

Chapter Two

EXHIBITION SPACES

Explaining their project design of the Czechoslovak pavilion for The International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life in Paris, 1937, the winning team noted:

We may say that 90% of people [visiting exhibitions] are not exhibition experts and do not share the cultural demands of the “upper ten thousands,” and as such they spend very limited time looking around exhibition pavilions. ... The content of the pavilion should therefore be such that it captures masses of these ordinary visitors while satisfying the demands of the culturally mature visitor.¹

Despite their somewhat patronizing tone towards the cultural level of exhibition visitors, the designers expressed their clear awareness of the way people behave in large exhibitions. They observed that visitors only skimmed some of the displays while focusing on entertainment and spectating. Architects and designers therefore needed to carefully consider not only what is displayed but also how.² The team of four Czech designers and architects, Jaromír Krejcar, Zdeněk Kejř, Bohuslav Soumar and Ladislav Sutnar, continued their explanatory notes for their project and proposed that “when designing the façade and all interior spaces, the psychology of the visitors should be affected. The psychology of a visitor of world’s fairs is very different from the psychology of a visitor of smaller and specialized exhibitions.”³

1 “Vysvětlivky k průvodní zprávě projektu československého pavilonu na Výstavě umění a techniky v moderním životě v Paříži v roce 1937 k soukromému použití poroty,” f.140, Kejř, 5, AACE NTM.

2 “Vysvětlivky,” 5.

3 “Vysvětlivky,” 5.

The Czechoslovak pavilion at the Parisian exposition in 1937 can be considered one of the most successful examples of exhibition architecture for reasons that I will discuss in this chapter alongside the designs that led to it. With the last national pavilion of the interwar period at the 1939 New York world's fair ending as a curtailed version of the original plans, Paris represents the peak of the joint exhibition efforts of the Czechoslovak government, the creators and the exhibitors who had been perfecting their exhibition approaches and techniques for almost two decades.

At The International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, Czechoslovakia's main official representation was concentrated in the national pavilion. The Czechoslovak pavilion was built out of a public competition with quite a strict brief; the design was to consider a potentially high volume of visitors who would be flowing into the pavilion with an estimated 50,000 people a day. The competing designers were asked to address this issue, which the winning team did by employing techniques and strategies that I explore in this chapter.

Designs of interiors and exteriors of exhibition pavilions habitually had to take into consideration a wide range of factors, including visitors' numbers, their attention span and physical and mental fatigue, and therefore were elaborate exercises in information design. During the interwar period, designers started paying more and more attention not just to the physical and technological features of the exhibitions but also the psychology of display. Designs and projects, however, often clashed with the reality of various demands from the sponsors, exhibitors and the state.

While the commercial involvement and business interests in national displays are the subject of the next chapter, here I concentrate on the interplay between the practical questions of designing a physical space to house a set of objects. I also examine the creative approach to shaping the experience of a visit to such a space. In this process, the state (often reduced to an abstracted entity) can be seen as the pavilion initiator, whereas the execution and content creation were in the hands of other agents. Who and what ultimately shaped the display, and its meaning is therefore a question I explore here in relation to the theories from various design disciplines that were used in exhibition design. What is behind the façade of the Czechoslovak pavilion in the Paris Exposition of 1937 serves as a means of looking at other national pavilions, their customary content and ideas and the way they were laid out. Ultimately, I identify discrepancies between the theory and practice of exhibition design; the discrepancies between the original, theoretical ideas of architects, designers and theorists on the one hand and the final execution of the national pavilion on the other hand.