Ephemerality of design

The French organizers of The International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life granted the Czechoslovak pavilion a total area of 2,440 m², out of which 1,500m² was meant for the pavilion.[4] It was planned on the Quai d'Orsay with Sweden and the USA as neighbors [fig. 22]. Several requirements were laid out, asking for a single-floor building, which would consider the train line under the ground and include a sheltered portico that the neighboring pavilions would share too. The artistic and technical details of the project were left to the Czechoslovak organizers. The competition rules published in Czechoslovakia further stipulated that participants had to be of Czechoslovak nationality and that the height of the main part of the building should not exceed 18m. The plot was understood as challenging; it was located on a slope above the underground, and this meant that weight had to be distributed carefully.

Fig.22. Views of the Paris Exhibition, 1937.

4 "Article 9," Podmínky soutěže (Tender terms and conditions) 20041215/07 f.140 Kejř (mezinárodní výstavy), AACE NTM, unpag.

The competition had to take place in two rounds because no winner was selected in the first round. When judging the entries, the committee consisting of governmental representatives and architects, expressed several objections to the Krejcar-Kejř-Sutnar-Soumar project.[5] Under the name "Folio 1937," they submitted a structure in steel and glass which the selection committee appreciated for its aesthetic quality but deemed impractical as an exhibition space. The committee questioned the main rectangular area as not sufficiently spacious for all the exhibits and did not provide enough light. The designers took the objections into account and resubmitted the project with modifications for the second round. Their winning design was a structure with four main load bearing points of steel with an entrance suspended above the underground and emphasized by a tall and slim lookout tower which supported a terrace by iron rods, extending over the Seine. The façade of the building was covered by Thermolux glass, which gave the pavilion transparency and translucency. The pavilion proved an enormous success, with over 2,200 prizes given to its different aspects and people responsible for them. The awards went to things material and tangible which were the visible result of the negotiations during all the stages of the pavilion design and construction.

The practical questions about the design were driven by considerations of the spatial layout, exhibition content and building material. These were, indeed, also practical concerns which, in the interwar period, were informed by decades of large exhibition projects that had been taking place since the 19th century. Exhibition pavilions at world's fairs were an exceptional architectural type, the primary function of which was to house exhibits for a limited period. In designing exhibition buildings, architects would therefore start from the decision of whether pavilions were meant as ephemeral, meaning temporal, or permanent structures. This determined the material to be used, the construction techniques and technologies, and related to the amount of money invested in the building.

Architects and designers created increasingly elaborate exteriors and interiors for the purposes of showcasing Czechoslovakia. How to display the set objects had been the subject of various theoretical reflections by both the creators and the critics. In Czechoslovakia, articles on exhibition architecture were published in journals specialized in architecture and construction like *Stavba* (Construction), *Horizont* (Horizon), *Stavitelské listy* (The Construction Gazette) but also

5 The committee consisted of Evžen Syrovátka, V. V. Štech and the construction councillor Vladimír Pacold from the ministry of public works, the art historian Zdeněk Wirth from the ministries of education, Ladislav Turnovský from the ministry of trade, Emil Purkhart of foreign affairs, and architects from Prague, Brno and Bratislava.

in the daily press, which indicated the level of interest and importance of the topic of state representation abroad. Newspapers frequently reported on the numerous prizes and awards the Czechoslovak pavilions, exhibitors and exhibits collected, by which they sanctioned the approach to exhibiting. Critical voices in architectural and artistic journals, on the other hand, pointed to faults in execution, changes of designs, insufficiencies of displays or irregularities in the competitions, which they used as arguments for improvement of future displays or their abandonment.

Following these debates also suggests how thinking about exhibition architecture and the general topic of exhibition design had developed and what informed the decision-making of the designers. Increasingly, many of them, including Sutnar, Krejcar or Jiří Kroha, whom I will discuss in detail later, entered the field of exhibition design with a background in a variety of disciplines. In several cases, they worked across many areas, including information and graphic design, interior design, and stage design. They brought experience from such commissions into exhibition design and enhanced the visual as well as informative effects of the exposition. At the same time, they turned their attention to visitors and their potential experience of the pavilions and the fair ground. Such concerns became important, albeit often theoretical.

Before the theoretical debates about exhibitions turned towards contemplating visitors experience, architects discussed more practical questions. They included topics of how to build exhibitions, how to display objects and represent the state or the various companies in the most precise and effective way, focusing primarily on the content and layout of the exhibitions. An article published in the Czech journal *Styl* as early as 1909 outlined the future needs of artistic and industrial exhibitions and identified specific considerations and objectives when organizing a large exhibition.[6] The author, Alois Koch, who was an architect in Vienna, claimed that exhibitions should represent actual needs, have an educational aim, and practical outcome, they should encourage sales and support local industry.

These were, indeed, the primary goals of such enterprises that were oriented towards the benefits of the exhibitors and organizers. When reception was considered, it was more related to the consumption of goods and knowledge. Apart from the main interest in the practicalities of displays, Koch nevertheless also paid some attention to how to tempt people to visit exhibitions. He suggested that "... everyone who is interested in the cultural tasks of our time must feel the

6 Alois Koch, "Budoucnost umělecko průmyslových výstav," *Styl* I (1909): 174–80.

need to see the exhibition and purchase something there."[7] Going to exhibitions, whether large or small, was considered a common pastime, as also fiction attests.[8]

The emphasis on the practical questions in exhibition architecture continued into the interwar period. Emil Edgar (1884–1963), an architect, theorist and editor-in-chief of *Stavitelské listy*, criticized the trend of building historicizing pavilions at exhibitions.[9] In 1921 he argued against recreating romantic castles and idealized architecture, which one could see for instance in the Pavilion of the Paper Industries built as an Egyptian temple at the Jubilee exhibition in 1891 in Prague. Instead, exhibition structures should acknowledge their function, he recommended, including their "ephemerality," to use Paul Greenhalgh's term. As many of the temporary pavilions were built from cheaper materials like wood and plaster, Edgar called for exhibition architecture that could use materials easy to assemble and that would have an overall architectural awareness of the exhibition ground. In Czechoslovakia, these ideas were applied at many national and regional exhibitions. Edgar named for instance the Prague Sample Fair organized from 1920 at the extensive grounds in the capital twice a year, where buildings by Bohuslav Fuchs appeared next to historicist architecture of the late 19th century. Various regional and national fairs outside of Prague in, for instance, Mladá Boleslav in central Bohemia (1927) or in Uherské Hradiště in eastern Moravia (1937) featured many ephemeral pavilions that were destroyed immediately or shortly after the events ended.

For their short lifespan, ephemeral exhibition structures could be considered as practicing grounds for the designs and concepts of national pavilions at world's fairs. Architects and designers could similarly consider interiors. As a very specific building type, the pavilion and its internal disposition could be subjected to creative approaches which would look for various solutions to the arrangement of spaces and objects. Temporality and ephemerality therefore brought certain positives.[10] If these buildings were not meant to last, these structures could be exceptional in their design and construction, and they could afford being more experimental and therefore more attractive to visitors. This was certainly implemented in the designs of Czechoslovak pavilions that used various experiments to appeal to audiences and their experience.

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7 Koch, "Budoucnost," 176.

8 For example, Svatopluk Čech, *Matěj Brouček na výstavě* (1892), E. L. Doctorow, *World's Fair: A Novel* (New York: Plume, 1985), Eric Larson, *The Devil in the White City* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003), Rob Levandoski, *Going to Chicago* (Sag Harbor, New York: Permanent Press, 1997).

9 Emil Edgar, "Výstavní architektura," *Život a umění. Soudobá architektura* (Prague, 1921), 88.

10 Jiří Kroha, "Několik poznámek k výstavní architektuře," *Horizont* (1927): 99.

Various commentators had paid attention to visitors and their experience at exhibitions already at the end of the nineteenth century. They often pointed to the ever-increasing size of these events which prevented visitors from meaningfully inspecting the exhibition grounds.[11] As early as 1880, the German professor of mechanical technology Egbert Hoyer introduced the term "exhibition fatigue" [Ausstellungsmüdigkeit], which he used to describe a feeling from the abundance of great exhibitions and from a visit to each of these overwhelming events with thousands of exhibits.[12] Later exhibition critics agreed that such a state caused by prolonged exertion and exposure to displayed objects can lead to information overload, distraction, limited cognitive capacity and higher selectiveness of what to view or visit.[13] By the First World War, the end of the exhibitions era was discussed and a move away from these large enterprises suggested.[14] Yet the war changed that and brought a renewed need and eagerness for large exhibitions which, as was believed, could help political, cultural and social recovery, while also engaging the visitor.

Contemplating exhibition spaces

After the First World War, exhibition design became a more self-aware activity for many architects across Europe. Designers, architects and visual artists like Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, László Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer and El Lissitzky, linked to the Bauhaus, were engaged in rethinking exhibition spaces.[15] Their work was reflected in Czechoslovakia, where individual designers, organizations and schools established exchanges with the Bauhaus.[16] Some of

11 Alexander C. T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities. Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 211.

12 Egbert Hoyer, "Über die heutige Praxis der Ausstellungen," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Volkswirtschaft* 1 (1880): 16–23. Quoted in Geppert, *Fleeting Cities*, 210–11.

13 Cf. for example Stephen Bitgood, "Museum Fatigue: A Critical Review," *Visitor Studies* 12, no. 2 (2009): 93–111; Stephen Bitgood, "When is 'Museum Fatigue' not Fatigue?" *Curator: The Museum Journal* 52 (2009): 193–202; Gareth Davey, "What is Museum Fatigue?" *Visitor Studies Today* 8 no. 3 (2005): 17–21; Benjamin Gilman, "Museum Fatigue," *Scientific Monthly* 12 (1916): 67–74.

14 A. Anderson, "The Paris Exhibition and Some of its Buildings," *Architectural Review* 7 (1900): 29–37; George Collins Levey, "Exhibition," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 9, 13th ed. (London: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1926), 67–71; cf. Geppert, 215.

15 Olivier Lugon, "Dynamic Paths of Though: Exhibition Design, Photography and Circulation in the Work of Herbert Bayer," in *Cinema beyond Film: Media Epistemology in the Modern Era*, eds. François Albera and Maria Tortajada (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 118.

16 Markéta Svobodová, *Bauhaus a Československo 1919–1938: studenti, koncepty, kontakty. The Bauhaus and Czechoslovakia 1919–1938: Students, Concepts, Contacts* (Prague: Kant, 2016); Nicholas Sawicki, "Czechoslovakia: Bauhaus Students and Associates," *Centropa* 3 no.1 (2003): 27–40; Leo Kohut, "Bauhaus. Un-