

The Work of Emil Králíček

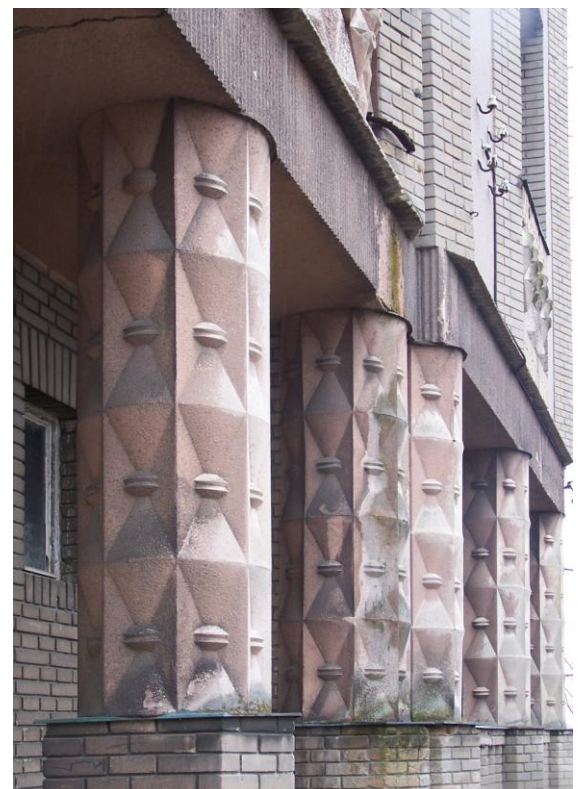
see page 11

*Clockwise from top left.
The first two images are of statuary
and the main entrance of the
Diamant House on the corner of
Lazarská and Spálená Streets
in Prague 1.*

*The Cubist lamppost stands in a
quiet corner off Jungmann Square,
not far from the foot of Wenceslas
Square.*

Villa Benies:

- balcony*
- detail of columns*
- the east elevation*
- a crystalline column in the interior*



Forgotten Cubist Gem in Bohemia

Villa Benies in Lysá nad Labem,
designed by Emil Králíček

Eva Hrončková

Cubism in Czech Architecture

Before the First World War, Prague was an important centre of the newly born *avant-garde* movement that affected art across all disciplines. In the search for a new style which would reflect the spirit of the era better than decorative Art Nouveau, artists in the Kingdom of Bohemia experimented with Futurism, but Cubism was found to be more suitable for expressing the ideas of the young generation.

The extent to which Cubism affected architecture and design in today's Czech Republic is unique in the world context. For Cubist architecture, the period between 1911-1914 was especially fruitful until this creative boom was interrupted by the outbreak of the Great War. Despite this short period of time and the small number of realised designs (there are about ten Cubist buildings in the whole country), this unique style continued to influence Czech architecture after the War and throughout the 1920s.

Emil Králíček (1877-1930)

The most prominent representatives of Czech Cubist architecture are architects Pavel Janák, Josef Gočár and Josef Chochol, whose buildings in Prague such as The House of the Black Madonna in the Old Town and the Cubist villa houses near Vyšehrad are regular features of city tourist guides.

However, the authorship of one of the most iconic Cubist buildings in Prague, dům (house) Diamant, had been assigned for a long time simply to 'the construction company of Matěj Blecha'. In fact, the person behind its design was the architect Emil Králíček. Králíček trained in Darmstadt in the studio of Joseph Maria Olbrich, who was one of the founders of the Vienna Secession. After his return to Prague, Králíček was employed by Matěj Blecha's construction company, where he worked as the lead architect between 1907 and 1913.

One of the most famous examples of Cubist architecture, a street lamp in the Jungmann Square in Prague, which became a symbol of the whole movement, is also the work of Králíček. Tucked away from the crowds of Wenceslas Square in a side alley, the street lamp was saved from demolition and

was restored following appeals from Králíček's successor, another famous Czech architect - Jan Kaplický.

Villa Benies

Villa Benies, designed by Emil Králíček and built by Matěj Blecha's company in 1912, is situated in Lysá nad Labem, a town of 9,000 inhabitants, about 30km north-east of Prague. The villa stands on the grounds of a former sugar refinery built in the early 1870s. The refinery was owned by a Vienna-based corporation Gebrüder Benies between 1887-1923 and the whole complex stayed in the ownership of the Benies family until the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938.

The villa is unique for its flat roof structure. In 1912, only five flat-roofed buildings existed in the country, with three of them in Prague. The idea of planting a garden at the top was very innovative. Le Corbusier's manifesto 'Five Points of a New Architecture', in which the role of roof gardens is highlighted for comfort and environmental reasons, was published fourteen years later in 1926.

The organic décor of the villa most evident in structural features of the building, both in interior and exterior, is another rarity. Its design was inspired by the structure of sugar crystals when viewed under a microscope, which not only referred to the heritage of the Benies family and their link to the sugar industry but also reflected the spirit of the early 20th century, celebrating science and new discoveries.

Villa Benies has two main floors on a geometric floor plan and a half-sunken basement with storage and technical facilities. The ground floor served the family for entertainment and business receptions, whilst the first floor consisted entirely of bedrooms. The most iconic feature of the villa's interior is the main hall with its highly decorative columns spanning two floors, covered with a decorative skylight.

Apart from the crystalline form of the columns in the main hall, all original interior features are of a very simple form, which also applies to wooden cladding in the interior and the decoration of the villa's two staircases.

The villa was built as a wedding present for a daughter of Michael Benies, the owner of the refinery. With its extensive garden and two tennis courts it was used mostly as a family retreat and as a setting for business meetings rather than the family's permanent residence. Unfortunately, the property of

the Benies family was confiscated during the German occupation and so was the refinery with all its surrounding buildings. During the war, the villa was turned into an administrative centre of the sugar refinery and has not been used as a private residence since.

To accommodate its new function, the ground floor and the basement of this precious Cubist structure underwent slight alterations, whilst the first floor was converted into staff accommodation. Villa Benies was used for this purpose for another half-century, until the refinery closed down in 1990 as a result of an unsuccessful privatisation following the Velvet Revolution.

The current owner of Villa Benies, a German haulage company ARS Altmann Praha spol. s r. o., bought the villa together with the complex of the abandoned sugar refinery in 1997. In 1999, the remains of the historic factory buildings were demolished, together with the majority of an exquisite garden surrounding the villa, to provide space for new parking facilities needed to accommodate the company's expanding trade before the financial crisis in 2008.

For a long time, Villa Benies had been out of sight of architectural historians due to its location outside Prague and a general custom of the period when it was built, crediting the building company rather than the architect. Only at the beginning of the 21st century was the villa finally proclaimed to be a work by Emil Králíček and listed as a national landmark in 2004. It was later introduced to the world in a travelling exhibition about Czech Cubist architecture that marked the occasion of Czech Presidency of the EU in 2009.

*Exterior panel, used at first-floor level
on the façade of the Villa Benies*



Present

Since its listing as a national landmark, Villa Benies has undergone a series of refurbishments with financial help from the National Heritage Institute (NPÚ) to prevent further damage to its fabric. In 2015 the villa was put on a list of monuments at risk (*Program záchrany architektonického dědictví*), allowing further public funding support. In a project jointly funded by the owner and the National Heritage Institute, a complete roof refurbishment was completed in late autumn 2016, making the structure watertight. Over time Villa Benies lost its original furnishings, but the original floor plan, wooden interior cladding, as well as some fittings, stayed mostly intact. Even though Villa Benies is not currently accessible to public, it continuously attracts the attention and interest of local people. There is an active local friends group, involving individuals concerned about the villa's future. Occasional lectures and exhibitions introducing the history of the refinery and Villa Benies, organised by the friends group and local historians, usually attracting large public interest.

Future!?

Despite the recent building works and the evident interest of the public in the villa's fortune, there is no clear vision about its future. The National Heritage Institute and the local friends group would like to see this important piece of Czech architectural heritage restored to its former glory with a meaningful purpose, accessible to the public. However, this cannot be done without the cooperation of its owner. Currently, there seems to be a lack of dialogue and negotiation on all levels. As there is a missing tradition and experience of heritage advocacy in the Czech Republic, Eva Hrončková with the support from the Friends of Czech Heritage would like to offer help to the local friends group through the provision of UK knowledge and expertise to support their aims to safeguard this important piece of Czech architectural heritage for future generations and to find a sympathetic sustainable use, acceptable to the current owners. During the past eighteen months The Friends have had discussions with the local group and other interested parties.

Eva Hrončková studied Architecture and Urbanism at the Czech Technical University in Prague and has recently finished an MSc in Sustainable Heritage at the Bartlett, University College London. She has a special interest in the sensitive re-use of historic buildings and is currently an intern at the Heritage Alliance, researching examples of successful heritage regeneration projects in England and their resulting social and economic impact on local communities in support of the Alliance's advocacy work.