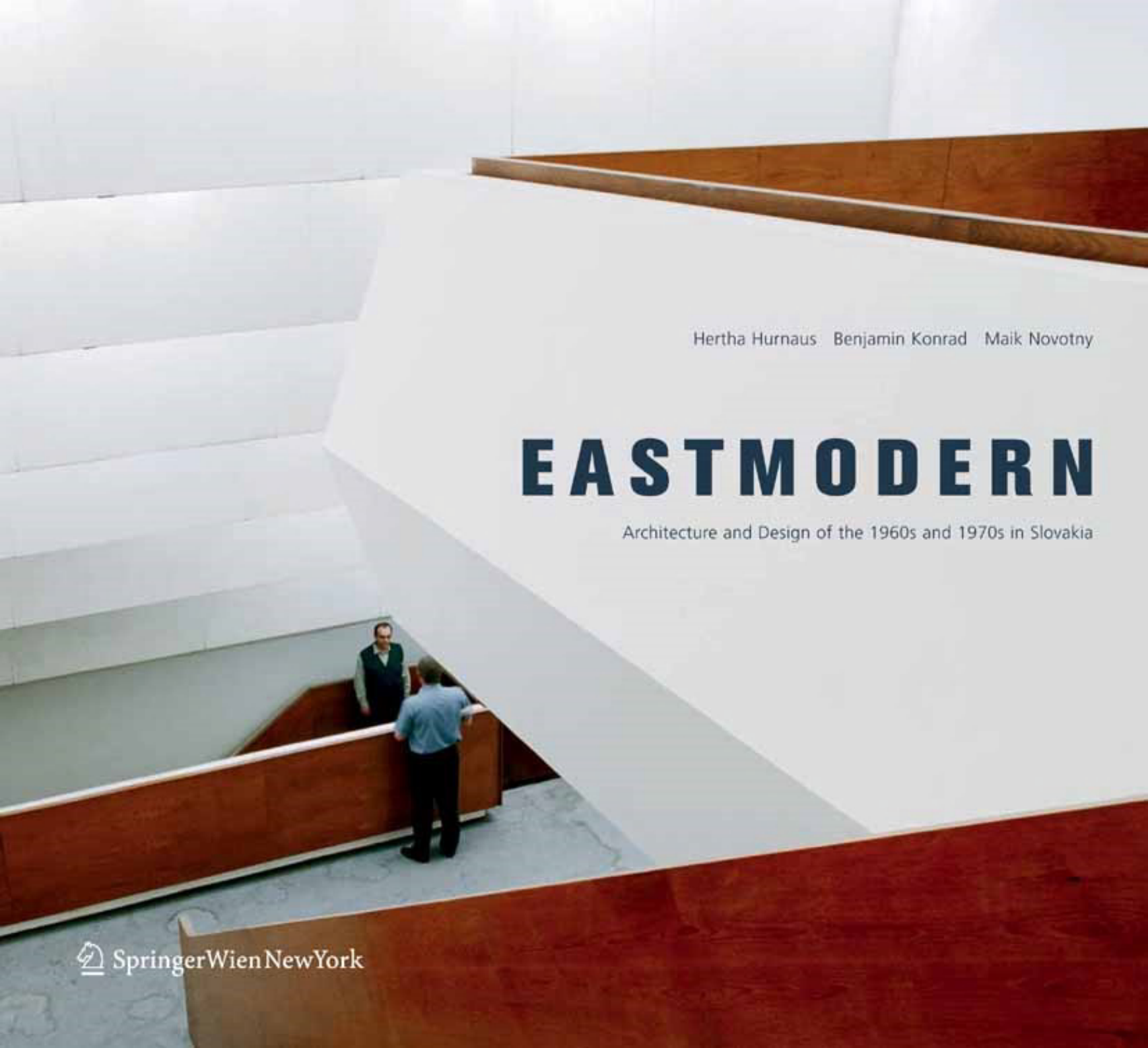

Hertha Hurnaus Benjamin Konrad Maik Novotny

EASTMODERN

Architecture and Design of the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia

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Architecture and Design of the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia

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SpringerWienNewYork

Preface
Back to the future

Oliver Elser

A photographer and two architects embarked on a journey to cover rather temporal as opposed to spatial distances. Most of their discoveries recorded in this book are less than a day trip from Vienna. What is essential though is that each building the three have visited has opened a door to another era. They are time capsules and spaceships. Ready for take-off, like the café on the New Bridge, the broadcasting building or the Kamzík TV Tower (all of them in Bratislava). At the same time, by today's standards, they resemble aircrafts that have just landed after an endless odyssey and after losing their crew on the way. Thus, the interiors dating from the 1960s and 1970s have remained unaltered, while appearing now spooky and deserted. Nonetheless, this aspect of "yesterday" that has been preserved over the course of time, untouched by attempts to modernize modernism, once used to harbor the promise of a "tomorrow" or even a time beyond that. The national anthem of the former GDR praised its time as "risen from the ruins and turned toward the future". Structures inspired by Slovakian Eastmodernism reflect the same strong desire to shape the future and could serve even today as the perfect setting for a science-fiction movie. Switching to reverse gear and traveling back to a time that was pressing forward toward the future is a tricky motion.

This was not the sole purpose of the present book, for such an endeavor would not have required interviewing architects. It would have been a wasted opportunity to simply record this passage in images, leading back to the future. Instead, references are made from Hans Hollein to Ján Bahna, from Vladimír Dedeček to the ancient European tradition. Dedeček has also coined the excellent definition that there is no socialist architecture, but only "the mistakes that were made were socialist". This definition may not be accurate but in order to find out, we have to produce books that permit the reader to take a closer look.

The stories recounted by the edifices – whether tales of socialism, the future or the desire to fly away – stand in stark contrast to the reality they will encounter over the next few years. Their future resembles more the following scenario: reconstruction, demolition, refurbishment congruent with the style of global capitalism that knows no tomorrow, for business deals are made here and now.

One could object that socialism differed from the images collected by Hertha Hurnaus, Benjamin Konrad and Maik Novotny along their journey. They depict the crème of the crop, not the ordinary "Plattenbauten" (buildings made from prefabricated concrete slabs) and shoddy residential developments. High-density dwellings were lauded by their contemporaries as paradise. However, architects soon began to worry about the trend they had unleashed with industrialized architecture, such as reflected in an exchange of letters between the writer Brigitte Reimann and GDR-based architect Hermann Henselmann. Architecture crafted beyond mass production behind the Iron Curtain raised hardly any interest in the West. The art historian Udo Kultermann was one of the few experts who were well-informed in that respect. In the 1960s, his introductory works on modern architecture still featured a myriad of examples from Eastern Europe. Once characterizing modern architecture as a global project went out of fashion, he dedicated a publication to contemporary architecture in Eastern Europe, though it was only published with one edition.

Just in time, the Slovakian representatives of post-war Eastmodernism are honored in a way that appeals to the audience, in particular those buildings that were atypical and rare examples. Nowadays not only individual buildings are threatened by demolition or redesign attempts. These structures that bear witness to the modicum of luxury the state permitted itself continued a tradition that had disappeared in the West: The distinction between the grey mass of ordinary buildings and the grand monuments few

and far in between. Whenever today a city or urban district is redesigned, accumulated monuments compete with each other for attention and neutralize each other's splendor. In Eastern Bloc nations, destituteness necessitated a distribution of resources, as had been practiced in Europe for centuries: Residential buildings form a diffident grey mass that highlights architectural masterpieces even more. Even in places where the relations were turned upside down, such as inside the workers' palaces in socialist Vienna or those of the Stalin era, the dwellings formed a previously unseen ensemble of uniformity. Once technological progress permitted mass production of residential developments, the European urban structure was propelled into an extreme scenario both in the East and West, the consequences of which will have to be corrected by one or two subsequent generations. As an opposing trend, making no difference either between the East and West, an international neohistoricism seems to emerge from the tombs of post modernism. Is the response to "no past" of modern architecture indeed "no future"?

The fact that the expiration date of this future, as foretold by the featured buildings, has not been reached rekindles hope. To instinctively navigate buildings such as the Slovakian broadcasting building, we have to become modern enough again.

Prior Department Store
and Hotel Kyjev

Bratislava

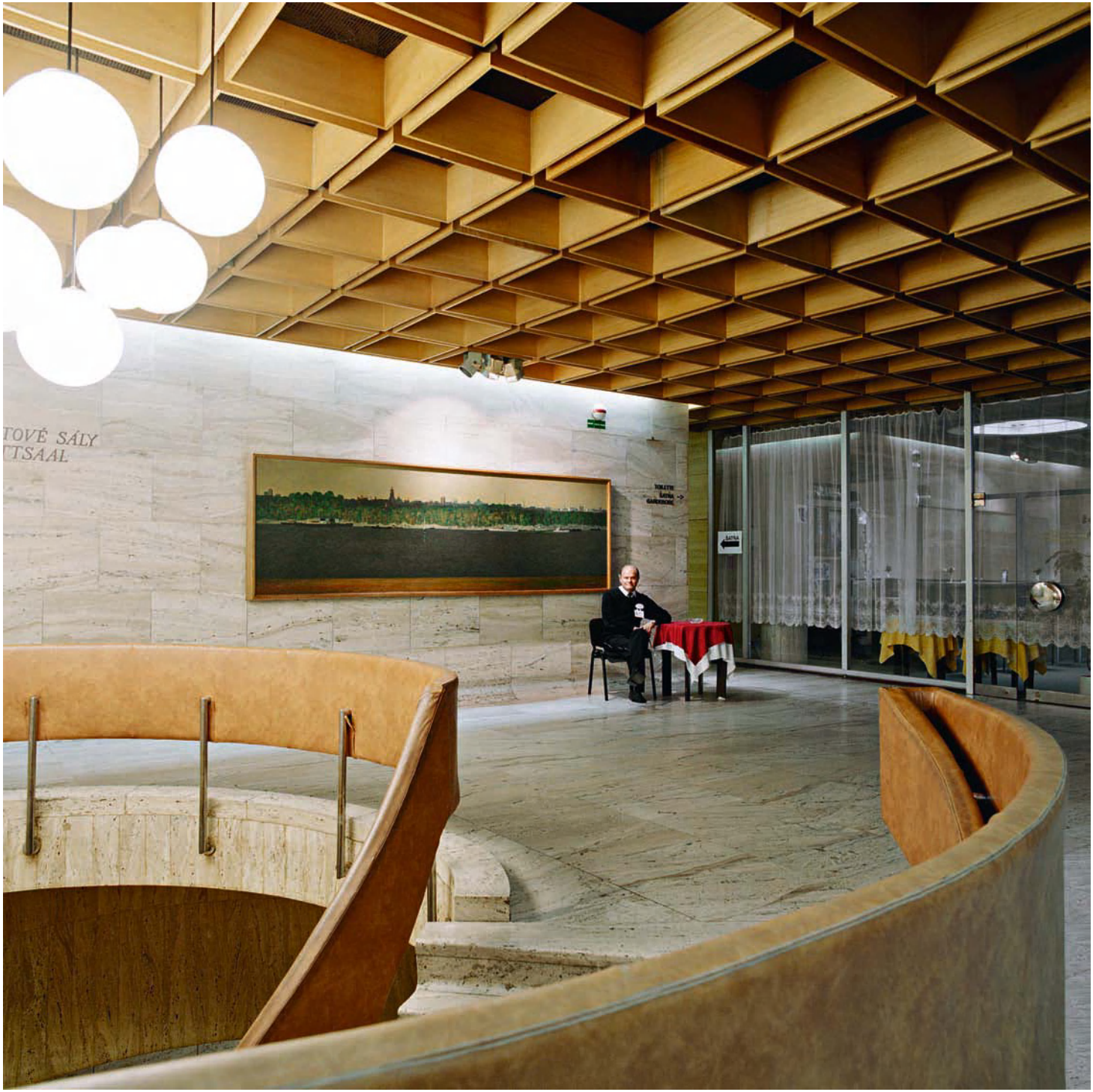
Ivan Matušík

1961 – 1973


5151


hotel hyjew


REŠTAURÁCIA
RESTAURANT


TOVÉ SÁLY
TTSAAL


VÝCHOD >>

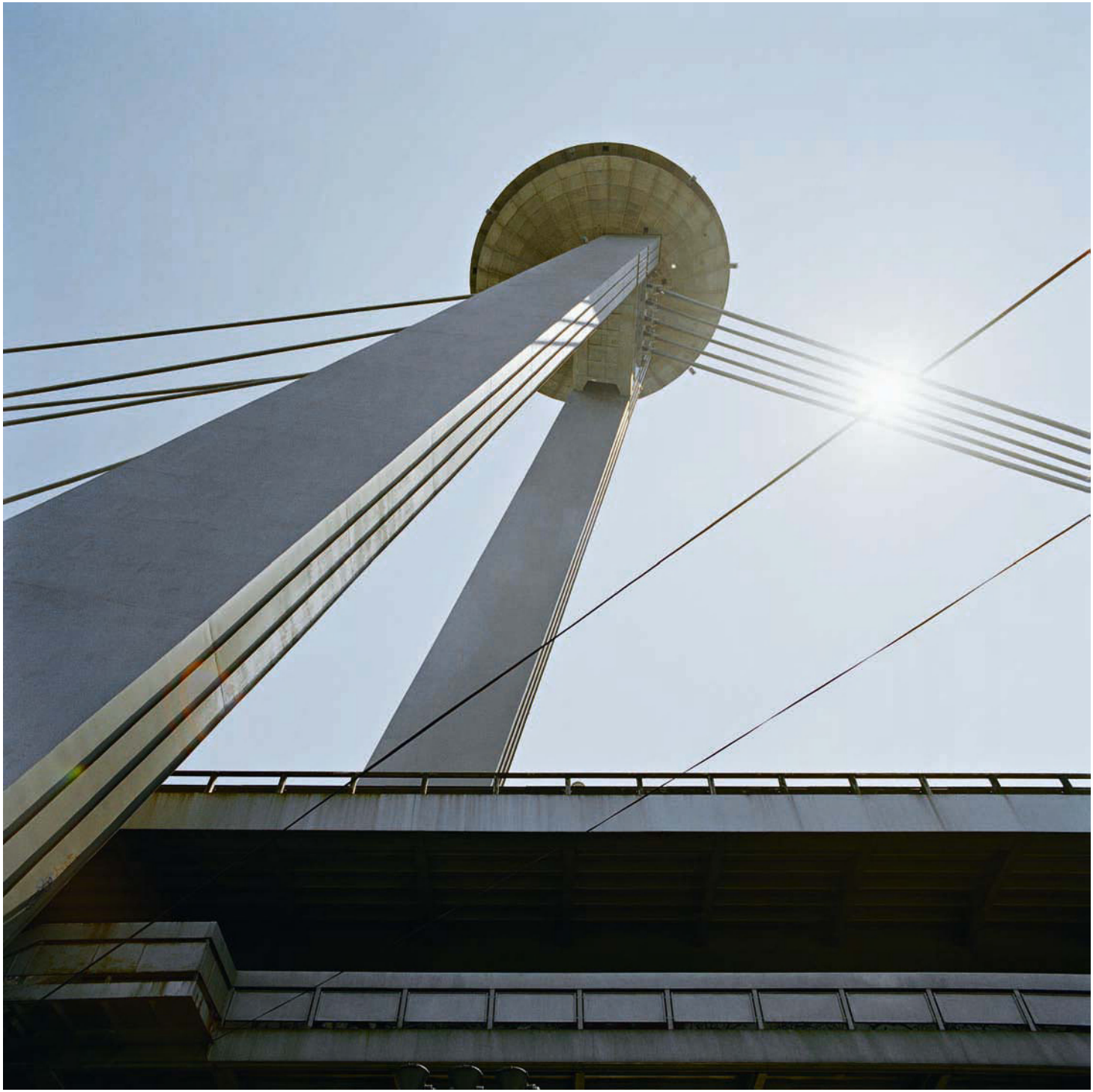

KYJEV CLUB ↗
TOILETTE ↘

New Bridge
(Nový Most)

Bratislava

Jozef Lacko
Ladislav Kušnír
Ivan Slameň

1968 – 1973



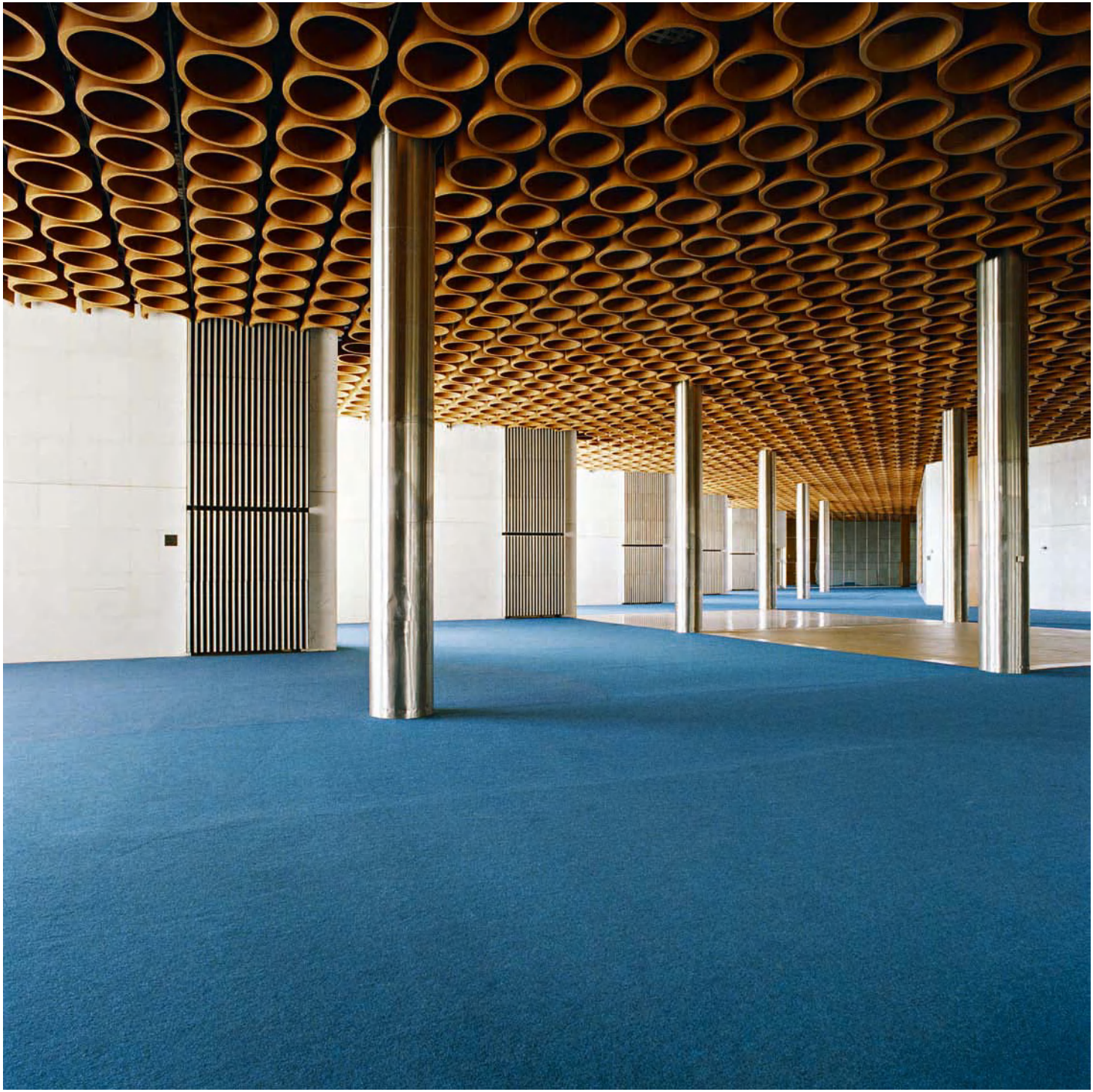

NOVÝ MOST

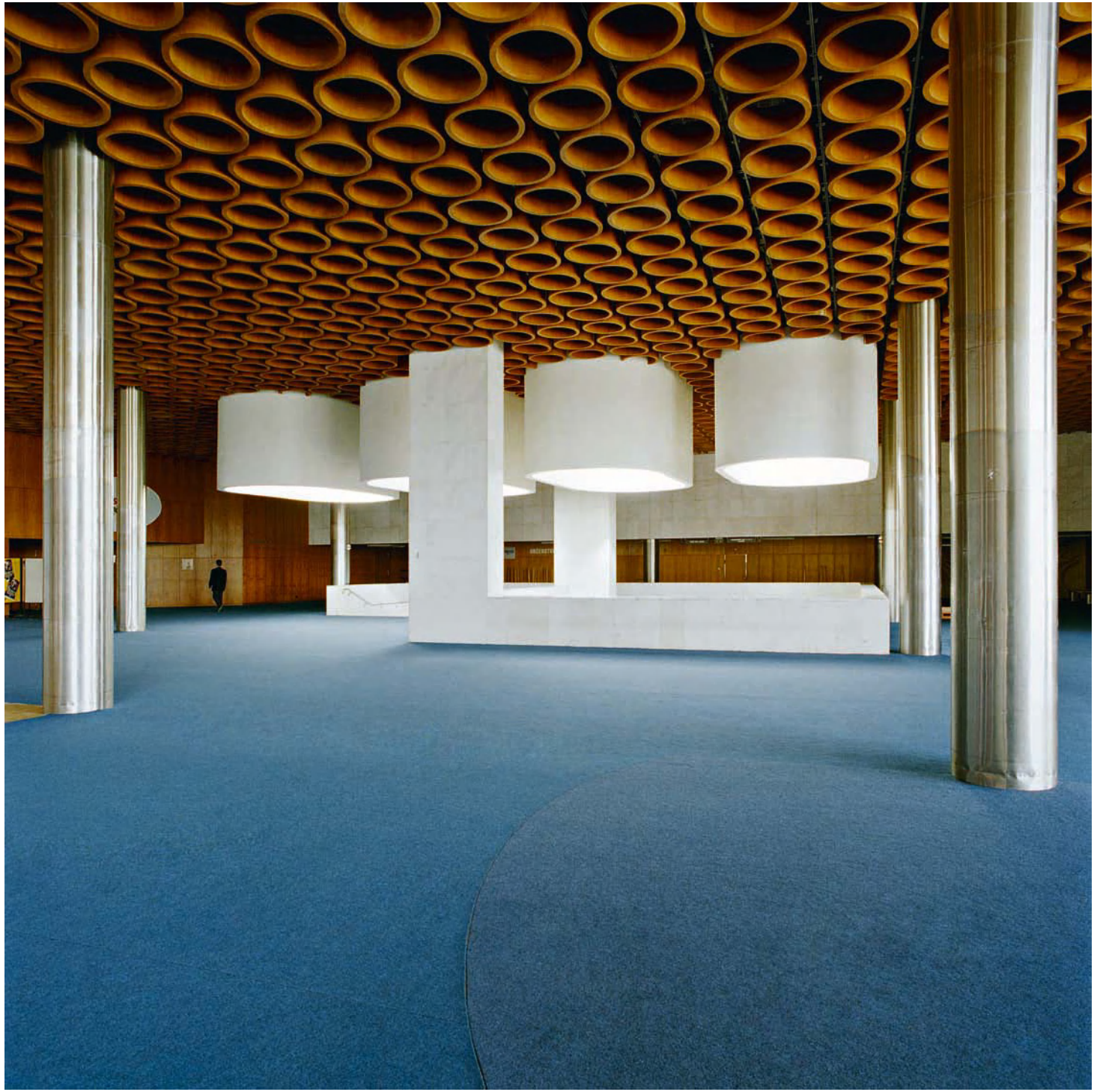
Trade Union House

Bratislava

Ferdinand Konček
Iľja Skoček
Ľubomír Titl

1955 – 1981





Reception Lounge
for Guests of State

Bratislava Airport

Vojtech Vilhan
Ján Bahna

1972 – 1973


TOALETY


10 46


Air Slovakia


SEM

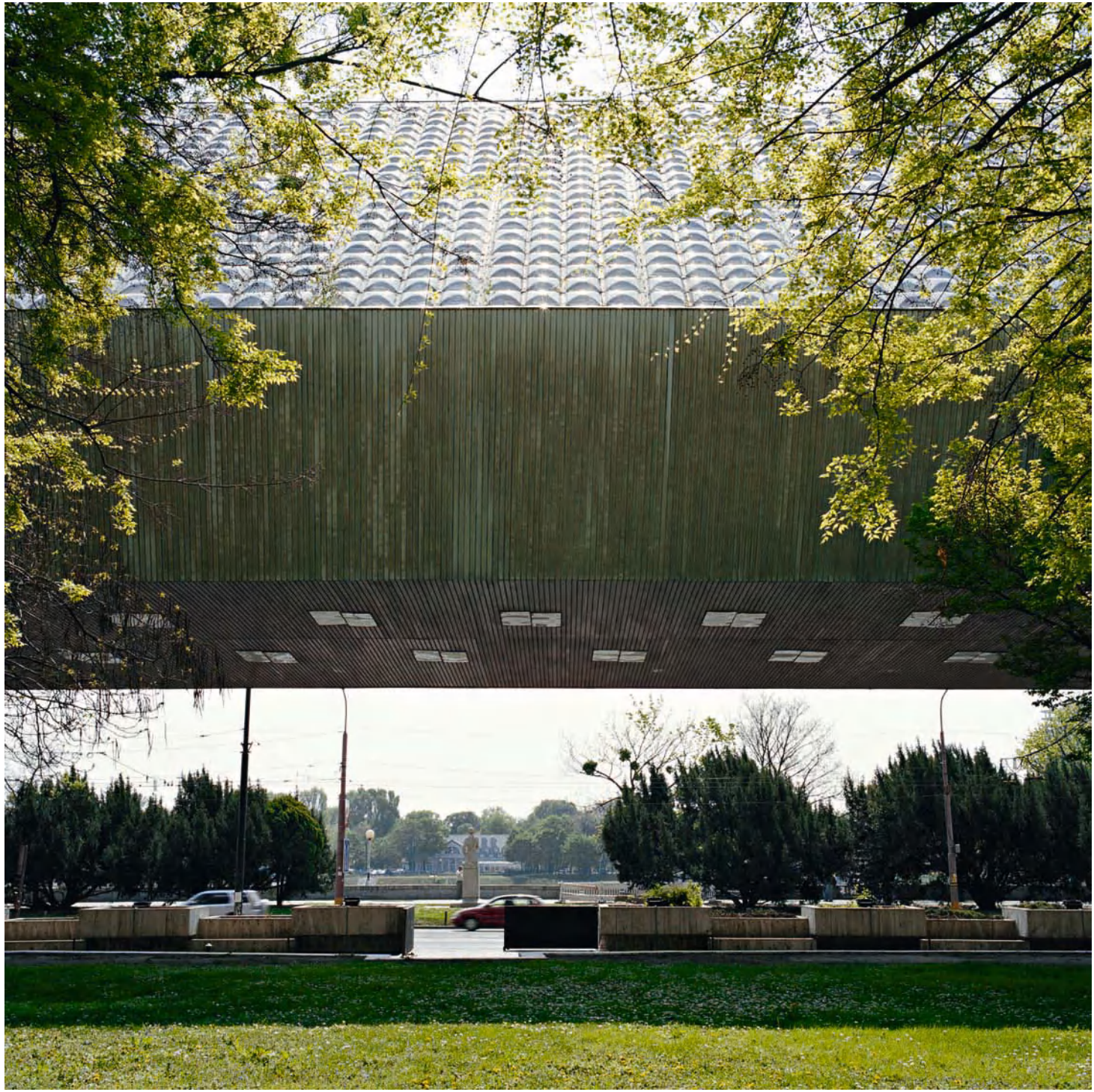
National Gallery

Bratislava

Vladimír Dedeček

1967 – 1979


flexipôžička
vyberte si dĺžku
vúb
BA 204CJ



Kamzík TV Tower

Bratislava

Stanislav Májek
Jakub Tomašák
Milan Jurica
Juraj Kozák
Ján Privitzer

1965 – 1974

National Archives

Bratislava

Vladimír Dedeček

1970 – 1983

Slovakian Broadcasting Building

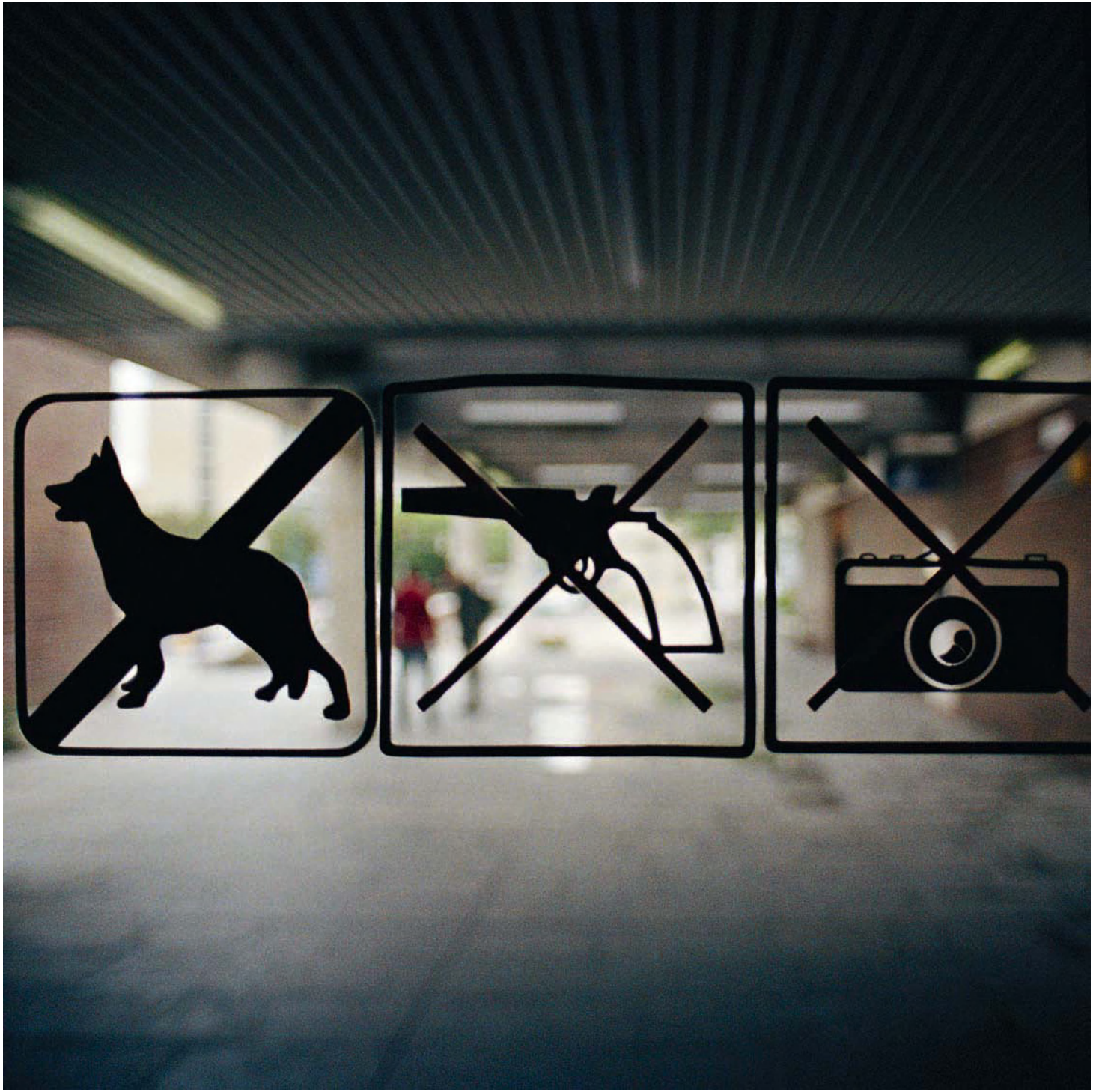
Bratislava

Štefan Svetko
Štefan Ďurkovič
Barnabáš Kissling

1962 – 1985


SLOVENSKÝ


SEPTEMBER
OKTOBER
27
28
29




A08
STEAM
COFFEE


SLOVENSKÝ ROZHLAS
PDD 66-31

Memorial for the
Slovak National Uprising

Banská Bystrica

Dušan Kuzma
Jozef Jankovič

1963 – 1970

University of Agriculture

Nitra

Vladimír Dedeček
Rudolf Miňovský

1960 – 1966


SLOVENSKÁ POĽNOHOSPODÁRSKA UNIVERZITA

Tatra Railway Station

Poprad

Milan Novák

completed 1987


POPRAD-TATRY


ŽSR


FORRÁD TATRY


ODCHOD
CIEĽOVÁ STANICA
SMER CESTY
DRUH VLAKU
PRAVIDELNÝ ODCHOD
MEŠKANIE
NÁST.
SPIŠSKÁ NOVÁ VES
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KOŠICE
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R
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TATRY

Hotel Panorama

Štrbské Pleso
High Tatras

Zdeněk Řihák

1965 – 1970


HOTEL
ORAMA

FIS Winter Sports Complex
Site of the Nordic Ski World
Championships

Štrbské Pleso
High Tatras

Eugen Kramár
Ján Šprlák-Uličný

1965 – 1970


ALCOMA

State Political School

Modra

Vladimír Dedeček

1972 – 1978


SK
PK 763

Crematory

Bratislava-Lamač

Ferdinand Milučký

1962 – 1968


OBRANNÁ SIEŇ

Eastern singularities

Benjamin Konrad and Maik Novotny

In the West, the idea of Slovakia is only marginally defined. Hardly anyone can recall an image or landmark of Bratislava, one of Europe's youngest capitals – let alone representatives of architecture and design. Descriptions of Slovakia do not tend to automatically evoke the notion of outstanding design. Especially when referring to the period between the 1960s and 1970s.

Slovakia has been an independent nation since 1993; in the common history with the Czech Republic it had always remained in the shadow of Prague. Many attempts to break away from the dominant brother have transpired. After the Technical University in Bratislava was expanded by a Faculty of Architecture in 1947, a similar trend began to predominate within architecture. Not least because architects were able to work and teach in Bratislava who had fallen out of favor with the Communist regime and were subsequently ousted from Prague, where due to the control exerted from Moscow the architectural and urbanist discourse was not as liberal and unrestricted.

Today the fact has been mostly forgotten that during the 1920s and 1930s the young Czechoslovakian nation was one of the most innovative and progressive European countries in terms of architecture and technology, and this trend has largely been continued in the 1960s in the Slovakian part of the state. Within planning

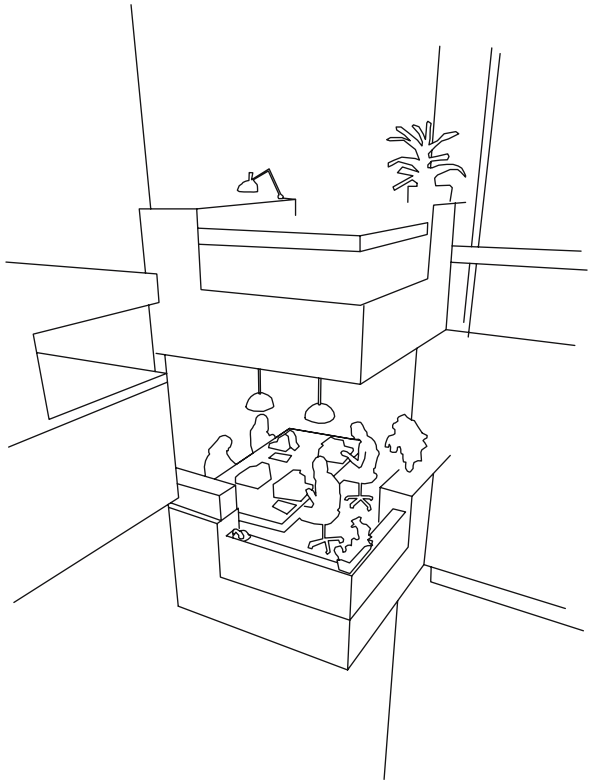
collectives, where often more than hundred architects, structural and building engineers, as well as consultants worked on projects side by side, technical ambition, enthusiasm for interdisciplinary exchange and modernism's yet unrestrained optimism about the future formed an ideal ground for singular building projects.

These include public structures that were intentionally placed to stand out from the urban fabric and whose singularity was later enhanced by the building boom that followed the Velvet Revolution. Due to a lack of wherewithal or motivation to subject these buildings to refurbishment, they have remained – as opposed to many of their counterparts in the West – exceptionally well preserved, continuing to enhance the urbanscape.

One of the most remarkable and emblematic edifices is the Slovakian broadcasting building designed by Štefan Svetko, Štefan Ďurkovič and Barnabáš Kissling. The precisely delineated monumental form of the reversed pyramid with its dark steel supports appears almost closed-off, while being contrasted with an expansive and relaxed interior featuring a clearly differentiated layout. The pyramid is redolent of Oscar Niemeyer's design for the MAM Museum in Caracas that was never implemented, while the interior is clearly related to the social spaces designed during the 1970s, such as Herman Hertzberger's "Centraal Beheer" in Apeldoorn. Just like Hertzberger, Svetko largely draws on humanist ideals versus strictly formal criteria – the sculptural form is primarily a result of the internal logic of the intended use. The diametric difference between the interior and the exterior becomes most obvious in the design of the concert halls on the ground level; the wooden and travertine panelling and the dark red seat covers lend them an air of sensuousness.

The Trade Union House by Ferdinand Konček, Iľja Skoček and Ľubomír Titl, "Grey Mouse" in vernacular, conjures the same surprise effect: As one steps from the exterior space, framed by two large structures that have been fused to yield the convention center, into the vast foyer on the second floor with its polished pillars and massive, oval light wells above the staircase, exuding a sacral quality.

Although the building was planned during the 1950s, it was only completed in the early 1980s. Extremely long construction periods of ten, fifteen or even more years were not uncommon back then. Scarcity of materials and high building costs resulted in long delays for completing especially large construction projects. Against this background the correspondence of the original idea and the implemented product is even more impressive.



Herman Hertzberger
Office building "Centraal Beheer"
Apeldoorn, the Netherlands
1967 – 1972

Arcade-like internal space
with open office areas
and seating groups

A distinctive example of Slovakian modern interior design was completed in a comparably short period of time: The government's VIP lounge at Bratislava airport was designed by Ján Bahna and Vojtech Vilhan between 1972-73 and continues to be used for receptions of high-ranking guests of the state.

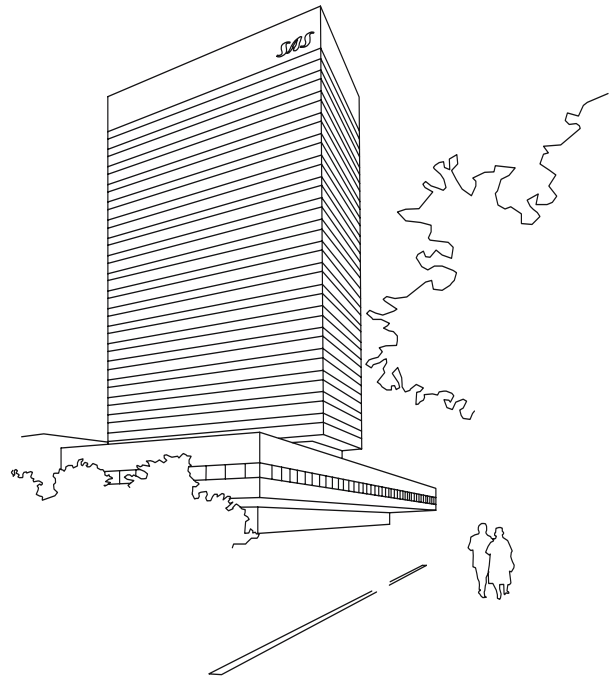
Originally planned as an exclusive departure and arrival spot for prominent party and government members, it remains hidden in a small barrack next to the airfield and unknown to most Slovakians. Past its discreet exterior an unexpected world opens up inside: An interior running the gamut of brown, beige and white nuances and resembling a spaceship, unique geometric forms in the shape of circular aluminium panels, cylindrical seating and variable partitioning.

Bahna's rapture over Hans Hollein's early works from the 1960s, such as the Retti candle store in Vienna, is clearly distinguishable. Cool, technically influenced design was balanced with abstract decor elements rooted in Slovakian folk art. The interior design perfected to the hangers and ceiling lights continues to appeal through its consistency of style.

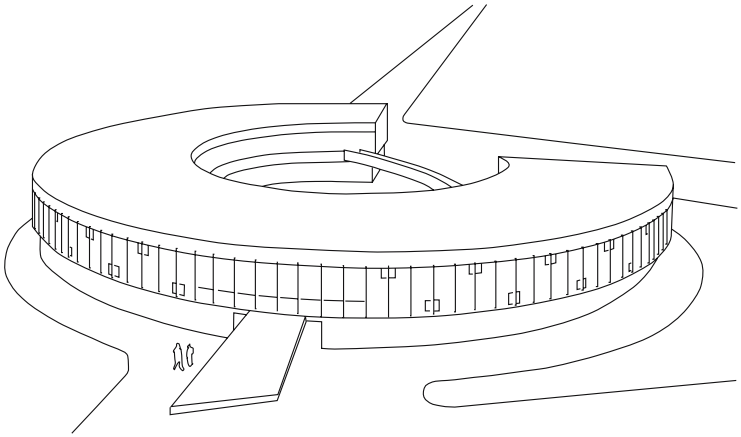
In contrast to these hidden interiors, for the complex of the Kyjev hotel and the Prior department store (1961-73) Ivan Matušík designed the interior and exterior space as a continuous

concept. The 15-storeyed hotel facade, reminiscent of modern icons such as the Lever Building in New York by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and particularly Arne Jacobsen's SAS Royal Hotel in Copenhagen, bears intricate details. The precisely cut travertine slabs and the wooden panelling of the corridors feature identical rounded inner edges. Matušík invested much effort in counteracting the unrefined quality of industrial serial production and the scarcity of materials, while emphasizing his ideal of craftsmanship in details. This represents Matušík's fascination for clear forms, particularly those inherent in Scandinavian modernism. The hotel is infused with more than just an air of international style, which becomes palpable on the first floor inside the exclusive "Kyjev Club" bar with its magnificent sequined ceiling lights above the bar, which has been skilfully lowered into the floor, thus offering vistas of the city past the roof of the department store. In the basement the "Luna" dancing bar with its bright red nuances and curvy design is reminiscent of the works of another Danish designer, Verner Panton.

One of the most outstanding buildings of Slovakian post-war architecture is influenced by the same Scandinavian clarity and open structure of design: Ferdinand Milučký's crematory in Bratislava-Lamač has been perfectly woven into the landscape. It took Milučký almost 10 years to perfect his balanced composition of wall planes,



Arne Jacobsen
Radisson SAS Royal Hotel
Copenhagen, Denmark
1955 – 1961



Ivan Matušík
Shopping Center "Slimák" (The Snail)
Bratislava, Slovakia
1957 – 1964
redeveloped in 1996

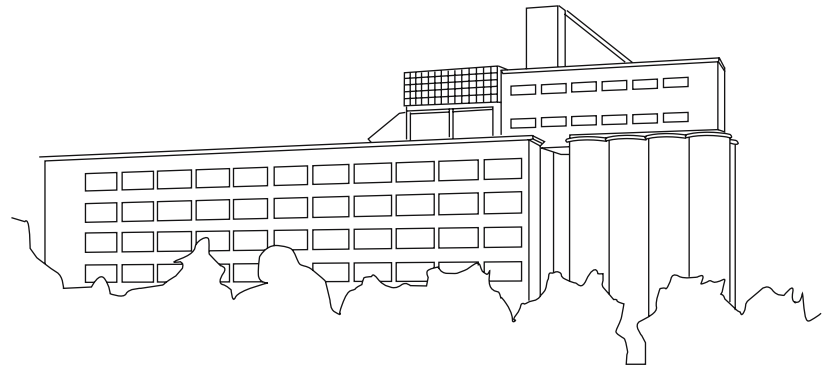
openings and quiet, intimate spaces. Today this "Gesamtkunstwerk" that discreetly accompanies the path of the mourner is considered one of the icons of modernism in Slovakia.

The architect Vladimír Dedeček, one of the controversial representatives of Slovakian post-war architecture, was less fortunate. His National Gallery, with its unusual exhibition spaces, looks back upon a protracted construction period. It has certainly received the most negative criticism and was almost demolished right after the Velvet Revolution. In 2003, an international competition was held for its redesign; the exhibition spaces have lain in a state of disuse ever since, for renovations are deemed too expensive.

Dedeček's comprehensive architectural body of works – aside from the National Gallery this includes the National Archives in Bratislava and the exhibition grounds – is despite all criticism characterized by such clarity and impressive shapes that he undoubtedly pertains to one of the most interesting architects of Slovakia. His buildings vary the principle of structuring facades with highly plastic projections and recesses, whose stark contrasts of light and shadow are enhanced by color accents. One of his early and most convincing works, the University of Agriculture in Nitra, characterized by strictly orthogonal structures that are in concert with the landscape, is clearly a product of the 1950s.

His later works lean more toward sculpturality, oozing an air of massiness and exemplifying the transition from modernism to late modernism.

The marked contrast between the rough monomaterialism of the exterior – often a result of the limited selection of materials – and the carefully detailed elegance of the comfortable interiors that is a central theme in most of the projects reflect the preference for massive and symbolic architecture back then. At the same time traditions typical for the country, such as wood construction or decorative elements, have been integrated into the designs. This common intellectual and architectural approach suggests a special building and design style, a separate "Eastmodernism". However, individual buildings reveal parallels to Western architecture of that era, thus impeding such classification attempts, while labeling the presented buildings rather as relicts of a pan-European period whose original state has been preserved in Slovakia better than anywhere else. The development of Slovakian post-war architecture reveals to what extent architectural styles and theories were a global phenomenon at that time and could not even be halted by the Iron Curtain. Late modernism took – emerging rather unnoticed from the West – also hold in Eastern Europe. In Slovakia it has generated an astounding concentration of terrific examples on a small area.



Emil Belluš
Nupod Mill
Trnava, Slovakia
1936 – 1938

An icon of Czechoslovakian
inter-war modernism

Unfortunately, more and more important structures from that era are demolished or refurbished to where nothing of the original structure remains. State buildings of the socialist era are still met with reservations. Consequently, project commissions at short notice, demolitions, defacing interventions and sellout of sites crucial to the urban development are common.

According to Štefan Svetko a lack of cultural awareness is to be blamed for the fact that the architectural legacy of the 1960s and 1970s cannot be assessed in objective terms: "For entering a discourse, we lag at least two generations of democratic development behind."

Svetko's broadcasting building is, like many of its contemporaries in the West, affected by high maintenance costs and altered needs of its users. The Kyjev hotel has repeatedly been endangered by demolition attempts, while the enchanting UFO-shaped restaurant on the top of the New Bridge, where once one was able to dine in a James Bond film atmosphere of the 1960s while floating above the city and the Danube, has already been redesigned. The original interior has been completely removed.

But despite all these losses, the exterior shells in all their logo-like imagery remain the rough monuments they were – the initial 1960s concept of public buildings implanted into the urban fabric, or "the icing on the cake", as Svetko puts it, is still valid today. Aliens in a world of corporate westernized standard design and mirrored-glass mediocrity, they remain persistently present in the city. Crossing the river from the suburb of Petržalka[1] into the historic center, with the New Bridge's pylons in the sky blending with the boxy silhouette of Bratislava Castle behind it, one feels that they are already firmly ingrained in Bratislava's iconography.

1 Petržalka: in 1966, an international competition co-organised by Štefan Svetko was held for a large-scale settlement on the South Bank of the Danube in Bratislava. The shared winning entries came from Austria and Japan among others. Construction began in 1977 and lasted until the 1980s. Currently, Petržalka houses 115.000 inhabitants, about 25% of the population of Bratislava.

Late modernism in Slovakia
Expanding the limits

Henrieta Moravčíková

The opening of the Prior department store in Bratislava in 1968 was not only a success for modern architecture, but also for the Slovakian society that longed to attain a Western lifestyle. Architects were impressed by the unconventional building structure and the technical innovations; while ordinary people rushed enthusiastically to purchase rare products.

The building complex boasting the Prior department store and the Kyjev hotel became a symbol for modern redesign of the city center, proof of the success of Slovakian architecture and a temple of consumerism offering nationals of the socialist state an unusual array of products and the atmosphere of large Western cities.

Ivan Matušík, the architect, won the competition for the design of the department store and the hotel at the young age of 30. Nonetheless, he succeeded in realising this extraordinary feat by implementing a number of exclusive and unique solutions, both in terms of construction and technology, as well as in selecting and applying the materials used. Consequently, to this day the building complex has been preserved in its original form. Only the owners have changed: The building was transferred from state to private ownership. In 2006, the new owner decided to demolish the entire complex and to replace it with a new structure, thus prompting a public debate in Slovakia; both the public and numerous architects have

frequently been advocating for demolishing the building. The department store and the hotel are still at their original location in the city center and are still used according to the original intent of the architect. The question remains though, for how long.

The history of the department store and the hotel exemplifies the historical context of late modernism in Slovakia, encompassing the enthusiasm of the 1960s and large construction projects of that era, the relevance of modernism for the architectural history of Slovakia, as well as the unskilled attitude of the public in terms of the architectural legacy of the socialist era.

The late 1950s brought a period of political thaw, paving the way for democratization, blossoming of the society and economic growth in Czechoslovakia. All these factors enlivened culture – and consequently architecture as an integral part of it.

After WWII Slovakia remained, as part of Czechoslovakia, in ideological terms in the shadow of the Czech Republic. Not even the officially adopted art style of the 1950s – Socialist Realism – took hold to the same extent as in the Czech portion of the country. However, these developments fostered the artistic energy of the Slovakian avant-garde. Slovakia had previously always adopted a peripheral role as regards to cultural activities and made now a unique historical experience that propelled it into the limelight for a while. "Back then … everything that we produced was incredibly inspiring, terrific and truly world class." This is how the famous Slovakian poet Ladislav Ballek[1] expressed the sentiment of those times. Inherent in that special social climate was also the "need to continue representing the power of socialist ideology". This need prompted "the political leaders to make peace with the intelligentsia and support their artistic endeavors driven by the government's self-serving interests."[2] Later, the hopes of those times proved larger than the actual possibilities of the Communist regime. Future failure was already inherent in the pioneer spirit of the 1960s. This became obvious decades later when the socialist system collapsed in 1989. One of the frontrunners of the Velvet Revolution and former president of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, referred to the 1960s as "not an idyllic era, but not necessarily a continuation of terror", but rather as "a period of discreet, polite and sometimes playful attempts to expand one's limits."[3]

The 1960s brought another wave of industrialization and economic growth to Slovakia, which was also reflected by major construction projects. Thousands of residential buildings, hundreds of schools and edifices housing cultural institutions were built and entire city centers

were restructured. But even here, the plans were bolder than the possibilities of socialist building production. This is illustrated by countless architectural and urban design concepts that failed to materialize or whose implementation dragged on for decades. The nationalization of construction firms and the formation of large state-owned construction companies prompted a decline in natural competition and gradually induced the collapse of socialist building. Planning companies were also affected by nationalization attempts. Private architectural firms and studios were replaced by large planning departments that collaborated with hundreds of employees in collectives. A general management ensured smooth operations by acquiring sufficient commissions and allocating tasks and funds. The planning departments were outfitted with excellent offices, good technical equipment and a superb specialized library. Architects were not required to deal with existential matters; their sole responsibility lay in planning. The planning departments were infused with a collective and artistic spirit and each collective was supervised by the best architects who had acquired their status of authority naturally.

Ironically, this specific combination of totalitarian organization and artistic freedom indeed permitted architects to expand their limits and create an individual and conceptionally perfected body of works.

In terms of content architectural design of the 1960s favored a return to modernism. Between the two world wars, modernism was throughout Czechoslovakia "an architectural tool for national validation"[4]. Interim-war modernism in Czechoslovakia enjoyed the reputation of a golden age of architecture and was associated with democratic standards during the first Czechoslovakian Republic and with Western cultural traditions. Returning to modernism after an era of imposed socialist realism meant the logical continuation of the only authentic tradition and favoring the ethic aspect of architecture. Slovakian architecture fully used the liberating potential that is attributed to modernism by architecture historians "as a project of progress and emancipation"[5]. This implied renewing a continuity that was vital for further development.

One of the main forces in reviving the position of modernism in Slovakia was assumed by the new architectural faculty in Bratislava. Heavy hitters in Czechoslovakian interim-war functionalism such as Emil Belluš and Vladimír Karfík taught there. They succeeded in gathering an extraordinarily strong generation that spearheaded architectural developments in the country during the 1960s.

Slovakian architecture of the second half of the 20th century was dominated by two fundamental positions regarding modernism:

On the one hand, the tendency to develop further the principles of functionalism based on right-angled and geometric patterns[6]. On the other hand, architects sought to break away from functional restraints and to create spatial and artistically more complex compositions and sculptural forms that were redolent of works authored by Le Corbusier and the British brutalists[7]. Furthermore, folk art was introduced into late modern architecture and gained particular significance in the context of avant-garde. This was reflected by abstracting forms that were rooted in folk art and by putting traditional local materials to use[8].

Another feature of Slovakian modernism was monumentality. It was rooted in the rapture over unusual forms and spectacular constructions, being born from the desire to "instil soul into a building" and "express its character", to use the words of the architect Štefan Svetko. This monumentalist idea was also reflected in the building activities. In the 1960s, the majority of Slovakian state institutions built representative edifices for the first time in their history. This trend yielded projects such as the Slovakian broadcasting building, the TV Tower, the National Archives and the National Gallery. The monumental form supported the interests of the totalitarian regime by representing its "financial possibilities and its cultural awareness"[9].

While monumentality gave rise to unique formal solutions in the 1960s, later it was only a product of huge building dimensions and the megalomania of the regime that sought to impress the working class by means of monumentality. Particularly this type of monumentalism became the target of criticism against late modernism and the symbol of an inflated rhetoric of the socialist era.

Late modern architecture in post-communist nations is closely tied to the political history. For the majority of the society this is an ideologically burdening legacy. The uncertain position of late modern buildings and their difficult classification is not only a result of their time of origin and altered requirements of their users but also that of the manifestation of late modernism. Individual architectural solutions that were based on new aesthetic and spatial requirements proposed by modern architects were often hard to decipher for non-experts. Late modern architecture – just like abstract art – remained hard to grasp for the majority of ordinary people. At the same time, modern architecture penetrated historically grown structures and destroyed their original character. New developments were usually realized in response to political decisions and were consequently not subjected to public debate. Private property was virtually unheard

of and the state was able to appropriate land and determine its use and development. As a result of the newly erected department store and hotel on Kamenné square in Bratislava, approximately 60,000 m^2 of the original urban development were demolished. According to public view, the New Bridge across the Danube is directly linked to the outcome of demolishing the development of the old city below the castle. Many other contemporary structures involved similarly large-scale demolitions. A sense of grief about the loss of the historical buildings and a lack of understanding for modern architecture have remained the most frequent reasons for rejecting the projects of late modernism.

Late modern architecture in Slovakia is despite such negative associations a record of a unique architectural situation in the 1960s and the ability to expand one's limits – even under impossible circumstances. It is a valuable aspect of the cultural legacy of the Slovakian nation, even if its recognition has yet to come.

1 Šesťdesiate roky v slovenskom výtvarnom umení (The 1960s in Slovak Visual Art). Ed. Zora Rusinová, Bratislava, SNG 1995, p. 322.

2 Miroslav Masák: Mezi expy (Between Expos). In: Šedesátá léta v architektuře očima pamětníků (The 1960s in architecture through the eyes of living witnesses). Ed. P. Urlich et all. Praha, ČVUT 2006, p. 20.

3 Ibid., p. 24.

4 J. L. Cohen: International Rhetoric, Local Response. In: Back from Utopia. Ed. H. J. Henket, H. Heynen, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers 2002, p. 84-85.

5 Hilde Heyen: Engaging Modernism. In: Back from Utopia. The challenge of the Modern Movement. Ed. H. J. Henket, H. Heynen, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers 2002, p. 379.

6 The examples of the Trade Union House or the Crematory in Bratislava in this book illustrate this principle. See also Matúš Dulla, Henrieta Moravčíková: Architektúra 20. storočia na Slovensku (Architecture of the 20th century in Slovakia). Bratislava, Slovart 2002, p. 206-208.

7 In this book such indications are displayed on the Memorial for the Slovak National Uprising in Banská Bystrica or the University of Agriculture. See also Matúš Dulla, Henrieta Moravčíková: Architektúra 20. storočia na Slovensku (Architecture of the 20th century in Slovakia). Bratislava, Slovart 2002, p. 198-199 and p. 208-209.

8 A remarkable example of folk inspiration in Slovakian modernism was the Slovenská Koliba restaurant, Expo 1967, Montreal (Stanislav Talaš, Vojtech Vilhan, 1965 – 1967). Matúš Dulla, Henrieta Moravčíková: Architektúra 20. storočia na Slovensku (Architecture of the 20th century in Slovakia). Bratislava, Slovart 2002, p. 233.

9 Kenneth Frampton: Moderní architektura. Kritické dějiny (Modern architecture. The Critical History). Praha, Academia 2004, p. 307.

The grand gesture

Public space and expression in the post-war architecture of the socialist nations

Ákos Moravánszky

Architecture and urban development of the 1960s and 1970s in Eastern Europe is usually only briefly dealt with in publications. It is said that after the intermezzo of Socialist Realism, construction engineering was, after 1960, determined by the design principles of modernism. It is also emphasized that the pathos of the Stalinist period was followed by a mundane, productivist, even technocratic period characterized by the fulfilment of planning objectives, which found its adequate expression in the grey mass of "Plattenbauten".

The examples from Slovakia published herein, illustrate that the public buildings of the 1960s and 1970s tell a different story than the residential buildings. Cantilevered panels, bold canopies and upside down pyramids are design features of an architecture that wants to both appeal to and impress the beholder, though it used different architectural means to those used in the 1950s. The focus is now on a "communicative architecture", whereby the communication takes place on a gestural and not on a symbolic level. In other words: The Dorian pillars and the star decorated gables of Socialist Realism, which redefined the classical tradition as a common cultural ground are now – to use the words of Ján Bahna – replaced by the "grand gesture", an expressive and abstract form, which can only hardly, if at all, be placed into a precise historical context.

The comparatively short-lived era of Socialist Realism was, despite the great significance attributed to architecture at that time, perceived by architects as a stylistic constraint. This is clearly reflected in the interviews published in this volume. With regard to the architecture of the 1960s and 1970s it is possible to ascertain some kind of optimism, which is also expressed in the new esthetics. This optimism is accompanied by a new appreciation for public squares, which takes account of the observer's new mode of perception. The central city squares were designed for socialist rituals and the urban spaces were both framework and representations of a clearly defined and rigid relationship between mass and power. The rigidity of the relationship between symbol and meaning eases in the same way as the monolithic buildings of the 1950s make way for the acrobatics of the masses, which often deals with the tectonic or atectonic of heavy masses and which is assessing the limits of stability. The game of overturning – the element of collapse is a striking characteristic of 1960s-1970s architecture in the state-socialist countries. The issue is thus not a resumption of modernism, but its revision, its destabilization in the literal sense. This revision marked the continuation of the very monumentality discussion that had already begun in the USA and Eastern and Western Europe in the 1940s, thus prior to the erection of the so-called Iron Curtain.

In architecture, the notion of monumentality can refer either to the sheer size of a building or to its capability to act as a repository of memories. The etymological root of the term "monument" is the Latin word "monere": to remind, to warn. The two meanings are not as different as one may initially be inclined to assume. In order to evoke memories the object has to be clearly discernible and stand out from its environment. The notion of monumentality describes a specific form of architecture – similar to the way rhetoric distinguishes between different modes of speaking. A form is monumental if it stands out from the everyday environment, while at the same time giving structure to the same. Permanence is required, if the monument is to remind the posterity of a deed, a thought or a personality. That is how the pyramids, gravestones and ancient triumphal arches emerged, as well as the later memorials for kings, politicians, soldiers or artists.

In 1943, Sigfried Giedion, the theorist, historian and organiser of "Neues Bauen" (New Ways of Building), co-authored a manifest with the architect José Luis Sert and the painter Fernand Léger titled "Nine Points on Monumentality". These nine points were not published at that time; it was only one year later that Giedion published an essay titled "The Need for a New Monumentality". Giedion was fully aware of the difficulties and risks connected with the intro-

duction of this idea – the historical presence of Speer's and Piacentini's monumentality was still lingering – and thus he used the term "international style" for this very "pseudo monumentality", which, according to his classification, also includes the American classicism of the 1930s, in addition to German and Russian buildings.[1] This remark was attentively noticed in the socialist countries, although one rather kept silent about Socialist Realism instead of seeking a critical debate about Stalinist architecture. Giedion's examples, such as the fireworks spectacle at the Paris World Exposition 1937, show that he intended to distance himself from the "stony" monumentality in favor of a lightshow. In her book "Built in USA 1932 – 1944", published in the same year as Giedion's essay, Elizabeth Mock, the director of the architecture department of Museum of Modern Art in New York, illustrated the issue in a different light. Monumentality in a totalitarian state is the expression of the state's omnipotence over the individual; that is why it has nothing to do with the democratic idea of modern architecture. Then again, a democracy needs monuments that lift "the every-day casualness of living" to a higher "ceremonial" level and which embody a dignified and coherent expression of the reciprocal dependency between the individual and the social group.[2]

The "desire for community life", as described by Giedion, evokes memories of old and (back then) not quite so old ideas of a new "Gesamtkunstwerk" (synthesis of the arts) and of a "new myth". Giedion averred that we have become unable to create monuments, to celebrate together – "emotional experiences" are regarded as a private matter. In today's city, this situation is "expressed in a noisy manner". That is why community centers have to be created "by the community for the community".[3] The "new humanism", which was associated with the architecture of these centers has abandoned the rigid rectangularity and the smooth facades of the first generation of modernism – in favor of a "structural exhibitionism", as the architectural historian Vincent Scully put it, to describe the plastic designs of the "second generation" of modern architecture.

The 6th CIAM Congress in Bridgewater, England, focused on the topic of "The Synthesis of the Arts". Several CIAM members from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary attended the preparatory conference in Zurich in May 1947 as well as the actual congress in September of the same year. The 8th CIAM Congress under the theme "The Heart of the City", which was held in the English town of Hoddesdon in 1951, addressed this issue, even though the notion of monumentality itself was rarely used. At that time, the division of Europe was already percep-

tible. The quest for an alternative to socialist ideology and the trend towards a rather general concept of "collectivity" is clearly reflected in the records. The central issue was The Core, the core of the city as a "Gesamtkunstwerk" – but the "Nine Points on Monumentality" had not fallen into oblivion. The continuing discussions reflect the concern of many intellectuals that the family has become the prevailing social unit of the post-war consumer society – the city does not provide any space for larger social organisms. The president of CIAM, José Luis Sert, called for re-centralization, for the reversal of the spontaneous decentralization of the towns and cities.[4] Civic cores, community centers are the new equivalents of the ancient Agora, aimed at generating a democratic city life and a sense of community with urban means. The issue of decentralization, sub-urbanization and the resulting depopulation of the city centers did not exist as such in the socialist countries. The desire to transform the city centers into a space of new and appealing urban experiences was omnipresent. At the same time, new leisure facilities emerge. It seems as if tourism, holidays and traveling become appreciated as a substitute for the unfulfilled utopia of freedom, even if these little means of escape from every day work life are just as regulated and organized as work itself.

The common ground of the new monumentality of public buildings in socialist countries and the Western European-American discussion about "new humanism" is a shared interest in a language that is accessible to the public and that is not based on historical examples but on "abstract" forms. Certain theoretical similarities could be discerned in the East and the West, e.g. the theory of human dimensions, which, for instance, found its expression in the Modulor system developed by Le Corbusier and which was perfectly known in Eastern Europe. The interest in scales of proportions also played a role in architecture classes and was applied to both the analysis of historical examples as well as to the design of new buildings. In the 1970s, this method played a crucial role in the development of a formalistic approach to architecture (e.g. Peter Eisenmann's early residential house designs) in the United States. Equally important though less prominent were the theoretical concepts of characterology and the so-called theory of empathy, which was developed around 1900 by Theodor Lipps, Wilhelm Worringer and other advocates of the psychology of perception. This theory, which assumes the existence of an esthetic empathy of the beholder towards the observed object, seeks a correspondence between the plastic forms and the emotions of the audience, instead of a correspondence between plastic form and symbolic meaning.

A political interpretation of the shift from the symbolism of the 1950s towards a gestural expression in the 1960s-1970s is fairly easy. The meaning of form in the case of a classical cultural center was linked to a tangible reference, which related to the Stalinist definition of Socialist Realism. The meticulously studied examples of classicism, the local, national and regional traditions are intrinsically tied to this symbolism. The architecture of the 1960s and 1970s liberates itself from such restraints. The new expressivity of form allows for a certain degree of "fluidity", for a far more liberal approach of dealing with the meaning of the architectural form, which is reflected in the redefinition of the public space.

The renunciation of the dogma of functionalism goes hand in hand with the return of the ornament as a decorative layer of plastic motifs or sgraffito decorations, which were often designed as "Kunst am Bau" (art in construction) by fine artists. These decorations intend to contribute to the differentiation and individualization of the architecture and allow the symbolism, e.g. forms of motifs inspired by folk art, to re-enter the architectural arena through the back door. Crystal chandeliers, wrought iron works and graceful interior design solutions seem to aim at softening the expressivity of large architectural forms by means of populist details.

The similarities between the lines of development in East and West are obvious. Said "optimism" is reflected in the quest for a language that allows autonomy and that suggests meanings rather than prescribing them. This autonomy is limited in the 1980s: due to the criticism of an alleged "inability of modernism to communicate", the architects of the 1980s will discover a closer connection between form and meaning in the concepts of semiology.

1 Sigfried Giedion, "Über eine neue Monumentalität" (1943), id., Architektur und Gemeinschaft (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956), pp. 27-39. The essay was initially published in an anthology by Paul Zucker, New Architecture and City Planning: A Symposium (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944).

2 Elizabeth Mock (Ed.), Built in USA 1932 – 1944 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1944), p. 25.

3 Ibid., p. 38.

4 J.L.Sert, "Centers of Community Life", in J. Tyrwhitt, J.L.Sert, E.N.Rogers (Eds.), The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanization of Urban Life (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952), p. 4.

How did you become an architect?

The decision to become an architect was a bit unusual. Since I was interested in drawing and caricature, I was preparing to study painting. I traveled from Žilina to Prague to participate in the entrance exam. That was right after World War II and the situation was difficult back then. In Prague, they realized that I was ill-prepared and they did not grant me admission to the school.

Since I was already there, I decided to visit some of the sights in the city. Prague was an architectural phenomenon for me. In fact, it helped me to discover what architecture was. That's when I decided to become an architect. Even though I did not know anything about the profession and although there was a strange fellow, where I lived, who lived off swindling money from people and who was referred to as the "architec". "Architec" mind you, not architect, according to the local dialect. My family had no idea what architecture was. My father was a simple farmer. Once they learned about it, they were extremely unhappy.

How would you describe your time in Prague?

It was a time of upheaval. Independent architecture had been abolished and consequently, architecture as a form of art ceased to exist.

I witnessed those times very closely; along with the tragic fate of professors who were affected by changes of the political system. They were forced to publicly criticize and amend their work.

As a result, I have felt my entire life that it is not only important to work at the drawing table, but to also transport architecture to society. Architecture is a phenomenon that is omnipresent in people's lives. Once it is undermined, its failure reflects on the surroundings as well.

The situation was slightly different in Slovakia. They did not have a school of architecture there before 1945. Slovak architects had to study in Prague, Budapest or Vienna. In 1945, the conditions were extremely favorable and Emil Belluš founded the Slovak Technical University in Bratislava and managed to recruit some highly skilled people. They had been rejected by officials in Prague after a background check, since they were not willing to comply with restrictions imposed by the Communist regime. Many of them were able to work here and establish themselves in Bratislava.

Where you influenced by architectural developments in the West or were you inspired to purposely follow a different path?

The state and socialist system tried to pressure architects into adapting. Not to things that dominated the rest of the world but to those that originated from the Soviet Union, where after the war historic elements were preferred. They wanted to honor socialism with monumental buildings that adhered to the ideals of the past.

Imposing socialist architecture often resulted even in atrocities such as discrimination and imprisonment, and the destruction of human lives. Architects were sentenced to 15 years in prison, all their assets were confiscated, their families persecuted and banished from Bratislava.

In other words: On the one hand, the pressure was immense and on the other hand socialist project groups began developing ideas; mainly young university graduates who had increasingly gained confidence to stand in for their ideals. Since those groups did not have the opportunity to express themselves publicly, some studios became the fulcrum of their activities. Western journals had been banned, which is why they were distributed secretly. As a result many of my colleagues were persecuted, students suspended from school, just because one of those journals had been discovered there.

I was fortunate enough to become part of a collective here at Stavoprojekt[1] in Bratislava that used to work on very lucrative projects at the time. Residential buildings – the era of housing developments had just dawned. Particularly in

that field, I realized that this topic is extremely important to people, that dwelling is a basic human need. It requires change, it changes constantly, just like people's lifestyle changes. We formed small groups within our studios and applied different ideas we had snapped up somewhere. Even if, at times, it was difficult to snap up anything.

When I designed the Račianska[2] dwellings, which were extremely progressive back then, we, as young architects, presented those projects collectively as the authors to the Slovakian government. What an incompetent organization ... they were all old grandpas with grey hair! Nonetheless, they were responsible for approving the project and because they were not really familiar with the topic, no one dared to ask questions about the structuring of the building or construction related details, nor what interests we pursued. Those old men only asked, "Why are there only American cars in the drawings? After all, our Škoda is a nice car too!"

It was not always easy with those architectural illiterates.

What is it like to work in a collective? How would you describe working conditions at the studios?

At the studios, the collectives were awarded the commissions depending on who was available at the time. The management, the project department, which was a 1000-man organization, made all the decisions. However, within the pseudo-collective system we actually formed a real collective. We used to debate all night whenever a competition was held – it was so much fun!

We even tackled each ongoing project after the supervisors had left – all of them were famous architects – and analyzed it in detail. When the professor came to work the next morning, he would find something completely different on his desk. We even meddled with projects that we were not in charge of. We simply tried to persuade those people that it could also be done differently.

Therefore, it is hard for me to understand how architects have split up to work in individual offices. They don't even come together anymore, no one knows anything about them – I couldn't work under such conditions. We used to lay out everything on the table. They try to hide their work under the table.

Regarding the Slovak broadcasting building: In what context was this building developed?

This building has a long history. Nonetheless, in principle it is a child of its time. After the war socialism adhered to such strange visions. During the 1960s, the following slogan was

adopted: Bratislava has to become a workers' city of two million.

Consequently, the number of residential buildings increased rapidly. The city limits began to expand while the center sank more and more into poverty. Nothing was realized there anymore bar the icing on the cake. Only things that glorified the socialist system. Consequently, the system granted permission for certain buildings that served that purpose. Such as the broadcasting building.

Even though it was not easy at the time to realize progressive ideas, the political situation worked in our favor. Internal problems of the Federation of Czechoslovakia began to emerge, while in Bratislava public sentiment increasingly reflected the resentment about not being officially recognized as Slovakia's capital. Thus, the federal government had to relent to some demands and began to loosen its grip to allow for the development of certain elements of state infrastructure. Hence, also the broadcasting building in Bratislava was given green light.

Consequently, we permitted ourselves certain technological caprices. We argued that broadcasting was a technology of the 20th century and required a certain spatial concept: The core of the structure houses broadcasting studios that are flanked by open offices, protecting the core from external noise. The idea to center everything toward the core determined the actual design. Along with requirements of the surrounding urban fabric. Back then, a wide boulevard was slated to run through the city. We envisioned our edifice as the last building along the strip abutting the termination of the boulevard near the new train station. We wanted to use the resulting design to express the specific function of the urban space that would evolve there.

Bratislava, a comparably young capital, does not evoke a well defined image in people's minds in other parts of Europe. Will the structures that were built in the 1970s fill that gap and become landmarks?

This is a serious question and breaches on the topic of the social-political climate that predominates here. The city lacks a long-term vision. This is one of the biggest tragedies and reasons why Bratislava fails to establish itself internationally – these fragments that have never succeeded in forming a whole, which would have benefited local residents. The citizens condemned that, they could not understand these fragments.

Therefore, it was almost a miracle that they let Dedeček get away with the National Gallery. Don't assume that the public reacted positively to designating the New Bridge as "the Slovakian

monument of the century"; just as they disapproved of the broadcasting building. Modern architecture – particularly due to its fragmentary character, considering that it permeated an existing environment and destroyed certain values, without replacing them with new ones – has not secured a permanent spot in the interest of the Slovakian public. Nor has it been recognized as such by theorists.

When I visited the broadcasting building with young architects, I saw how they marveled at the interior space – and they hadn't even seen the concert halls yet! No one is familiar with those, since no one is accorded access. No one knows about these interiors.

To what extent is architecture a topic discussed by the Slovakian public?

Often particularly those involved with the arts are wrong about many things. Milan Lasica[3], a good friend of mine, is culturally very active and in his eyes, the quality of an urban environment is reflected by its romantic appeal and the number of its pubs. It is not enough though to be romantic. This ideal could be realized in any environment, just like pubs could be placed anywhere. The question is whether the project has soul.

What are your hopes for the future of architecture and in particular for architecture in Slovakia?

This is an extremely difficult question. On the one hand, I am glad that the Velvet Revolution took place and I was also actively involved in the events that preceded it. I used to have major political problems in the past – the designs of the broadcasting building do not bear my name; the draftspeople had to remove it after half of the construction had been completed. Those times were not easy for me. I was unable to work independently for twenty years, I was only assisting others. But that doesn't matter. I am just sad to see how the majority of the architectural community has acted. Most of the architects contented themselves with opening the doors to their own endeavors, while at the same time they retreated to their own shell – which was a big mistake. Architecture today unfolds under more anonymous circumstances than during the socialist era. No one knows who has designed which building or who has amended the work of another architect, without respecting authors' rights. The consequences of inept people being involved in the planning process are detrimental. This gives rise to the so-called "investors' baroque".

I can provide truthful information on the topic, as my conscience is clear and I don't have

anything to hide. It is in certain respects an advantage and I am glad that I have arrived at such a position after 50 years of work. Recently, the Greens organised a demonstration against logging. I was attending as well and they asked me, "You side with us too?" And I responded, "Of course, I have planted at least one and a half hectares of trees during the 50 years that my career has lasted." Totaling the green spaces around the dwellings would yield a small forest by now and when I see that people in summer go there to relax and spread out their blankets on the turf to lay down there with their children... All I say is, I have planted one and a half hectares. Had everyone done the same, Bratislava would have been completely green by now.

1 Stavoprojekt was founded in 1949 and became one of the largest project organizations (planning collectives) for architecture and urban design in Czechoslovakia.

2 Račianska: Housing estate in Bratislava constructed in 1957 – 1961 according to the functionalist principles of terraced housing. Strongly reminiscent of Scandinavian estates of the time, it is one of the most renowned works of the early post-war period.

3 Milan Lasica: Slovakian humorist, born 1940 in Zvolen

Štefan Svetko, born on June 19, 1926 in Mojš, Slovakia; is one of the most accomplished representatives of Slovakian architecture during the second half of the 20th century. He co-organized the internationally renowned competition for Petržalka's urban development in the late 1960s; designed the Slovakian broadcasting building and the first industrialized dwellings. He actively participated in the political and social movements of 1968 and 1989.

Why did you become an architect?

In those early years, I was passionate about building model planes. I was also a glider pilot. At that time, most models were made of plaster, though I preferred working with balsa wood. Once I even built a model plane for which I received the European Elegance Award! When constructing models, it is important to plan every single step carefully. Thus, I came to architecture modeling and finally to architecture.

What was the situation like at the time?

The historical Czech Republic belonged to Austria, whereas Slovakia was part of Hungary. However, the difference was not only a cultural, but a fundamental one. In 1949, the Slovak University of Technology was established in Bratislava. I belonged to the first generation of students to study there. The majority of our instructors were from the Czech Republic – the likes of Vladimír Karfík, the chief architect of Baťa's city design program in Zlín, the urban planner Emanuel Hruška or Karel Hanauer. However, there was one Slovak among them: Emil Belluš.

Were you familiar with contemporary international architects and their works?

One's for sure: every architect has to keep track of international developments. As soon as I was allowed to leave the country, I really wanted to travel to Scandinavia. But I only had two weeks to do so. A friend of mine and I then drove to Sweden and Finland – in my first car – and I met some colleagues there. That was in 1957 – it was my first contact with foreign architecture. I spent my first holiday in Western Europe in Italy in 1968, together with my family. Right at that time, the Russians intervened in Czechoslo - vakia and we asked ourselves: shall we stay or return home? We decided to return home.

Why did you decide to return?

That was primarily because of personal reasons and, of course, the family. My work also kept me from staying in Italy. I was working on a few projects and felt obliged to finish them. At that time, for example, the shopping mall was opened – that was the first stage of the Kyjev-Prior complex.

The Kyjev-Prior complex was started before 1968. Did you participate in the competition as a collective?

After the military service, I started working for a company called Stavoprojekt. In the evenings, I worked on the Kyjev-Prior competition, which I ended up winning. Subsequently, I opened a studio in Bratislava. We had between 30 and 40 staff members. I worked there for 30 years.

What was the first project you implemented?

One of the first projects was the shopping center Slimák[1] – the first self-service supermarket in Bratislava. Though it was only a small shop, I incorporated everything into the planning, even the design of the neighborhood, including a fountain and bench. I have always endeavored to create a new environment with my projects. For a few years, I even cleaned and turned on the fountain myself. Unfortunately, the courtyard was filled in after only three years and the fountain cut off.

Unlike the Kyjev hotel, the shopping center Slimák was completely changed in the 1990s – basically, the original architecture has been destroyed. Does an architect have the chance to prevent such "refurbishments"?

If you compare the initial architecture of the building to that of today, it is really a disaster, because, back then, it was an open and transparent building. But no one asked me for permission. On the contrary: a charge was brought against me! I had to appear in court, because I had written a letter of protest. I was alleged of

infringing the new owner's property rights. He was one of those young men – a private investor. His two lawyers raised some absurd allegations. "You have to prove that this is architecture! It is just an ordinary building!"

So, something along the lines of authors' rights does not exist?

No, there is no such thing. The colleagues did not mind and, obviously, the investors did not mind either. Let me tell you of an incident I recently experienced. There is an old house located next to the Prior department store. A member of parliament bought the house and added more storeys. Afterwards, he contacted several authorities and asked for the carillon on the facade of the building to be turned off, because it disturbed his peace. Now doctors are looking into the case. This is a portrayal of today's Slovakia and it illustrates how one deals with architecture in this country nowadays.

How would you rate the public response to your buildings? Has it changed over the years?

In the first years after the Velvet Revolution, common opinion was: socialist architecture – hence with it! Demolish Petržalka! That was some sort of constructed psychosis. But things are slowly improving, even though only among experts. Architecture has hardly any significance in public and political perception. The mayor of Bratislava has completely different ideas. He wants to narrow the street next to the Kyjev Hotel. In former times, carriages passed through and the road was narrow even then! For that purpose, he intends to spend a fortune on purchasing gas lamps from Italy and to use expensive stone pavements for the refurbishment of the Old Town, which are far too thin. He does not care for experts' opinions. Unfortunately, many young architects are willing to do anything if asked to do it. After all, it was architects who had the brilliant idea to erect new buildings on all sides of the Prior. Recently, I was invited to attend a meeting of the Chamber of Architects and used the occasion to express my opinion. And what did the young colleagues reply? Matušík, you have missed the signs of our times!

Planning and building in a collective – what were the working conditions like back then?

Whenever we were assigned a project, the whole collective started working on it. At that time, we were drawing the plans using t-squares and Indian ink pens. It took 30 people and two years to plan the Kyjev hotel and the Prior department store. We just did everything ourselves, from A to Z – without a computer! Today, after the Velvet

Revolution, there is not a single large studio in Bratislava that would be capable of planning large-scale projects such as the multi-storey building of the VUB bank[2] on its own. Everything has fallen apart. Nowadays, architects work on their own or in teams of three or five at the most.

So you were in a leading position?

The profession of the architect was not a liberal profession in the sense understood in the West. However, I had my own studio and I must say that there were also quite normal people among the Communist politicians – they accepted me. I also did not encounter any problems, when I went to Prague to present my work.

Were architects regionally bound? Was it possible to work on projects or to participate in competitions in other Eastern Bloc nations?

I was able to participate in competitions in the whole of Czechoslovakia. However, an actual implementation in the Czech Republic was next to impossible – even after winning a competition. In the Czech city of Liberec we had, for instance, once planned a center according to Western standards, although urban planning was still influenced by Russian urban design. Even though we were awarded first place, we were not allowed to continue working on it. The Czechs then built it themselves.

Your architecture, such as the Kyjev hotel, features impressive details. How did you develop them?

I am an advocate of mono-materiality. That is why I am against combining too many materials. My idea was to use travertine for both floors and walls. Travertine was not particularly expensive at that time. I established contact with a stone quarry in East Slovakia. Back then, demand for travertine from Spiš was low, thus the stonemasons were very obliging. That put me in a position to use unusual transitions and many details. Everything had to be done by hand. But that was not difficult, after all the stonemasons were skilled in working with stones. It was easy to win them over. I wanted to have solid stones, with a thickness of three and a half centimeters. That was only possible with the old technology, the old tools they were still using. I showed them how to cut the stone open. The cut open stone displays a pattern similar to wood, which can be then assembled easily. So when the stones were delivered to Bratislava, every single one of them had to be numbered. That required a lot of time and effort.

The lamps in the foyer and restaurant are designed with the same love to detail.

Unfortunately, there are not many original lamps left. The ceiling lamps above the spiral staircase, for instance, looked like stars, like bubbles made of clear glass. I wanted this transparency in order to emphasize the wood-coffered ceiling. Later, the lamps were replaced with opaque glass. The Prior department store has its special characteristics as well: I opted for a triangular base. Therefore, the ceiling consists of small hexagonal modules. The flooring made of dark Czech granite consists of rhombi, which then again take the shape of hexagons. Maybe preferring modular patterns is only one of my quirks! I recall an old professor at the Slovak Technical University's Faculty of Construction – he was of my father's generation and a real stickler. When he saw the Prior department store for the first time, he said, "Mr. Architect, how did you manage to convince the craftsmen to assemble the flooring in such a way?" Other architects did not notice such details.

How much did you plan yourself? Did you also select the paintings and works of art?

We had an organization called "Slovak Fund for Fine Arts". That was a pool of artists. I was able to choose a partner with whom I subsequently worked together. Once, the "International Women's Day" was celebrated in the banquet hall, where one of those abstract works of art was displayed. The minister, who was already a bit tipsy, said he wanted to speak to the architect on the phone: "You have to tell me, what kind of thing is this?" Initially, I was embarrassed. Then I said, "You know, Mr. Minister, this is an homage to the avant-garde Russian poet Majakovskij!" The Minister was pleased. That is how one had to deal with men like him.

1 Slimák (literally "the snail"): a small shopping center with a spiral-shaped floor plan designed by Ivan Matušík in 1957 and built in 1960 – 1964.

2 The headquarters of the VUB Bank in Bratislava, designed by Ján Bahna, were completed in 1996, the highest edifice in Slovakia at its time.

Ivan Matušík, born on July 12,1930 in Bratislava, Slovakia; reputed to be one of the most influential architects of Slovakia. Matušík's work is inspired by functionalist modernism and encompasses a period of five decades. He was only 27 when he built the Slimák shopping center in Bratislava, one of the groundbreaking buildings of Slovakian post-war architecture. He was awarded twice the highest architectural prize in Slovakia, the Dušan Jurkovič Prize and the Emil Belluš Prize for his life's work.

How would you describe the beginnings of your career?

The late 1960s, while I was attending the academy, were the liberal years. Until 1972, even contacts with the West were permitted. Changes after 1968 did not transpire overnight. We were convinced that the freedoms of the Dubček era would remain intact. It was hard to believe that one day they would cease to exist.

How was the political climate of that time period?

Together with Czech architects, we founded an underground organization. The situation was more precarious in the Czech Republic; the system had always been tougher there. After all, communism had first taken roots there, before being exported to Slovakia. In the 1930s, communism was seen as progress in light of the avant-garde of Czech Modernism. The intelligentsia was centered to the left and strongly influenced by Russian avant-garde. After WWII, the Communists also won in the Czech Republic, whereas in Slovakia the Democrats were the first who came to power. This reflects the conservative attitude of the Slovaks.

When Stalin passed away in 1953, we sported red flags as pioneers before his grave. Every town erected a monument, people wept; he had

been worshipped like a God. The end of that era wore on for another three to four years under Khrushchev. The 1960s brought more liberalism and improvement each year. Even music and books from Western Europe were available at that time.

While jazz had still been banned in the 1950s; the Communists later reinterpreted it politically as the music of African-Americans who had been exploited by capitalists. Traditional New Orleans style jazz was the first stage of liberalization. Later, the Beatles and pop emerged.

How important were contacts with the West?

At that time, there was an exhibition by Hans Hollein, which influenced me to a great extent. I was widely traveled even back then and I had seen his first shop designs in Vienna as early as 1966. At that point, I realized that we had both a very similar approach. I was well-prepared for post-modernism. Thank God back then it was impossible to block out Austrian TV.

Your colleague, Štefan Svetko, said that despite all difficulties one attempted to continue working on one's ideas of the liberal years.

Svetko was a very important figure. It was dangerous for him back then, because he also voiced his political opinions. Consequently, he was removed from the public view after the Normalization[1]. He simply had too much influence. He continues to build even today – but his buildings are very different from his earlier works. Now, his designs are merely commercial, monumental and not modern at all.

The main problem of his generation was that it was even more difficult for them to maintain contacts to the West than it was for my generation. They started working in the 1950s and continued until the 1990s – almost their entire lives. We, on the other hand, were still working when free market economy began to establish itself. Thus, my generation was still able to implement a number of buildings under improved conditions. That made a huge difference. Many ideas and visions had failed to materialize as a result of inadequate technology and materials. It was for example extremely difficult to procure a certain type of stone cladding. You could only choose between the Bulgarian kind and Czech granite. Furthermore, quantities were strictly regulated by the state budget.

Did officials interfere with architectural design at all?

Not officially, but there were always people in the government who were bent on discussing architecture. Which doesn't mean they were open to architectural experiments – we faced

certain restrictions. When Vojtech Vilhan and I were commissioned to design the government's VIP lounge at the airport, we told the party leader that our design emulated the interior of an airplane. Thus, the design could be compartmentalised as "progress and technology", and he gave his consent.

Best not to mention Hollein as an ideal?

Oh, only two or three people knew him in Slovakia anyway.

Nonetheless, the designs and details suggest a transition from the 1970s' late modernism to post-modernism.

The 1970s were irrelevant for me. The 1960s were a historical era in my eyes, but I did not see the 1970s as a separate architectural period. They only implemented what had been designed years before.

For us post-modernism meant discovering new developments, implications and different perspectives. While modernism had only focused on its own buildings, post-modernism suddenly proclaimed: "It is important how urban districts relate to one other." At least that is what Norbert Schulz thought – at the time, he was a guru for us. For fanciers of post-modernism it was important to know how the urbanscape and single buildings related to one other – and also to history.

We were unofficially banned from post-modernism. We secretly read literature like Robert Venturi's "Learning from Las Vegas". I had received a few copies from Prague, translated them at home, and illustrated them with hand drawings. Those were our architectural underground projects back then.

When working out the details for the lounge, we encountered a very odd situation – the artist, Vladimír Kompánek, who had designed the wall reliefs, was a sculptor specialized in Northern Slovakian folk poetics. He attempted to create a modern abstract form of such traditional tales. But he had been banned from working since 1968. However, no one from the leadership noticed that those reliefs were his, although the forbidden art was right before their eyes in those exclusive government premises!

How strong was the political leadership's desire to represent the state through architecture?

Buildings such as the New Bridge across the Danube or the Slovak National Gallery – those were grand gestures. Vladimír Dedeček, the architect of the National Gallery was a member of the ruling political party. And everyone used to say: That gallery is hideous, it is awfully designed! We associated Dedeček with the

government. He was friends with the deputy mayor and as a result, he could travel abroad freely.

How are those edifices seen today?

Not much better. For example, the future of Ivan Matušík's Kyjev hotel in Bratislava's center is uncertain. There have been talks of demolishing it. Today, only money talks. Building is not synonymous with culture anymore. The Kyjev hotel is not even a listed monument. I am not sure who owns the hotel now; ownership changes hands frequently. It is constantly sold and re-sold and speculation continues.

This is a common problem. In Ružinov, a district of Bratislava, I had designed a shopping center for a residential neighborhood. Now, a Czech architect is building a shopping center with an expansive new passage connecting to our structure that was built in the 1980s; most likely, the existing building will also be redesigned. I am not particularly upset about it. But the older generation, the likes of Matušík and Svetko, believe that architecture should be preserved in its original state. However, that is impossible.

Some buildings, such as Matušík's Slimák shopping center, were largely defaced as a result of redesign efforts.

That is true, the redesign of Slimák was very poorly done. It would have been necessary to collaborate with the original architect, which is however impossible, to retain the original function of those buildings. New tenants enter the scene and you have to collaborate with them. I told Matušík, If you don't participate, someone else will take your place and then you will become history! You won't be happy with the outcome though!

Every architecture has passed through phases of metamorphosis – from ancient times until today. However, the pace of these changes is increasing year after year. It is an exception that the government's VIP lounge has remained in its original state, even after 30 years.

1 The program of "Normalization" – the restoration of continuity with the period before the Prague Spring reforms – was initiated after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The program enforced political repression, censorship and closer ties to Moscow.

Ján Bahna, born on April 8,1944 in Pukanec, Slovakia; studied architecture in the late 1960s in Bratislava and began his career at Ivan Matušík's studio, where, among others, he co-designed the interiors of the Kyjev hotel and designed "as a side project" the VIP lounge of the government at the airport in Bratislava together with Vojtech Vilhan. He worked until the 1980s in a planning collective which was mainly in charge of shopping centers. After the Velvet Revolution he opened his own firm in 1990 and in 1996, he erected the headoffice of the VUB bank, the tallest building in Bratislava at that time. In Bratislava he is a professor at the art academy, vice president of the Chamber of Architects and co-editor of several architectural journals.

How did you end up in architecture?

In a roundabout way. In high school, I had a professor named Ladislav Záborský[1], who taught me how to draw. At first I did not want to study architecture because I was so intrigued by the ideas of Tomislav Kolakovič's[2], a professor at the University in Zagreb, that it sparked my interest in sociology. Kolakovič was neither a capitalist nor a communist. He believed that the working class should control industry and economy, as opposed to being under state control. One could say: capitalism of the working class.

Later, I was even offered a scholarship at Sorbonne. But my relatives – who were strictly communist – disapproved of it, because they knew that I was against communism. Consequently, I had to stay at home and that spelled the end of my studies in sociology. I returned to Záborský and decided to study architecture instead. In my opinion, architecture is closely related to sociology, for it does not only meet technical but also social needs, and in fact those of the entire society.

Which tendencies in architecture were predominant back then?

Our professors, the likes of Karfík and Belluš, were modernist architects. However, during the post-war era we had to design in the style of

Socialist Realism. I didn't want to do that, which is why I opted to complete military service. I would have rather drawn a gun than such absurd buildings. It was interesting though that older architects turned much later to modernism than my generation, because they had been forced to design according to the principles of Socialist Realism.

Another problem was that functioning studios were very few and far in between. We were only at the beginnings.

How strong was the influence of the Soviet Union?

We felt that influences from Russia were alien to us. Our ideas are based on European culture, the legacy of ancient times. I learned Latin and Greek in school for eight years, and I never felt as if we were not part of Europe. The European ideal does not know any physical borders. Even though the borders to the West had been closed off, they could not be shut down in this respect.

Was it possible to obtain any information about modern Western architecture?

Luminaries like Corbusier were well-known, however, many others were not. Western journals were only sent to select university departments. State-run planning collectives did not receive any copies of such literature, as it did not conform to the ideals of Socialist Realism.

The year I started planning the University of Agriculture in Nitra together with my colleague Miňovský, who passed away two years later, I went on a study trip to Italy. It was there that I saw contemporary Western architecture for the first time in my life. Nonetheless, I had designed various projects beforehand that were not in line with Socialist Realism. Magazines from the 1960s or 1970s attest to the fact that even here young architects realized modern architectural projects.

How frequently were you given permission to travel to the West?

We were indeed allowed to travel. Maybe once a year, but not always.

What sights did you visit during your trips, for example, in Italy?

Almost all of them. But I was mainly interested in ancient architecture. Modernism was extremely colorful at that time. Not particularly serious, almost a caricature. But I was literally floored when I saw the Coliseum, early Christian basilicas and public baths for the first time.

Those were magnificent – monumental! I saw such a wealth of natural and pure colors. Something made of brick is always red, whereas objects crafted from travertine or marble have a white appearance. I learned something important there: Hues have to be a result of the materials used, architects are not painters. We design spaces, but colors should only be used to accentuate. My buildings are always outfitted with white cladding. Color is only used in the background to enhance plasticity.

The plasticity you are referring to, the sculptural element – how did it emerge during the design process?

I always considered myself a carpenter. When I was a young boy, I helped to build blockhouses. We have many of those in rural areas. I was fascinated by wood and my designs are, in effect, a continuation of those wooden blockhouses.

Many of your designs, such as the extension of the Slovak National Gallery, are much more than just layering of volumes. Did you perfect the design by employing architectural models?

For the National Gallery, I had envisioned a large, simple design, where only the ground floor was to remain open. When I presented the project, however, I realized that people wanted to have a view of the old building wing from the Danube riverbank. Consequently, I had to raise the entire structure. The model showed that lifting the three-storied structure by seven or eight meters would open up a view of the existing building. But on some days, the new structure would still cast a shadow and obstruct the view. Therefore, I shifted the "wooden blocks" to allow light to enter the courtyard.

That resulted in the bridge construction in its current form?

Only a part of the design was actually implemented. Originally, not only an open-air movie theater and administrative offices were to be added to the bridge, but also a sculpture gallery. The façade of the office building was supposed to face a new large square.

Was it not built due to insufficient funding?

The "Pressburger" – the Bratislava city bourgeoisie – were against it. When you are working here on something, there are always at least five or six others claiming to do a better job. That's how things are here: Two Slovaks have five different opinions.

Many people still consider the National Gallery a thorn in their side. What is your opinion on that?

The "Pressburger" still believe that it is a poorly constructed building. Nonetheless, younger architects see the value of this type of architecture.

The interior is unfortunately in a dilapidated state …

Yes, the owners of the National Gallery have gradually destroyed the air conditioning. At first, they threw out the thermostats and then they replaced the glass roof with an array of roof lights. The glass roof was flawless. Perfectly crafted by a Czech company that had assembled glass roofs all over Europe. Roof lights on the other hand tend to be problematic when it rains or snows, particularly for a roof at that angle. Now they need someone to blame for all of those mistakes – and that's of course me! But no one cares that that is not my project there but one that had been modified by them.

Thus, the extension of the National Gallery was problematic from the very beginning?

My wife did not want me to design that building. She had worked there as a young art historian for ten years before I was commissioned to do the project. She looked at my desk every day and said, "What are you working on? Is that the National Gallery?" And I was embarrassed and responded, "Yes, they want me to do a study …" And she said, "If you do that, I will leave you. That building only brings misery to you and our family!" She must have had a premonition. She was a wonderful woman – an angel. She said, "With that building you will destroy everything you have ever done. The "Pressburger" are very conservative. Every sculptor and painter will come to ask for their individual exhibition space."

Those sculptors and painters were on friendly terms with the Communists. Now they are advocates for democracy, but back then they wanted to build Soviet monuments and that is why they were so firmly ingrained in the system – so "thoroughly red".

Is there a difference between Bratislava and other Slovakian cities regarding the – as you like to say – "Pressburger"?

In other cities, they don't interfere with planning. In Ostrava, I designed a large gymnasium and with help of local engineers and technicians, we were able to produce everything at local factories: A movable auditorium and a changeable floor that could be adapted to play

ice hockey and two hours later tennis. Those things were possible because they could relate to them. But the "Pressburger" don't understand that. A man, for example, who holds a doctorate, once wrote: "The Gallery is a national disgrace!". Later, I learned that he had previously written a cookbook. And I thought: Damn, I use that cookbook! Is it a disgrace when I use his goulash recipes? In his book, he doesn't mention that you need fire to cook with. Sometimes I cook even without ...

Did you encounter similar hostilities among your fellow architects?

At first, we were all friends in the industry, supporting each other. After the 1970s, more and more new studios were founded, which resulted in less work and more competition.

Did work conditions change considerably after the Prague Spring in 1968?

The Communists did not meddle with architecture. I continued to work like before. They fought their fights internally, not with the simple folk. I was not interested in that; I did not give a damn about the Russians. They were not really visible in daily life. But there was a group of people that received their orders from Moscow; they were referred to as "State Security Service" and were extremely dangerous. I, for example, was under their surveillance for ten years; they suspected that I was collaborating with French intelligence, because I traveled once a year to Paris as a "Union Internationale des Architectes" member. A neighbor from across the street would always write down the license plate number, whenever I had visitors – and my phone was bugged.

Was that at your home?

At work. They also hid a bug where I stored my plans. But that did not really bother me. As a result, I had a certain level of immunity, because they thought I was only a small fish in a much bigger pond. I knew that because the man who tracked me became my friend. We were talking and I said, "Listen, you can go to the movies, I will write down the numbers myself today".

That time was extremely bad for colleagues like Štefan Svetko. He was politically active. I wanted to be involved too, but I was not interested in organizing such things.

I never wanted to be active in politics. I am an architect for everyone. For communists and people of any political color – just like a doctor. A doctor has to accept everyone. Architecture is not supposed to be ideological, it revolves only around buildings.

Was it not shocking to see that tanks were rolling into the country?

It was a shock, but only for a brief moment. I left the office every day at two in the morning and had to make my way past the tanks. I used to swear, because it felt like running a slalom course.

One year later, I attended an international architecture congress in Moscow. After the congress, a famous actress invited us to her apartment. There was a puppet theater – I had never heard such good political jokes about communism before. They had also invited the president of the Soviet Union; he was Ukrainian[3]. He observed the scene, smiled and asked me, "Well, Vladimír, tell me, did our army give your people a hard time?" I responded, "Mr. President – to some yes, to others no. For me, it was difficult to get home and go to bed in time."

Others used to throw bricks during the first night. And in front of the university, a female student was killed by machine gun fire. I think the officer aimed at the sky though, otherwise he would have killed at least a hundred people. I was there during the shooting with my son, he was nine years old at the time.

And once I saw bullets fly just above the patio of my studio. I told all my colleagues to get down, but one of the workers who was unloading bottles two kilometers further away at the dairy factory was shot in the kidneys. Such things did happen. But it wasn't as horrible as it was rumored; it was not like a war front. Only a communist chit-chat between communists.

It is hard to imagine for someone who did not experience such …

Two out of ten people were spies. There were two in my studio. One who informed me prior and one who disliked me. That fellow was serious about it. When I built my current home, he wanted to earn some extra money and reported me to the police. He accused me of having stolen stone plates. But I had purchased everything legally and kept all the receipts. I was interrogated by the police four or five times: "You are accused of having stolen floor tiles!" But I was already prepared and carried receipts with me all the time. The third time it happened, they already knew me. It was rather comical than terrible.

Would you agree that the term socialist architecture is a valid category?

There is no such thing, there is only architecture. Socialist Realism never became a part of Slovakian culture. It was only imported from Russia. Stylistic elements were borrowed from

classicism, reminiscent of 19th century architecture.

There is only one type of architecture in Europe that has its roots in ancient European culture, which has been continued into our modern age. This brought forth a general European style. Some things, such as my preference for wood, could be considered as regional influence, but I would not object to calling it even cosmopolitan. Timber construction is also very common in Finland and Sweden.

It may rather be a lack of information. People in the West are maybe inclined to believe there is something like a socialist type architecture, as they are ill-informed.

That is simply stupid! There is no such thing as socialist architecture, only the mistakes that were made were socialist.

Take for example our housing developments. They are still better than most buildings of the same type in Paris. The district of Petržalka in Bratislava has a bad reputation; everyone knows that it is infamous for being a concrete jungle. In comparison, Fontenay-aux-Roses is really a concrete jungle. Even though the buildings are outfitted with glass mosaic claddings, they are nothing more than archetypes without architecture, only millions of windows. Further, the floor plans are inadequate: The apartments are so small that we wouldn't want to live there. The well-heeled French buy palaces or castles on the banks of the Loire river; they don't live in such tiny apartments. I was very surprised, considering that we only had dwellings of that quality right after the war.

Were you inspired by the works of fellow architects?

I had been asked such an important question before and I must answer it as truthfully as I can. But I can't think of any project that was influenced by someone else's work. I did not know, for example, that I would design the National Archives. I was simply told, "Mr. Architect, we need a design in five days." The architect who had originally been commissioned to design the project had planned a several hundred meter long two-storied archives building – people would have needed bicycles or motor bikes to get around. I had no opportunity to draw on inspiration from someone else. I simply designed something and they liked it. Only years later, after the shell of the building had been completed, I received an invitation to travel across Europe and visit other archives.

When we designed the university in Nitra, we did have enough time to develop a sound concept and invested time in researching relevant literature. When we completed the

designs, we realized that the project had no opportunity to expand at its current location, in the city center. As a result, we had the idea of transferring the building to the other riverbank that had not been developed previously. Around the same time, Niemeyer and Costa were standing in the jungle and had a vision: This is where Brazil's capital will be.

The design for Nitra does bear a certain resemblance to Brasilia. Apparently, such ideas surface at certain times ...

I did not see a dome as anything spectacular, they had existed during renaissance, baroque and so forth. Such prototypes or archetypes were my work tools.

In 1959, I visited Italy for the first time and I had already completed my designs for Nitra, including the dome. In Italy, I visited that small stadium by Nervi and Vitellozzi on the Olympic grounds. The dome flows into a wave structure that is braced by Y-shaped supports. I was surprised because I had integrated Y-shaped elements into my design as well. However, for the construction of the roof versus the floor. It may be true that such ideas are somehow transported by brainwaves.

In fact, the decision to transfer the building location was made just a few days prior to my departure. Subsequently, I had to complete and present the designs within five to ten days. As soon as I returned from Italy, I wanted to change everything – I did not want the dome anymore. I opposed it out of fear it could be branded as plagiarism. Subsequently, I made ten or twenty designs – all of them without a dome. In the end, I put up all designs on the wall and called in my colleagues: "Look, this is it! Now it's your call." But they selected the dome. I had to discard all the other designs.

1 Ladislav Záborský: Slovak painter (*1921)

2 Tomislav Kolakovič: Born Stjepan Tomislav Poglajen (1906 – 1992), Croatian Jesuit, an influential personality of Slovakian political and social life in the 1940s and 1950s.

3 President of the Soviet Union: The nominal Head of State, albeit a purely representative function until 1977 when it was merged with the position of CPSU Party Chairman under Leonid Brechnev. The President mentioned here was the Ukrainian Nikolai Viktorovich Podgorny (1903 – 1983)

Vladimír Dedeček, born on May 26, 1929 in Martin, Slovakia; he studied architecture in Bratislava, where he worked later as head architect for the Stavoprojekt planning collective. Between the 1960s and the 1980s he built important late modern projects, such as the University of Agriculture in Nitra and the National Gallery in Bratislava. Distinctive features of his work include an expressive, sculptural character and bold constructional elements. His edifices definitely belong to the most impressive and innovative examples of Slovakian post-war architecture.

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