

Czech Architecture Greats

Bedřich Rozehnal (1902–1984)

Architect of Moravian Hospitals

Vladimír Šlapeta

Bedřich Rozehnal was the first graduate of the School of Architecture at the Czech Technical University in Brno, founded in 1919, to become a professor at his *alma mater* immediately after the end of World War II. In this sense he achieved a symbolic position and with his extensive work embodied the architectural culture of the city of Brno and Moravia from the 1930s-1960s.

The beginnings of his career were relatively slow. He came from very modest circumstances in a Moravian village and had to support himself during his studies. He therefore postponed his dream of studying painting at the Prague Academy and after getting his baccalaureate he began studying drawing at the Brno Technical University while helping out in architectural offices. This work interested him so much that he transferred to architecture as a full-time student. The professors who most influenced him were first Emil Králík with his masterful drawing and elegance, and later Jiří Kroha by his sociological analyses. Under Kroha he defended and gained his diploma with a project for a community house as late as 1931.

In the meantime, he had already worked in the studio of another professor, Vladimír Fischer, on the project for the Church of St Augustine and also on the design of the Trauma Hospital in Brno, his first contact with the theme of hospital buildings. By then he had already built independently a number of his first family houses, culminating in the Pazdera commercial and residential building in the Brno suburb of Tuřany. In them he subscribed to the aesthetic ideals of Le Corbusier, which he continued to follow. When his competition designs for the Town Hall and the University City with clinics in Brno won an award in 1932, and when in 1933 he participated in the installation of building materials and the exhibition of Jiří Kroha's *Sociological Fragment of Housing* at the large Exhibition of Construction and Housing in Brno, he quickly grew into a respected figure of the second generation of Brno's *avant-garde*.

At that time, he began working on the design of the first hospital for radiation treatment of tumours on Žlutý kopec in Brno. He visited important hospitals

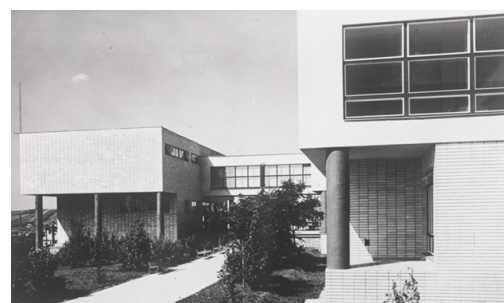


in Switzerland and especially in Paris, where he consulted on this problem with Professor Marie Curie-Sklodowska at the Sorbonne. With the help of his friend, architect Bedřich Feuerstein, he also visited Le Corbusier's buildings. Thus armed, he completed his first hospital building in 1935, which earned him the recognition of medical circles, the public and political circles of the Moravian-Silesian land. The latter then began to assign him tasks in the field of healthcare, which at that time played a significant role in the government's social programme. It was a great challenge for Bedřich Rozehnal, and therefore in the following years he completely focused on the field of healthcare buildings and in his grand-scale designs uniquely transformed the principles of Le Corbusier's architecture to this particular field.

The beginning of this series is represented by the hospital in Nové Město na Moravě, 1936-39. A pavilion composition is sensitively inserted into the landscape relief on the slope above the city. This was followed by the originally and almost sculpturally designed service buildings of the

The Pazdera building in Tuřany, Brno





The surgical pavilion of the hospital in Kyjov

hospitals in Uherské Hradiště, Třebíč and Vsetín and finally the concepts of large hospital complexes in Kroměříž. Kyjov and Dačice, the first two of which began to be built at the turn of the 1930s/1940s at the outbreak of WWII. At the same time, having won a competition, Bedřich Rozehnal also built a group of social housing blocks with very small apartments along Renneská Street in Brno.

Although the war greatly limited and eventually completely stopped construction activities, interest in building a hospital network was maintained even during the German occupation administration, and thanks to this coincidence, Rozehnal was still able to complete, in particular, the large surgical pavilion of the hospital in Kyjov, which then served as a military hospital for SS units from 1943 to May 1945, *see back cover*. During the war, he also managed to complete a long horizontal service block and boiler room of the psychiatric hospital in Jihlava, while the surgical pavilion of the hospital in Kroměříž was also under construction.

During the war, however, he continued to elaborate solutions to functional layouts in the medical field, for example, maternity and neonatal wards, and was able to develop grand-scale concepts of masterplans for hospitals in Olomouc, Přerov and Třebíč. In addition, he worked on the design of outdoor schools in recreational areas of the Moravian region using natural materials, inspired by the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

He was therefore very well prepared for the post-war era theoretically, and moreover, because he managed to build almost continuously during the war, he was also practically prepared. On 22nd May 1945 he was entrusted with planning the

construction of a hospital network and a clinical hospital in Brno, and was soon appointed, together with Bohuslav Fuchs, a professor at the School of Architecture, where he immediately became a leading figure, both thanks to his youth and charisma, and the example of his buildings.

While the hospitals in Kyjov and Kroměříž were rapidly being built, (both were featured in London's *Architectural Design*), and other hospitals in Dačice and Hodonín were also in progress, Rozehnal, surrounded by his students, focused primarily on solving the problem of the university hospital in Brno. His projects started featuring the motif of the 'open arms' of the hospital's bed area, which was connected to the operating block and the entrance area designed in an elegantly structured composition with views of the landscaped surroundings. He first applied this in the children's clinical hospital in Černá Pole, Brno. During the design process, he visited the Finsbury Health Centre in London by Berthold Lubetkin and the Tecton Group for inspiration, and also Alvar Aalto in his house in Munkkiniemi, Helsinki. His efforts resulted in the construction of a children's hospital which reached world-class standards in terms of its architecture and equipment, even though it was in the process of completion during the Stalinist repressions. Le Corbusier did not hesitate to send a congratulatory letter to Brno.

However, times changed rapidly after the communist coup of 1948. Further proposals for grand-scale clinical university towns in Bohunice in Brno, and La Franconi in Bratislava were stopped due to their 'cosmopolitan' nature, and Rozehnal was subjected to harsh criticism from communist ideologues claiming that his architecture did not correspond to the interests of the working people.

On the other hand, he was for a long time the most popular teacher at the School. The politically-led campaign finally culminated in 1958 in his shameful expulsion from the School and an unjust prison sentence. He spent two and a half years in the so-called *Basoprojekt* at Pankrác Prison in Prague (see Newsletter 23 pp.3-6*). Paradoxically, while in prison he designed a hotel for the government and party leadership at the Orlík Lake and built an atomic energy research institute in Prague-Běchovice. Shortly after Rozehnal's prison sentence began, his children's hospital was the only Czechoslovak building included in Alexander Dorgelo's representative publication *European Architecture*, published by Elsevier in Amsterdam.

After returning from prison in the summer of 1962, Rozehnal found asylum in the university hospital – thanks to the sympathy of doctors – and designed new alternatives to the vision of the Brno university town of Bohunice and other buildings for science and research. They were of an excellent standard, but had no hope of being realized. During the Prague Spring of 1968 he became one of the central figures of the reform movement, chairing a conference of architects in Brno in May 1968, and an exhibition of his work staged in

Prague was also presented in Liverpool, thanks to Ernest Wiesner, a Czech *émigré* architect. He was rehabilitated and was allowed to teach again at the School of Architecture. The Soviet occupation and normalization of the early seventies meant that he was removed from the School again in 1972 and again found asylum in the medical environment. Employed in the administration of hospital buildings, he was 'hidden away' to work until the end of his life on conceptual projects for hospital buildings and their reconstruction.

In this way, the communist regime brutally limited the life-long mission of the great architect and professor-teacher, who could no longer build anything after 1950. He spent the last years of his life in the diaspora, visited only by a narrow circle of his students and friends, his great talent suppressed and unused. After the Velvet Revolution, he was rehabilitated for the second time, this time *in memoriam*. His work was published in the London magazine, *The Architect's Journal*, and the Swiss magazine *Archithese*, and finally two monographs were published in Brno.

Prof. Vladimír Šlapeta studied architecture in Prague. From 1973-1991 he was director of the architectural department of the National Museum of Technology in Prague and following the Velvet Revolution 1989 he became Dean of the Faculty of Architecture in Prague and later in Brno. He is a member of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and the author of *Czech Functionalism 1918-1938* / AA London 1987. In 2023 he was awarded the ULA Jean Tschumi Prize in Copenhagen

The Children's Hospital in Černá Pole, Brno, which enjoyed views of the landscaped surroundings



*The Slave Labour of Architects and Technicians in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s by Šárka Koukalová

**The staircase of the surgical building of Kyjov Hospital,
designed by Bedřich Rozehnal**

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