

## The Czechoslovak Embassy in London

Designed by Jan Bočan,  
winner of an RIBA award in 1971

*In the autumn 2013 the Czech Embassy held an exhibition of the late Jan Bočan's work. Peter Jamieson talks to his collaborator, architect Zdeněk Rothbauer, and looks at the Brutalist building, now housing two separate embassies*

### Was there any attempt during the Cold War to control the influence of Western architecture?

“We started practising architecture in the 60s. Jan Bočan graduated in 1961, I in 1965. I remember going to the philosophy lectures of Dr Selucký that were quite daring at the time, a harbinger of the Prague Spring. We had access to various foreign architectural journals and were being introduced to the world-renowned architects and their work. The so called socialist realism was already dead. Loosening of the political situation influenced everything around us. In architecture the rule was for the public buildings to represent the high level of the socialist society and to be equal to the buildings of the western neighbours. Everything that was being built abroad had to be a good advertisement for this society. In my opinion this trend started with the World Exhibition in Brussels in 1958 where three Czech architects, F. Čubr, V. Hrubý and J. Pokorný received an award for the Czechoslovak Pavilion. It is wrong to imagine that we were living in a professional isolation. We studied under some professors who had been important representatives of the pre-war Functionalism such as Prof. Čermák, who designed excellent sanatoria and hospitals, or Prof. Šturza (brother of the sculptor Jan Šturza), the architect who designed the remarkable blocks of flats in Prague-Břevnov in the 1930s. As students we naturally admired the world giants of architecture – Le Corbusier, James Stirling, Paul Rudolph, Kenzo Tenge and many others. However, all the architectural plans and projects were being produced by architectural institutes where the architect was a mere employee. A member of the Communist Party always stood in the leading position, from the director down to the heads of project studios. Thus the Party ensured that it was always in charge of what was being designed and how the project would progress in its realisation. Around 1967 the political situation had changed so much that a few leading architects decided to establish a co-operative based on a group of individual architectural ateliers. Each year one of the ateliers was voted as the head of the group and an administrative director was appointed. This was more or less on the lines of the capitalist practice. The atelier of Jan Šrámek became a

part of the co-operative in 1967 with Jan Bočan and I already working there. In 1971 the communists of the ‘normalisation’ (after the 1968 Russian invasion) period changed the atelier back into a project institute. Design of the Czechoslovak Embassy in London was a commission given to the export atelier of the national enterprise *Konstruktiva* in 1966. This atelier was working on the projects for the friendly countries like Sudan, Mali and others, designing mostly factories, including roads and infrastructure that *Konstruktiva* then built. The head of the atelier was the architect Jan Šrámek, a member of the Communist Party. He could not have been in charge without his membership and his communist sympathies didn’t go any further than his post. His opinions and demeanour were those of an aristocrat. I started working in this atelier at the point when Jan Bočan, later my good friend, had just finished his design for the Embassy. Šrámek got us working together to save supervision time, thus starting our many years’ co-operation. I helped design the interior of the Embassy in London. We were designing objects that could not be bought anywhere because there was no mass production of furnishings for civic buildings and we could not use foreign currency to purchase anything abroad - a bonus to us and our professional pride because we had to come up with a design that would be in harmony with the building”.

### Was there a national interpretation of Western influences?

“Each creative person is influenced by his or her national and historic subconscious. There are many factors that influence creative thinking including the mentality of the author. You can adopt a rational or a romantic approach to your work. We were both rather romantic which is reflected on the outside of the representational building, now the Slovak Embassy. Equally, the finish of the concrete façade is vaguely reminiscent of the Secession period while the façade in Bayswater Road is clearly influenced by Le Corbusier.”

### What was it like working on a building in London at this time?

“This was an experience you couldn’t pay for! At the time when a Czech citizen couldn’t travel to the West without a special permit, we could work and live for months on end in a totally different society. Our friends back home suspected us to be either secret agents or members of the Communist Party, and nobody wanted to believe this was not the case. Of course, the pressure was put upon us but this was no different from anybody else who was permitted to travel abroad. We had a Švejk-like method of defence claiming that we were far too chatty to be able to keep any secrets. We knew the Embassy we were designing



**The Former Embassy of Czechoslovakia**  
*viewed from Notting Hill Gate, on a main artery westward out of Central London*

was to be administered by Communist officials, but it was a building that represented Czechoslovakia and we were proud to be Czechs, keen to make sure our citizens were represented by good architecture. Anyway, we all had a healthy professional pride.”

**What was the working relationship with RMJM (Robert Matthew Johnson Marshall) like?**

“I had a very good relationship with the site manager, Mr. Baffery, who possessed a wonderful English sense of humour. The quality of the work was of a higher standard than back home and what surprised me most was the fact that it was the architect who was in charge. Measuring in inches was another surprise and I can do the conversion into centimetres even today. Architectural drawings were different too. I did not work directly with Robert Matthew: Jan Bočan and Jan Šrámek were in direct communication with him, but I think the co-operation went well. It was the usual method – we provided the conceptual documents, while our British counterpart worked out the realisation plans and drawings. The same system is being used today.”

**Did you encounter any particular problems due to the unusual circumstances?**

“With the exception of our inadequate knowledge of the English language, I cannot remember any major problems. Jan’s English was a little bit better than mine but not good enough. Knowledge of foreign languages in my generation depended on the political situation. For example, when my brother started learning

English, my mother was called by the headmistress to come to school only to be told that unless he stopped learning an imperialist language, he would be expelled. These were the 50s.”

‘Brutalism’ - that most unfortunate appellation for a style or ‘theory of architecture’, as its authors would no doubt prefer, has dogged a generation of buildings designed in the latter half of the twentieth century. The title is derived from *béton brut* or ‘raw concrete’, an expression coined by the French architect Le Corbusier and transformed by Peter and Alison Smithson, influential architectural thinkers, in 1953 into the term that we now use to deride uncongenial, badly maintained buildings.

We tend to associate the term ‘Brutalism’ with concrete in its various forms but it was intended to describe a general approach to the design of buildings such that the ‘form should be entirely proper to the functions and materials of the building in their entirety.’<sup>1</sup>

The Czechoslovak Embassy as it was then, was conceived in the late 1960s under the influence of ‘Brutalism’ within the atelier system, which then prevailed in the communist state where the state-run design offices were administered by party officials. In this case the architect of the embassy, Jan Bočan, and his colleagues were fortunate to have Jan Šrámek as director, who to a large extent gave the design team the freedom it needed. This resulted in a design remarkable for its sophistication both in conception and execution

and belies the notion that the satellite states were a beleaguered backwater cut off from Western influences. The process described by Zdeněk Rothbauer, who worked with Jan Bočan, gives a fascinating insight into this world about which we in the West knew very little.

As Jan Bočan said ‘we tried to create a masterpiece that<sup>2</sup> would represent the ... nation, not the group in power’ and as such its relevance has not been compromised by the upheavals that have followed the collapse of communism, though the break-up of the Czechoslovak state has put considerable strains upon its functional success.

As to ‘Brutalism’, the building’s integrity and single minded execution, with the help of the well-known British practice of Robert Matthew Johnson Marshall, shows through the rhetoric and whatever your ‘taste’, this is a singular building. The RIBA recognised this at the time of its completion for it received the London Region Award in 1971. The citation described it as ‘utterly consistent’, ‘a refined example of its kind, skillfully detailed both technically and aesthetically’, and that both ‘internally and externally it speaks one language’.

The work of Jan Bočan was celebrated at the Czech and Slovak Embassies in an exhibition of his work in September 2013 and for the very first time the Embassy was open to public view during the Open House weekend when over twelve hundred visitors took advantage of this unique opportunity.

**Peter Jamieson**

(1) ‘The New Brutalism’ by Reyner Banham, *Architectural Review*, December 1955

(2) ‘Jan Bočan Člověk a prostor’ 2012, p.24  
*Interview translated by Jana Sommerlad*

### **The Embassy of the Slovak Republic**

*with entrance to the building in Kensington Palace Gardens*

