university's architecture in her book's first chapter, where she discusses how the locations for the new Czech buildings were chosen. In February 1904 the imperial government announced that it had selected Block III of the urban-renewal zone for the German University's new building and Block X for a building to house under one roof both the Czech Philosophical Faculty and the Law School. Marek provides useful maps of these blocks' locations and sizes. Members of the Czech law faculty protested the imperial government's announcement, saying that the smaller area of Block X disadvantaged the Czechs (especially since it was to hold both the Philosophical Faculty and the Law School) and the larger area of Block III privileged the Germans.

At least one member of the Philosophical Faculty abetted the Law School's call for a larger parcel. This was Lubor Niederle, a professor of ethnography, who suggested that the Czech building stand instead on the Letna Plateau, which rests atop a hill overlooking the northern end of downtown Prague where the site proposed for the new German university sat down near the Vltava [Moldau] River. Niederle argued that this site not only had financial, public-health and urban-planning advantages, but its physical prominence would give the Czech university and the nation to which it belonged "an effect" with which the German university resting down below it "could not measure" (p. 31).

Niederle, a progressive Young Czech, found support for the placement of the new building on the Letna Plateau from the conservative Old Czech architect Antonin Wiehl, who had published an historicist proposal. Marek says that this alliance is curious without substantively spelling out its significance or without noting the backwardness that Young Czechs sometimes ascribed to architectural historicism.

While Wiehl supported Niederle's idea, other Czech interest groups did not. Very important opponents of Niederle's idea were Prague's municipal representatives, half of them Young Czechs, who recognized that City Hall could gain from the construction of the new Czech University in Old Town, because its presence there would raise land prices in the urban-renewal zone and thereby help the municipality, through the sale of that land, to cover the significant expenses it incurred when clearing the former Jewish ghetto and areas around it. Some statistics regarding the municipality's great financial indebtedness would help readers to appreciate just how much pressure there was on Prague's Czech City Fathers to keep the new Czech University in Old Town.

In 1906 the imperial government announced that the Czech Law School would have its own building separate from the Philosophical Faculty and it purchased Block IV to hold the Law School (the Philosophical Faculty would arise on Block X). Block IV stood directly across the street from Block III where the new German University was to be. Marek states that the new purchase resulted from the imperial government's effort "to strengthen -- at least in gesture -- [the two universities'] equivalency." (p. 40)

The decision to erect the Czech University's buildings in Old Town determined that they receive special attention from the Czech community. Old Town was one of the five wards comprising Prague's historic core. It was also the ward which, in the eyes of Czechs, most symbolized their nation's quest for emancipation. Thus, monumental buildings there had to demonstrate the

accomplishments of the nation and its right to autonomy. Marek writes that the designs of the buildings for the Czech University's Natural Science and Medical Institutes were not heavily debated, because they were slated to arise in New Town which was a ward lacking the symbolic power of Old Town. More information about the design of these buildings, including pictures of them, dates of their construction, and Czech responses to them would help to convince the reader of this conclusion and shed further light on the way in which Czech politics shaped Czech architecture.

Marek opens her second chapter stating that in 1906 the Rector of the Czech University, Jaroslav Hlava, requested that Jan Kotera design a proposal for the new Law School and Josef Fanta design one for the new Philosophical Faculty. Hlava's choice of Kotera and Fanta is very interesting, because both were creators of secessionist structures. More systematic, detailed discussion of their careers is welcome in Marek's book, so that readers unfamiliar with Czech architectural history can appreciate well the important fact that Hlava selected two innovative, modern architects rather than conservative, traditional architects. Marek mentions in passing some facts about Kotera, including his studies with Otto Wagner, but fails to mention that Fanta designed Wilson Train Station, a leading example of secessionist design in Prague completed in 1909.

More could also be said about the motivations behind Hlava's choice. Was he merely trying to insure that Czech architects, rather than a Viennese *Baurat*, receive these commissions? Did he think, like some Czechs, that modern architecture demonstrated that the Czech nation was a progressive nation deserving of autonomy? Marek comes closest to answering these questions when she quotes Hlava expressing his desire "to create for posterity a monumental built-work, which should furnish proof to the spirit of the age of the height at which architectural art presently finds itself" (p. 46).

In 1907 Fanta and Kotera offered preliminary sketches to the Rector. Fanta's sketches treated only the lay-out of the Philosophical Faculty and included no visions of the building's facade; Kotera's proposals for the Law School treated both design aspects. Fanta's proposal goes undiscussed in this work; Kotera's 1907 proposal and his 1909 revisions receive extensive attention, including strong architectural analyses and rich illustrations. As Marek shows, Kotera's early plans represented a modernist break from historicism. In them Kotera gave the Law School a relatively unornamented and asymmetrical facade, which stood in contrast to the heavy adornment and equal proportions that characterized nineteenth-century Czech traditional design. Conservative architects, one powerful interest group in the fragmented Czech community, opposed seeing their nation's new Law School clad in modern dress. Marek cites articles found in their monthly publication, *The Architectural Observer*, to show they argued that Kotera's work was an effort to allow foreign influences to infiltrate and harm the Czech nation (without directly quoting him, Marek states that Kotera was trying to create a modern style for the nation [pp. 87-88]). More than once in her text, Marek hints that professional competition among schools of architects, rather than genuine concern about the nation, motivated the conservative architects to attack modern design.

Municipal representatives, another powerful interest group within the fragmented Czech community, also criticized Kotera's initial efforts, albeit from the standpoint of urban development rather than style. Prague's City Fathers proclaimed that Kotera's 1909 plan extended too far towards the street and obstructed plans to construct a wide artery connecting the Old Town with the Letna

Plateau. In order to demonstrate that the plans were detrimental to healthy urban growth, the municipality erected on the building's future site scaffolding standing 8 meters high and bedecked with suggestions of Kotera's proposed facade. Many Czechs outside the conservative architects' and municipal representatives' circles disliked the impression that the scaffolding left, and its erection had the effect of turning other groups within the Czech community against modern design.

Due to the power of the interest groups opposing his design, Kotera had to retreat from the modern in the direction of the traditional. He returned to the drawing board again in 1913. In his new plans, Marek writes, Kotera "lent [his design] a historicizing, classical appearance." (p. 95) Kotera's turn back towards the past, while not total, amounted to a victory for conservative Czech cultural forces. So did the 1913 announcement that a new architect had been selected to design the Philosophical Faculty. Josef Sakar replaced Fanta, who stopped participating in its design in 1908. In 1913 Sakar produced a historicist design with neo-baroque features that became the blueprint for the Philosophical Faculty.

Did the imperial government's preference for historicism (which Marek substantively presents in her second chapter), rather than the power of conservative interest groups within the fragmented Czech community, ultimately cause Czechs to adopt traditional architecture for their university? Marek answers this question in her third, final chapter where she adeptly and usefully crosses the World War I caesura. Here she shows that the end of Habsburg rule and the beginning of independent Czechoslovakian statehood brought no call for innovative, modern designs for the Philosophical Faculty and the Law School. In fact, without the Habsburg presence, some Czechs' embrace of traditional architecture grew firmer. For example, Josef Susta, a leading Czech professor of history, became Rector of the Czech University after 1918 and in this position he instigated an effort to find a conservative architect to replace Kotera as the designer of the Law School. Kotera managed to retain his position, but he had to agree to introduce further traditional elements into his plans. This leading Czech secessionist architect died in 1923 at the age of 52. He never saw his final paper vision transformed (with modifications) into stone reality. In contrast to the fate of Kotera's quasi-modern, quasi-traditional Law School design, Sakar's historicist vision for the Philosophical Faculty, designed in 1913, underwent no major assaults or revisions during the interwar period.

Czech architectural conservatism by and large triumphed in the history of the two university buildings. Marek does not compare this history to struggles between the old and the new in other areas of Czech cultural production, including activities inside and outside architecture. Nor does she compare her findings on the politics of architecture in Prague to findings on this subject in other cities. Such comparisons would substantiate her valuable discoveries about how conflict and consensus-building within the fragmented Czech community shaped modern Czech culture and further enable her to put to rest the argument that a general law of "artistic progress" determined that in the modern era progressive design necessarily replaced historicist design.

Recommended Citation:

Cathleen M. Giustino: [Review of:] Marek, Michaela: *Universität als "Monument" und Politikum. Die Repräsentationsbauten der Prager Universitäten 1900 - 1935 und der politische Konflikt zwischen "konservativer" und "moderner" Architektur (= Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum; 95)*, München

2001. In: ArtHist.net, Jun 18, 2008 (accessed Apr 18, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/reviews/193>>.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License. For the conditions under which you may distribute, copy and transmit the work, please go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>