

Bohuslav Fuchs

Czech avant-garde architect

December 9, 2010 until March 18, 2011

Concept: Adolph Stiller, Jan Sapák

Exhibition venue: Exhibition Centre in the Ringturm
VIENNA INSURANCE GROUP
1010 Vienna, Schottenring 30

Opening hours: Monday to Friday: 9 am to 6 pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays as well as on 24 and 31 December 2010)

Press tour: Tuesday, 7 December 2010, 10.30 am

Speakers: Adolph Stiller, Jan Sapák

Official Opening: Tuesday, 7 December 2010, 6.30 pm (admission by invitation only!)

Enquiries to: Silvia Polan
T: +43 (0)50 350-21064
F: +43 (0)50 350 99-21064
E-Mail: silvia.polan@vig.com

Bohuslav Fuchs – a Czech avant-garde architect

The architect Bohuslav Fuchs (1895-1972) is regarded as a leading light of "Brno functionalism", which is the name given to the architectural period between the world wars. In Brno, this "classical modern" period, also termed modernism in the Czech Republic, stretched into the late 1940s. With designs for numerous buildings and also his work with urban and regional planning, Bohuslav Fuchs was active during this period not only in Brno, the capital of Moravia, but throughout the country. From the late 1930s he also worked increasingly in Slovakia. His strong commitment to architecture, which occasionally even extended into the international arena, as well as his work as a university lecturer, have left a lasting impression on the profession and influenced generations of students. In its new exhibition in the "Architektur im Ringturm" series, the Vienna Insurance Group looks at the work of an extraordinary architectural personality who was active for decades "on Vienna's doorstep".

The Czech Republic in the inter-war period

As a result of its newly found independence, the Republic of Czechoslovakia, which was formed after the First World War, experienced considerable economic growth in the 1920s and 1930s. With its thriving textiles industry, the city of Brno was often termed "the Czech Manchester". The social and economic prosperity, in contrast to the situation in German speaking areas, made it possible to satisfy the increased demand for new buildings for residential, educational, cultural and leisure purposes. By virtue of this fortunate situation, Bohuslav Fuchs was able, even as a young architect, to get involved in the construction industry: out of a total of more than 500 projects he worked on during his career, he saw almost 150 come to fruition as completed buildings - an unusually high number for an architect.

Life and work

Bohuslav Fuchs studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague under the tutelage of Jan Kotěra – a student of Otto Wagner. He also worked in Kotěra's business for two years after graduation before returning to Moravia in 1923 and settling in Brno. Initially, he worked there as an architect in the city building office before establishing his own architectural agency in 1929. With the creation of numerous designs and constructions in a very short space of time, some already while working as the responsible architect at the city office, he also laid the basis for his own, now well known, house. Alongside his work with the construction industry, he also maintained good contacts with the international community in his profession. He attended, for example, the now legendary CIAM congresses (Congrès Internationaux de l'Architecture Moderne) as the Czechoslovakian representative (together with Frantisek Kalivoda) and was in regular contact with Le Corbusier and other leading lights of classical modernism in Europe. In his home country he became a member in 1928 of the Mánes Cultural Group, the organisation for visual artists that still exists today in the Czech Republic, and was also part of the left-wing Devětsil avant-garde group founded by Karel Teige.

By also designing the interiors of many of his buildings and operating a furniture business and a textiles company from time to time, Fuchs was also very involved in the tradition of providing upscale furnishings. In addition to these activities, Bohuslav Fuchs was also involved in planning on a larger scale: he made significant contributions to infrastructure planning in Moravia and its cities with his frequently implemented town planning designs as well as national and regional planning concepts. The reception of his work is made more difficult by a basic lack of workup: only a few publications, with just a selection of his designs and mostly in Czech, look at his work (1930 by Zdeněk Rossmann; 1966 by Zdeněk Kudělka; 1985 by Miloš Chronek; most recently 1986 by Mihály Kubinsky). Activities at an international level include regular mentions or articles in a range of journals and inclusion at "Brno functionalism" exhibitions.

From the 1950s there was plenty of direct contact between the then Viennese avant-garde (Achleitner, Arbeitsgruppe 4 or Hans Puchhammer) and Bohuslav Fuchs in Brno. When the "Czechoslovakian architecture in the 20th century" exhibition was held in 1967 in the Vienna

Sezession, he accepted the invitation from the Austrian Society to open it. In September of the same year, the Viennese made a trip to Brno, where Fuchs gave them a guided tour of the buildings.

Most significant works

Bohuslav Fuchs' most famous buildings and best known works in professional circles include the Avion Hotel in Brno (an unusual spatial construction created in 1927-28 to fill a gap in the old city centre), the Moravian Bank in the centre of Brno (1928-30 with A. Wiesner), a pavilion located on the Brno exhibition grounds (1929) that was constructed for the 10th anniversary of Czechoslovakia exhibition and which is still used today, and his own house in Brno (1928). Significant works can also be found in Slovakia, including a residential building in Bratislava with a clean and big-city design (Hviezdoslavovo námestie, 1935), the well known "Green Frog" thermal spa in Trenčianske Teplice (1937) and the "Morava" rest home (Tatranská Lomnica, 1931), which is a key element of a series of famous and functional sanatorium buildings from the 1930s.

"Hotel Avion" – originally Kostelecký Hotel und Café Brno, Česká 20, 1927-28

The depth of thought put into the design and the generous nature of the space and scale of this café have made it, internationally, one of the most famous works of Fuchs – grand architecture in miniature. As well as conveying an impression of skill and dexterity, this building is testament to a great idea and a good deal of courage.

Small land parcels in the centre of Brno and a spatial programme that became more extensive during the planning gave rise to this extraordinary spatial concept. In order to be able to realise the design visions in the limited space on offer, there was no choice but to build upwards. In order to ensure that this did not have a depressing effect, a clever and sensitive use of the available three dimensional space was required. Fuchs therefore developed a spatial plan. This may have been influenced by Adolf Loos, who often visited his hometown of Brno and knew Fuchs well, or by Heinrich Kulka.

It was thus possible to link multiple restaurant and café premises to form a single unit that allowed one to "breathe out" while at the same time creating a feeling of autonomy. The entire hotel complex has only one set of stairs and thus only one escape route, an exit leading out into the street. The building has 11 floors including the basement.

The Avion Hotel became a hub of intellectual life in Brno. The clientèle was comparable to that of the Hawelka Café in Vienna after the war. Apart from the destroyed entrance, the building was not rebuilt and is largely preserved in its original state.

"Vesna" School of Housekeeping Brno, Lipová 16, 1929-30 (together with Josef Polášek)

The school for female vocations and associated elite boarding school were intended for the training of housekeepers. "Vesna" was a foundation with a national penchant that aimed to establish well-educated housewives for the emerging Czech elite. It was created at the end of the 19th century, and its first premises were in art nouveau style buildings, based on the designs of the architect Pfeiffer, on Jaselská Street, directly opposite the building in which Robert Musil lived. The foundation was established in 1885 and gradually started up a number of primary and secondary schools for girls.

The building for the new "Vesna" foundation was constructed as two separate blocks, the actual school building and the boarding school, on the south-western and formerly vineyard-covered slopes of the so-called Yellow Hill, above the Pisárky district of the city. Fuchs designed the first part as a compact body, as he composed it along the gradient line directly against the incline. This resulted in an attractive contrast between the clarity of the purely geometric body, with its horizontally running, elongated windows, and the natural beauty of the slope. In contrast, the second body followed the contour lines and was at right angles to the first building. The south side consists entirely of a

"honeycombed front" formed by the stereometric arrangement of the balconies belonging to the individual rooms. The two buildings are joined by a narrow connecting wing. The school building was not only equipped with light and spacious classrooms, but also with technically advanced kitchens, laboratories and workshops, material collections etc. The structure involves a reinforced concrete skeleton embedded in the outer skin, which is bound together by a continuous framework system. On the outer walls, the natural white limestone-cement plaster has had colours applied in certain places (balcony ends). The building has not been rebuilt and is in good condition.

Exhibition

The exhibition, which forms part of the "Architektur im Ringturm" series, will feature 40 of Bohuslav Fuchs' most famous works using numerous never previously displayed photos and newly created descriptive texts. Curator Jan Sapák, who probably knows more than anyone about his work, gives an insight into his career and buildings, and describes their significance for modern architecture, in the exhibition and catalogue. And, last but not least, previously unpublished material provides a fresh look at the work of one of the most important Czech architects of the 20th century.

Models include Hotel Avion, his own house, the school in Martin (SK), and the original model of his submission for the World Fair in New York in 1939

Works loaned by:

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Brochure

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