

The Trade Fair Palace, Prague 1924-28

*New Perspectives on Architecture
in the First Republic*

by Ivan Margolius

The Trade Fair Palace (Veletřní palác) is one of the most significant Modern architecture buildings constructed in Prague in the interwar period and one of the best known and most influential Czechoslovak Functionalist designs – ‘this cathedral of Modernism,’ as Prof. Derek Sayer described it in 2002. On visiting the Palace in October 1928 the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier commented: ‘It is a very significant building... I congratulate Prague and its architecture on being able to realise such a grandiose work. Seeing the Trade Fair Palace, I understood how to create large buildings, having so far built only several relatively small houses on modest budgets’.

In the early years of the twentieth century modern economies started establishing regular trade fairs to display their countries' expertise and manufacturing scope in order to expand the customer base worldwide. Following the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 trade fairs became an even more important business factor. Already in 1908 an entrepreneur Václav Boháč (1874-1935) called on Prague city councillors to come up with a suitable venue for a trade fair (Pražské vzorkové veletrhy) to be held twice a year in the capital, however it was only in September 1919 that he was able to set up a Trade Fair Committee. A year later the Trade Fair Cooperative was incorporated as a company and was allocated an exhibition site with temporary buildings on the south side of the Strojnická railway bridge in Holešovice, where several fairs had taken place. The site was not large enough though and Boháč acquired a nearby closed-down Melichar and Umrath factory on Bělský Avenue (established in 1870, Umrath manufactured agricultural machinery and stopped production in 1924). Initially Boháč's intention was to erect two blocks of exhibition halls (A+B) as well as administration offices and employees' apartments (C), and a hotel (D).

At the beginning of 1924 the Trade Fair Building Cooperative announced a limited architectural competition for the whole site. The competition closed on 1st September resulting in a selection of six architects' initial projects to be assessed - among

them projects by Alois Dryák, František Roith, Miloš Vaněček, Josef Fuchs (1894-1979) and Oldřich Tyl (1884-1939).

Tyl's submission won approval by incorporating an underground tunnel with the nearby Bubny railway station for the transportation of goods and exhibits directly into the buildings' basements. Using logical, clear, functional planning of the floor levels, he designed simple circulation, product display arcades, Modernist façades and the use of a reinforced concrete structure employing a square modular unit. His whole building composition was strictly symmetrical. In contrast, Dryák's scheme was rather romantic, in Art Deco style and incorporating an advertising tower as well as a similar transportation tunnel for connection.

Fuchs' design showed a more acceptable asymmetrical disposition to differentiate between the exhibition and administration areas but his planning was very complicated and the overall design was in an outdated classicist monumental tradition. The jury awarded Tyl the first prize, Dryák came second and Fuchs third. To proceed further the Cooperative management invited Dryák, and the Fuchs-Tyl team to submit final designs.

At the end of 1924 the second-round schemes were received. Dryák omitted all decorative features, with the administration accommodation clearly defined separately from the exhibition areas. Fuchs and Tyl adopted a purer asymmetrical option of Fuchs' original design, and reinforced the layout with large and small exhibition atrium-like halls, with the administrative area to one side of the main block. The Trade Fair management then commissioned Fuchs and Tyl to prepare designs for one building (A) on Bělský Avenue, which was to become a prototype for the rest of the planned development.

The second round of competition design had been reworked several times before the final scheme emerged. Ribbon windows enveloped the main exhibition section around the large hall with a transversal administration part on the north side. The latter had a façade with punctured square window openings and an internal small atrium with gallery walkways overlooking the top-lit space. Fuchs contributed the asymmetrical composition and the galleried hall while Tyl insisted on the purer Functionalist design principles, both sharing equally in the final design. The architects were possibly

influenced by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's design for an office building from 1922-23 and Mart Stam's and Werner von Walhausen's residential project in Berlin-Königsberg from 1923.

The site clearance and excavation started in March 1925 and a year later work began on the reinforced concrete frame by the Prague-based Karel Skorkovský Company. The building fit-out continued, being completed in 1928 with the total construction cost coming to 81 million Crowns.

The accommodation within the 140 metre-long and 65 to 75 metre-wide, 37 metre-high block, with two basement levels, and eight levels above ground, consisted of loading bays and storage areas, exhibition areas, offices, a roof-top café and restaurant, a 600-seat cinema, post office and telephone exchange. The heating of the building was provided remotely from the Holešovice power station, the first such arrangement in Prague. The Palace was large enough for 10,000 visitors and 4,000 exhibitors located over 24,000 square metres of exhibition space.

The building was opened on 21st September 1928 and was celebrated with Alphonse Mucha's *Slav Epic* (1911-28) displayed in the great hall atrium. (The *Slav Epic* returned to the Trade Fair Palace again between 2012 and 2016.) Le Corbusier admired the building but disliked the north elevation square windows when observing the completed Palace, although he, like many other Modernist architects, had fallen under its inspiration and used the same motif later in his

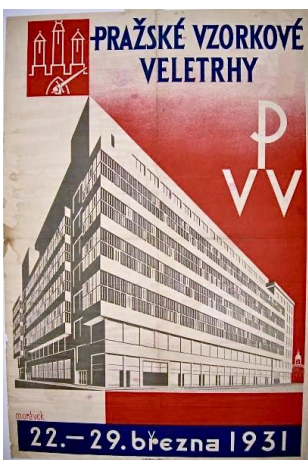
Pavillon Suisse in Paris in 1930.

A sad chapter in the history of the Palace took place during the Protectorate from the autumn of 1941 when the Palace and the surrounding grounds were used to gather Prague Jews for transport to the Łódź Ghetto and Theresienstadt (Terezín). The Jews were marched from there to Bubny railway station to be transported in packed trains, among them both sets of my grandparents with my parents.

The last trade fair was held in the Palace in 1951 after which four government foreign trade companies used it as office space. During the evening of 14th August 1974 the building suffered a fierce fire that gutted the entire block. In 1976 the Palace was listed as a national cultural monument and it took twenty years of intensive work for the restoration to be completed and the building to be opened as the National Gallery in December 1995. It houses the collection of modern art.

The Dutch architect Theo van Doesburg on seeing Tyl's competition design in 1926 noted: 'Tyl designed one of the most important manifestations of the young Czech architecture.' Similarly Karel Teige wrote about the Palace in 1930 celebrating its functionality: 'This is a remarkable work of modern architecture, a skeletal building that organically integrates light, functional spaces and great halls; its form is derived from the essence of its purpose, not from artistic speculation!'

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A poster for the 1931 Spring Fair



Above, perspective drawing showing the massing of the intended overall A, B, C (a twin block) and D blocks scheme, 1925. Right, the main and cinema entrance and the north administration part in 1928

