

Prague – City of Passages

28th January to 11th March 2005

Curators: Michaela Brožová, Ivo Hanel

Press tour: Thursday, 27th January 2005, 10.30 am

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Exhibition venue:

Wiener Städtische Allgemeine Versicherung AG

Ringturm Exhibition Centre

A-1010 Wien, Schottenring 30

Phone: [43-1] 531 39-1115 (Brigitta Fischer)

Fax: [43-1] 531 39-3178

Opening hours:

Monday to Friday 9.00 am – 6.00 pm; admission free

Thursday 9.00 am – 7.30 pm

Enquiries:

Birgit Reitbauer

Phone: [43-1] 531 39-1336

Fax: [43-1] 531 39-3134

e-mail: b.reitbauer@staedtische.co.at

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Between 28th January and 11th March 2005, the ARCHITECTURE IN THE RINGTUMR SERIES will be presenting an exhibition focusing on Prague as the ‘City of a Hundred Passages’. Numerous commercial arcades and passages of outstanding architectural quality were created during the course of 20th-century modernisation. This exhibition looks at the most architecturally interesting passages in both the Old and New Towns.

‘One can traverse whole districts in Prague without having to use the public streets for anything other than crossing,’ declares Egon Erwin Kisch in his ‘Monograph on Arcades’.

Nature of a passage. Passages, or arcades, fulfil a simple inner-city connecting function (mostly for pedestrians). They are built on the site of centuries-old passageways that are known to have existed as long ago as the Middle Ages, once forming a dense network that criss-crossed the Old Town.

The Prague pedestrian passage is a passageway through the middle of a city building or block and is designed for private or public use, offering housing, shops, cultural facilities and opportunities for social gatherings. The Czech name for these blocks – characterised by a certain multi-functionality and (usually) multiple stories with a glass roof – is ‘palace’ (palace), used here in the sense of the French word ‘galerie’.

They were built at the beginning of the 20th century in order to ensure that it was not only the fringes of the extensive parcels of development land forming the New Town founded by Karl IV that were publicly used. Many of the passages – above all in the outer districts – were built through apartment houses and combined with the function of a shopping street.

Prague’s passages were closely linked to rapid developments in architecture, trade and culture. The simple shopping street was transformed into a kind of ‘promenade’ and thus became the ‘forecourt’ to the temples of the entertainment culture: cabaret, theatre, concert and cinema.

The modern era. Prague’s transformation into a modern metropolis started in the early years of the 20th century. The creation of Wenceslas Square on the site of the old horse market led to the building of new houses and the first passages in the New Town, such as the **Hotel Ambassador Passage** (1912–14, Richard Klenka z Vlastimilu, František Weyr), which connects with the Sylva-Taroucca Palace via a garden. The building’s ornate façade, featuring a mansard roof and interestingly shaped gables, anticipated elements of Art Deco style. The passage, which boasts a coffered ceiling and mosaic floor, incorporated a cinema, a casino and a cabaret.

The **Koruna Palace Passage** (1914), whose architecture features a pearl-studded crown and mystical statues, was like a kind of secular basilica, housing shops, apartments and places to bide one’s time. Its architect, Antonin Pfeiffer, took his inspiration for the palace and its passage from buildings in Paris, Brussels, Budapest and elsewhere in Prague and created a showpiece of Czech modernism which was also one of the first reinforced concrete buildings in the country to be built in the geometric Art Nouveau style. It included businesses, office space, a café with gallery and even an underground picture palace and swimming pool.

Prague passages were the expression of a new aesthetic in which intellectual sophistication rubbed shoulders with a large dose of naivety. Passages became an integral part of the architectural type known as the urban ‘palace’ and a familiar feature of the Prague cityscape. In the 1920s the famous department store **U Nováků** (1904) was transformed into an outstanding example of a metropolitan palace when it was converted by architect Osvald Polívka, the leading

light of Czech 'Jugendstil' (Art Nouveau) architecture into a building that united commerce, gastronomy and culture.

In their heyday, Prague's passages were glittering centres of imagination and innovation. **Lucerna Palace**, built *in a pseudo-historicist style with Moorish elements* (1907–21, Václav Havel, Stanislav Bechyně) took the form of a temple of culture featuring a cabaret, a cinema that was the venue for Prague's first talking pictures and a concert hall that became just as well known. It was built by Václav Havel, the grandfather of the former president, who wanted it to be a 'people's palace' in the modern sense. One unique feature is Stanislav Bechyně's suspended reinforced concrete ceiling in the main hall.

The linking of the Rokoko, Lucerna and U Nováků passages created the most extensive labyrinth of passages in Prague.

In the 1920s, during the newly founded First Republic, the specifically Czech form of Cubism known as *Rondocubism* was adopted as the national style. *Art Deco* also became widespread. The exterior design of **Adria Palace** (1922–25, Josef Zasche, Pavel Janák) creates an impressive whole out of an imitation Italian *palazzo pubblico* and design features of the national style. Pavel Janák, its creator, was also responsible for the **Mirror Passage** (1929), taking his inspiration from 'Light Miracles of the Present'. The outside of this palais was resplendent with rough-hewn pillars and neoclassical pilasters and the inside with luxury shops. The interior of this breathtaking passage shimmered in gold and white due to the prevalence of soft white Opaxit glass surfaces and brass mirror fittings.

The sober signature of early *Functional Constructivism*, with its characteristic detailed forms, found its expression in **Fénix Palace** and its passage of the same name (1927–29, Friedrich Ehrmann, Josef Gočár).

Functionalism experienced its golden age in the 1930s, giving rise to the widespread use in architecture of glass and reinforced concrete. Early examples are the **Lindt** (1927) and **Bat'a** (1928–30) department stores. Ludvík Kysela's buildings with passages were the most advanced of his day. He used the reinforced concrete skeleton technique in a pioneering way, creating impressive glass façades for the Lindt and Bat'a buildings.

It was normal at this time for historical buildings to be un sentimentally replaced by new structures. The – now closed – Bat'a Passage was built on the site of the Baroque residence known as the 'House of the White Cock', for example, and featured modern amenities such as small drinking water fountains and that rare object in those days – a public telephone.

The pinnacle of Functionalism was reached with **Broadway Passage**, whose shops had chrome-framed windows, mirrored surfaces and rounded corner windows (1936–38, Antonín Černý, Bohumír Kozák), and the '**House of the Black Rose Passage**' (1928–32, Oldřich Tyl) in the Bondy department store – a gem of Prague Constructivism (three floors and halls featuring walkways, Prussian vaults and concrete-framed glass bricks).

Representative of the period early 1930s to 1940s is the **Arts and Crafts Building** (1934–38, Oldřich Starý, František Zelenka). This urban palace embodied many of the ideals of the day: transparency, weightlessness and machine-like beauty. The elegant smooth walls of the passage hall, the lighting effects and special glazing make the interior space seem to merge with the exterior. In Eugen Rosenberg's **Mercury Passage** (1937–38) a traditional aesthetic is combined with technical invention based on a conjunction of cool materials such as marble, chromium steel and glass, awnings and halls with reinforced concrete vaults. A small Renaissance portal serves as a reminder of the original 'walkthrough building' with its medieval core.

After a break of nearly fifty years, brought about by political circumstances, the 1990s saw the return of an unfettered entrepreneurial spirit and a new enthusiasm for architecture. Many passages were renovated – with varying degrees of respect for the past. **Rathpassage** (A.D.N.S., Václav Alda, Petr Dvořák, Martin Němec, Jan Stempel, 1996), for example, is a successful and innovative combination of old and new. Newly built commercial and administrative centres have been based on the architecture of the passage-rich urban ‘palaces’. The new **Hzán Shopping Passage** (Pavel Boček, Jan Kasl, A-projekt, 1996) is also highly impressive, due in particular to a Baroque façade displaying a harmonious blend of historical elements and modern forms.

The many faces of Prague’s passages. Ever since the earliest days, the existence of passages stimulated aesthetic thinking and favoured the development of new cultural forms. The new art of film needed picture houses and passages seemed tailor-made for them. One of Prague’s earliest cinemas (1909) was located in **Palais Lucerna**, for example. And the city’s other passages also had more than just aesthetic appeal – containing cafés, cabarets and theatres. **Adria Passage** housed a cinema, the famous Laterna Magica theatre and the film-makers’ club that became a legend.

By 1938 40 passages had been built in Prague. Over time, however, the demographic profile of the visitors changed: hedonistic pleasure-seekers were replaced during the economic recession by a more businesslike approach. An example of this change is provided by **Koruna Passage**, one of the best-known addresses in the city. This Baroque building that had housed a café frequented by Czech intellectuals during the time of national emancipation gave way to an Art Nouveau urban palace with a passage and a new café that was converted into a self-service restaurant, a forerunner of the fast-food joint, during the recession. This apotheosis of machine-inspired functionalism made its architect L. Machoň so famous that he received a commission to build something similar in London. This glittering technological wonder, today no more than a literary legend, lost its allure over the years and eventually fell victim to the Prague underground.

The exhibition: The exhibition ‘Prague – City of Passages’ shows the location of the passages on maps. Each passage is described in detail with a selection of photographs and texts. A large model provides an overview of the major urban arteries.

Catalogue (in Czech and German): Prager Passagen. Begleiter für Flaneure, Passanten und/oder Touristen; Michaela Brožová, Ivo Hanel; EURO ART, Prague 2000; 88 pages with numerous illustrations; price: 12 Euros.

Press releases and photographs relating to the ARCHITECTURE IN THE RINGTURM series of exhibitions can be found at <http://www.wienerstaedtische.at> in the “Arts & Culture” section.