

Unitas and Nová doba. Experiments in Housing in 1930s Bratislava

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L'architecture engagée

The role of the architect in society is one of the frequent topics of current architectural discussion. The desire to use architecture to improve or change the social situation is often mentioned. The underlying enthusiasm seems to suggest that this is an exceptional historical situation. However, when we look back at history, we find parallels with such behaviour among utopian socialists, the architectural avant-garde and the radical architectural collectives of the 1960s. Architectural strategies changed in relation to the times and ongoing crises. Nevertheless, they were always united by an effort to promote the common good for large sections of the population.

In 2012, Winfried Nerdinger curated an exhibition called 'L'architecture engagée – Manifestos for Social Change' at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich. This was the first time that the term had been used in relation to architecture, having previously been reserved for literature and fine arts. He emphasised that, in architecture's case, which is always focused on a certain change in the existing material structure, it only becomes engaged when it strives for 'structural change and the establishment of a new social order'.

The exhibition clearly demonstrated that architects repeatedly return to the theme of housing, considering it to be a key tool for changing social conditions.

The social and legislative framework for housing construction in Czechoslovakia

In interwar Czechoslovakia, several legislative measures were introduced to address the housing shortage. However, Act No. 45/1930 on construction, adopted by the government in April 1930, proved to be of decisive importance. This legislation set out the conditions for state guarantees on mortgage loans, tax exemptions for small and minimum-sized flats, and various fee reductions. For the first time, it also defined individual flat categories, including small and minimum-sized flats. Municipalities and cooperatives were given preferential treatment in the support system over individuals, with a higher percentage of loan coverage — up to 50% of the costs — guaranteed by the state. This legislative amendment was one of the key instruments for initiating social housing in interwar Czechoslovakia.

This resulted in the mobilisation of state and municipal administrations in relation to housing policy, the establishment of housing cooperatives and the announcement of numerous architectural competitions for apartment buildings containing small apartments. Subsequently, there was an overall strengthening of housing construction, particularly in the largest cities of the former Czechoslovakia: Prague, Brno and Bratislava.

In Bratislava, construction of small and minimum-sized apartments was relatively successful from the outset. The proximity of Vienna, where a successful social housing project had been implemented; the relatively strong influence of social democracy on the city council; and the rapid development of cooperatives in Slovakia at the time undoubtedly played a role in the openness of the local environment to this trend. However, the city regulatory commission and its progressive architect members were mainly responsible for promoting new forms of development and modern construction. The city's chief architect also played a significant role in its openness to modern architecture. In Bratislava, the views of the architectural avant-garde on modern housing were reflected in residential complexes with small apartments, such as Unitas and Nová doba.

Unitas

Unitas, a construction cooperative established for the development of small apartments, was founded in April 1930 by František Vaverka, who was secretary of the Bratislava Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Committee members included several prominent figures, such as František Vodička, a representative of the Slovak Agricultural Council, and Eugen Singer, a socialist and founding member of the Communist Party. From the outset, the construction project was guided by an 'enlightened, ethically motivated attitude' and the belief that it could influence society as a whole and educate individuals. This is how Vaverka, the chairman of the cooperative, later described its beginnings. To carry out the 'Great Work of Unitas', he chose architect Friedrich Weinwurm, who was renowned at the time not only for his experience, but also for his commitment to the avant-garde.

Architects Weinwurm and Vécsei designed the Unitas development as a series of rows. By doing so, they fulfilled the contemporary ideal of breaking up the traditional city block, while also creating shared semi-public spaces, which were considered essential for collective housing. A key feature of the residential complex was the decision to incorporate a gallery-type apartment building, which supported the idea of collective living. Using only one type of building throughout the complex was consistent with the application of standardisation

principles. This principle was also reflected in the design of the standardised furnishings with which all apartments were to be equipped. Standardisation was also linked to the unification of building elements. The architects incorporated several new products and technologies into the structural design of the apartment buildings. Of particular note are the load-bearing structure made of a steel-concrete skeleton and the grouped chimney stacks, which were patented shortly before construction began and allowed for an open and flexible floor plan design. The urban concept of hundreds of minimum-size apartments concentrated in identical buildings with galleries, shared laundry facilities, shops offering basic goods and even a library with a public reading room indicates that the complex was planned as a community housing project. The broader social dimension of Unitas is also evident in the cooperative's activities. Shortly after completing the buildings, it established a credit and food cooperative for the residents of the housing complex. The spirit of socialist solidarity also permeates the publication issued by the cooperative shortly after completion of the complex. Therefore, it is not surprising that Karel Teige, the main spokesman of the Prague architectural avant-garde, referred to Unitas as 'collectivised housing' in his publication *The minimum dwelling*.

Nová doba

Encouraged by the success of Unitas, local socialists and architects Weinwurm and Vécsei undertook another bold venture: the construction of an even larger and more complex residential complex. In 1932, several officials of the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party established a construction cooperative for private employees and workers, aptly named *Nová doba* (New Age). The original plan included the construction of 162 small apartments, as well as commercial, storage and workshop facilities on the ground floor. The architects designed the buildings as two parallel rows perpendicular to the main street. However, at the initiative of the building authority, an additional pair of houses were eventually added to the street side to create a continuous street frontage. At *Nová Doba*, the architects sought to apply innovative ideas in urban planning, floor plans and structural design, and to use these to support the concept of a new social organisation. To meet the client's requirement for a range of apartments, from studios to one- and two-room options, the buildings were designed as staircase sections, with four apartments per floor. This allowed for the direct lighting and ventilation of all rooms while maintaining a certain level of intimacy in each apartment. However, the biggest innovation was the steel supporting structure, which was used for the first time in a residential building in these conditions. This prefabricated steel skeleton was

intended not only to speed up construction, but also to reduce costs by standardising the building elements.

The remarkable architectural concept and the organisation and financing of the construction attracted attention even in the broader context of state housing policy. Representatives of the relevant ministries held Nová doba up as a model for the 'large Prague cooperatives' and even sent an 'official commission' from the capital to study the local situation and obtain a 'model for the construction of similar residential buildings in Prague'.

Unitas a Nová doba and their legacy

Even after nationalisation in 1948, the Unitas and Nová Doba housing estates remained under the control of building cooperatives. The original residents, or rather their children, continued to live there. In 1985, both complexes were designated national cultural monuments.

However, the biggest change came in the mid-1990s, when the housing stock was privatised. At that time, the tenants of the apartments became their owners. Today, they are organised into an owners' association, which provides the legislative framework for jointly operating an apartment building. Even this radical change failed to destroy the original concept of both complexes, however. They still function much as they did before: small apartments have been preserved, as have communal areas and semi-public spaces. Local communities are still proud of the history of their homes.

Historical examples show us that, for engaged architecture to move from a theoretical manifesto to realised works, support from state policy, local government and local social elites is one of the key prerequisites. This particularly concerns reaching a social agreement on the need to solve the housing crisis. The next step is to create an appropriate legislative framework and support alternative ways of financing and organising construction, as well as applying innovative construction methods and technologies. At a local level, a flexible, open-minded and ambitious local government is needed, as well as cooperation between architects, politicians and urban elites. Above all, the unifying goal should be to ensure the common good.