Interpretation of the Architectural Form of the Former Communist Party Headquarters: A Case Study on White House in Brno

Interpretacja formy architektonicznej byłej centrali Partii Komunistycznej: studium przypadku dotyczące Białego Domu w Brnie

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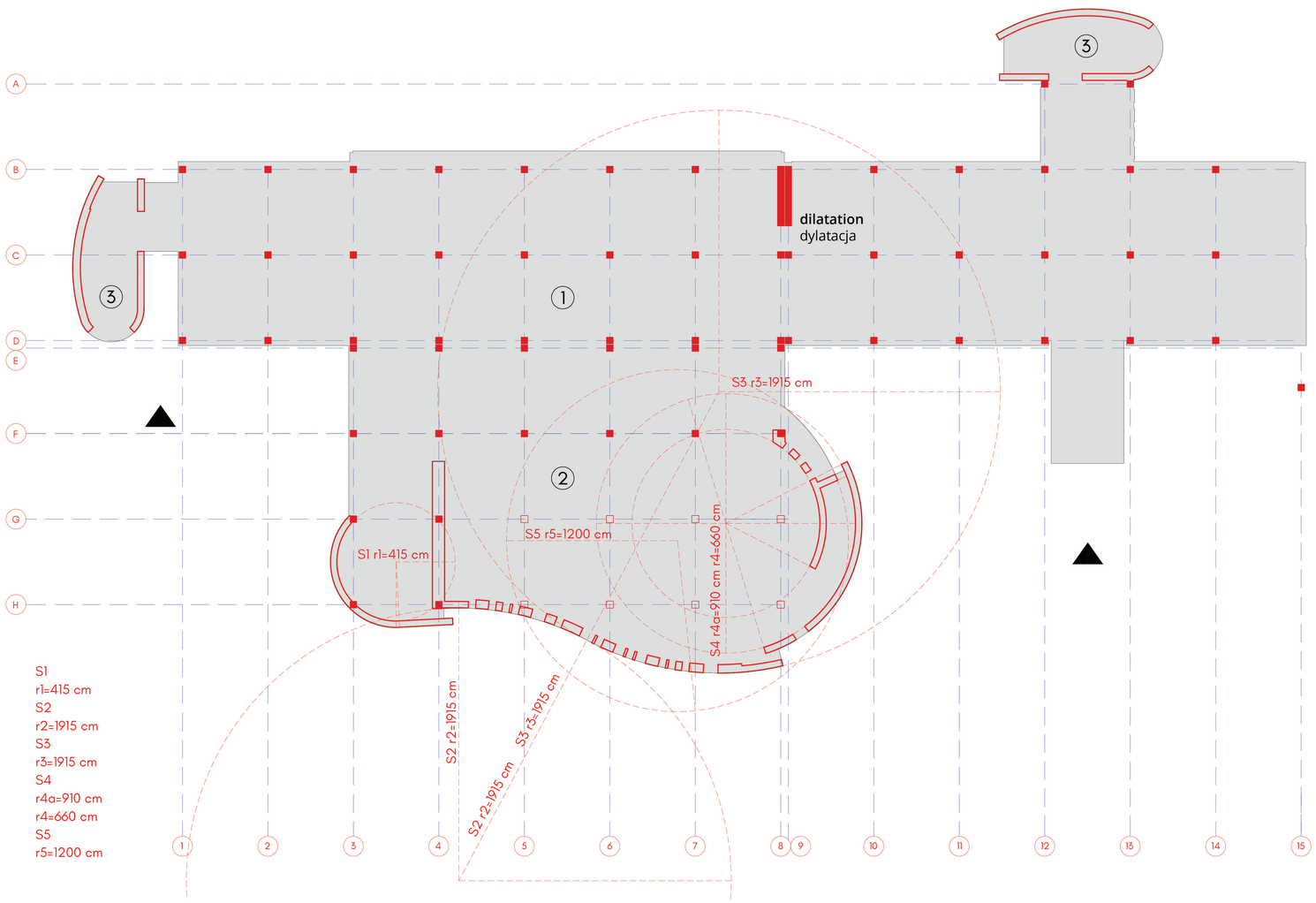
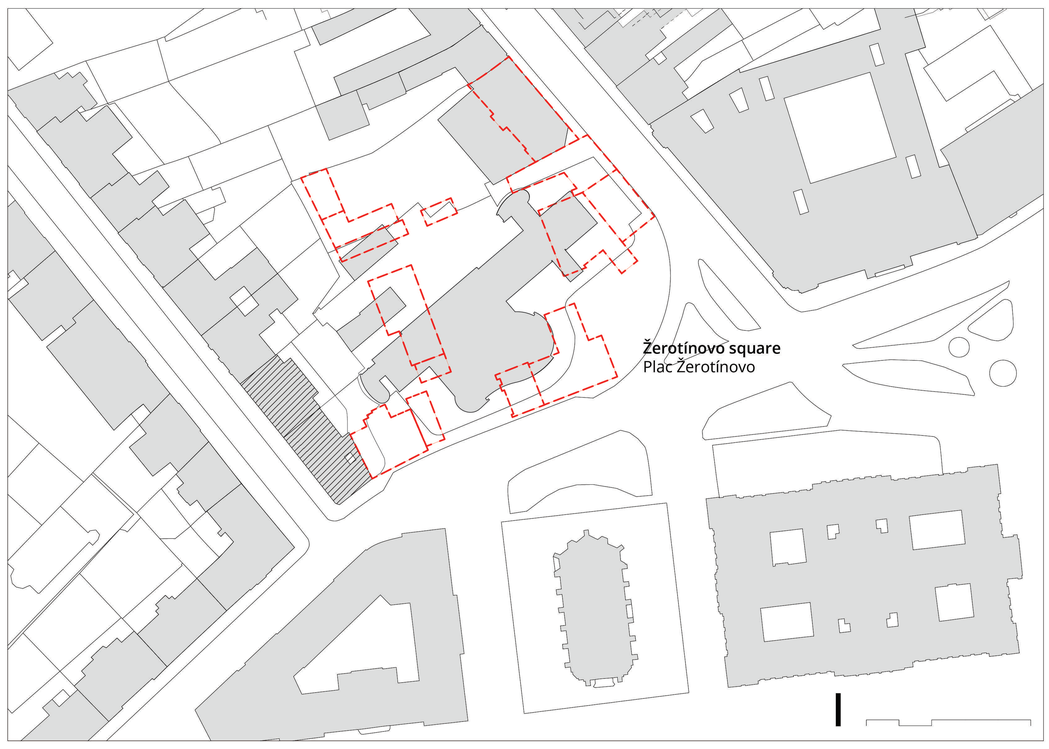


Fig. 1 The White House
Ground Floor – Compositional analysis
Miroslav Spurný (1921–2018)
Žerotínovo square, Brno, Czechia
Construction years: 1974–76
Source: Eva Truncová

Biały Dom
Rzut parteru – Interpretacja formy
Miroslav Spurný (1921–2018)
Plac Žerotínovo, Brno, Republika Czeska
Lata budowy: 1974–1976
Źródło: Eva Truncová

1. **The main block volume** — Objętość bloku głównego
2. **Auditorium** — Audytorium
3. **Staircase towers** — Wieże klatek schodowych



Demolished houses berofe construction started.
Wyburzone domy przed rozpoczęciem budowy.

Buidings designed for the demolition according to the project in 1973.
Budynki planowane do wyburzenia zgodnie z projektem z 1973 r.

Current urban situation.
Obecna sytuacja w mieście.

Fig. 4 Site plan
Source: Eva Truncová

Plan terenu miejskiego
Źródło: Eva Truncová

Fig. 3 The White House (photo approx. 1977)
View from the square
Source: Brno City Archive

Biały Dom (foto. ok. 1977 r.)
Widok ogólny budynku z placu
Źródło: Archiwum Miasta Brna

Fig. 4 Swiss college (photo approx. 1933)
Le Corbusier
Paris, France
Construction years: 1929–1933
Source: Archiweb

Szwajcarski college (foto. ok. 1933 r.)
Le Corbusier
Paryż, Francja
Lata budowy: 1929–33
Źródło: Archiweb

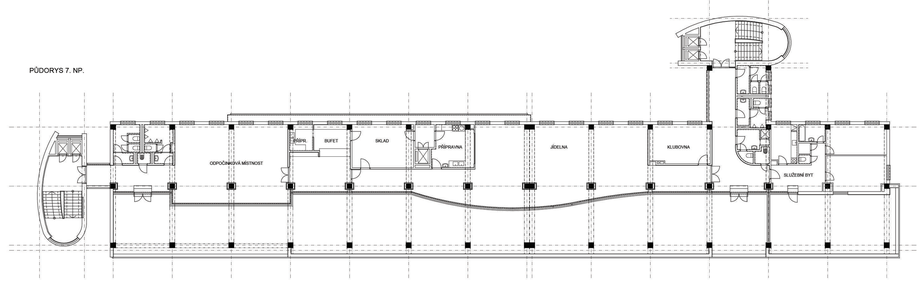


Fig. 5 The White House
6th Floorplan
Source: Martin Švec

Biały Dom
6. piętro
Źródło: Martin Švec

Fig. 6 The White House (photo 2022)
View from the square
Source: Michaela Dvořáková

Biały Dom (foto. 2022)
Wnętrze sali Audytorium
Źródło: Michaela Dvořáková

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Introduction

The building of the Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was built between 1974–1976, following the project designed in 1972–73, by architect Miroslav Spurný in cooperation with engineer František Jakubec. Although he was never a member of the Communist Party, Spurný worked in Brno's Stavoprojekt from the 1960s as a head of the design Studio II. He won a short-listed invited competition with his proposal and, as a party non-aligned architect, he was entrusted with this representative ideologically burdened building. Present-day so-called White House formally merged two different typologies – an administrative part and an educational part in the form of the Municipal Committee and the House of Political Education respectively which at that time usually operated separately.

It is important to mention that Spurný represents a legacy of his teachers – well-known functionalist architects Bohuslav Fuchs and Bedřich Rozehnal – and focuses mostly on projecting hospitals and architecture of care. His inheritance, namely the personal notebooks and sketchbooks were irreparably destroyed and the most valuable source of information is, besides the original project documentation, the oral history. (SVOBODOVÁ, 2022) The motivation to conduct the research on the White House is partly the fact that there is no scientific study expert publication on the building and the imminence
of demolition is being discussed.

Urban Situation and the Question of Monumentality

Several locations were considered and tested by the Communist Party before the site at Žerotínovo Square was chosen. This decision goes hand in hand with the importance and representative function of the building itself, the site is in the place of the former fortification of the city of Brno resulting in a direct proximity to the historical centre. Moreover, the circular street (so-called Ringstrasse) connects several significant municipal buildings mostly from the 19th century.

The architect Spurný was faced with the question of whether to complement and enclose the incomplete urban block damaged after the Second World War or demolish the resting houses in order to erect a solitary structure. He opted for the solitary monumental building but if the method of the close reading is applied we can recognize modern principles encoded in the proposal.

The building of the White House is designed to be settled in a greenery, the auditorium is treated and proposed as a pavilion surrounded by vegetation. The decision not to respect the former street line and set the White House back, further to the plot, meant the creation of the square and also an assembly area in front of the main entrance. This quality of the public space would not have been achieved if the former urban block structure had been simply enclosed. However, the proposed urban plan is not finished till nowadays – the planned garden in the northwest and demolition of neighbouring buildings were not executed.

Interpretation of Architectural Form and Inspiration by Le Corbusier´s Swiss College in Paris

The volume of the White House can be interpreted as a cluster of four forms – the main block volume, the auditorium hall and two self-bearing staircase towers. This reading could be supported by a brief text written by the architect himself in which he described the building as a set of volumes resulting in a synthesis of all the requirements of the assignment.
The load-bearing structure of the main block volume is a prefabricated skeleton system which was available at the time and erecting the building in the given period was manageable. The architect Spurný tried to oppose the rigid grid of the skeleton system with the nonorthogonal partition walls expanding beyond it. Even though the skeleton system allows the plan to be opened, on most of the floors (except the ground floor and the last floor) this feature is not utilised.

There are three volumes attached to the main one – the auditorium hall and two self-bearing staircase towers. The shape of the auditorium hall is constructed as a comprehensive geometric curve composed of segments of multiple circles. The manner in which this curve was composed reflects the contemporary hand drawing methods, reconstructing the curve with present-day CAD software is rather difficult. All the dimensions of the circles and a compound curve geometry are referenced to the grid of columns. As opposed to the structure of the main volume, the auditorium is made of masonry.

As mentioned before, the building housed two different typologies, an administrative part and a school which operated next to each other. We can notice the structure covering the main entrance on the right side which served at the same time as a terrace directly connected to the office of a chief secretary of the Communist Party. On the other hand, the House of Political Education was

Discussion

Even though the former totalitarian regime operated behind the so-called Iron Curtain, foreign journals and magazines were available there. The source of inspiration from abroad was present and modernist architects such as Le Corbusier, Richard Meier and New York Five were frequently cited and looked up to in the postwar period in Czechoslovakia. (ŠVÁCHA, 2020)

The building was recommended to be declared a national monument by the jury for architectural monuments and heritage from the post-war era. However, the proposal was declined two times on the grounds of its monumentality, not respecting the former street line and urban block structure, lack of artworks in the interior and non-original interventions to the structure, even though no major refurbishment was carried out till the present day. (VRABELOVÁ, 2023)

Conclusion

The formal resemblance with Le Corbusier's Swiss college in Paris is apparent, particularly on the front south facade, the modernist principles were taken into account.
The ideologically burdened past of the White House is undeniable history, however, the architectural qualities of the White House offer a multilayered comprehensive proposal developing aforementioned concepts and exceeds the totalitarian stigma.

As was mentioned before, the materials on this topic are limited and therefore it is crucial to archive the oral history as long as it is possible. The valuable and fundamental question for further research is if the contemporary postwar interest in the architecture of modernist architects influenced Miroslav Spurný, or if the inspiration stemmed from the personal architect's interest in the work of Le Corbusier.

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Streszczenie artykułu

Niniejszy artykuł zawiera opis i analizę tzw. Białego domu w Brnie pod względem jego formy architektonicznej i rozpatruje kwestie metodologiczne związane z jej interpretacją. Budynek Komitetu Miejskiego Komunistycznej Partii Czechosłowacji (obecnie Republiki Czeskiej) oraz Budynek Edukacji Politycznej powstał w latach 1974–1976 na podstawie projektu architekta Miroslava Spurný'ego we współpracy z inżynierem Františkiem Jakubecem. Budynek ten stanowi jeden z ostatnich zabytków architektury z okresu powojennego w Brnie, a co więcej znajduje się w miejscu dawnych fortyfikacji miejskich, a zatem w bezpośrednim pobliżu centrum historycznego miasta. Chociaż budynek ten jest obecnie użytkowany w części jako szkoła podstawowa, przychodnia lekarska i kawiarnia, to jego obciążona ideologią przeszłość ciągle odciska na nim swoje piętno.

Miroslav Spurný nigdy nie był członkiem partii komunistycznej, jednak jako kierownikowi Studia II w brneńskiej firmie Stavoprojekt powierzono mu prestiżowe zadanie zaprojektowania tego budynku. Niestety osobiste notatki i szkicowniki architekta zostały nieodwracalnie zniszczone i dostępnych jest tylko kilka materiałów związanych z tym tematem. (SVOBODOVÁ, 2022) Nie istnieją żadne publikacje ani studia naukowe potwierdzające jakość obiektów architektury zaprojektowanych przez Spurný'ego, a jedynym wartościowym źródłem są informacje przekazywane ustnie. Choć eksperci podkreślają formę architektoniczną Białego Domu z odniesieniem do międzywojennego modernizmu i modernistycznej urbanistyki, propozycję uznania go za zabytek kultury narodowej dwukrotnie odrzucono i mówi się o konieczności przeprowadzenia jego rozbiórki w najbliższym czasie. (VRABELOVÁ, 2023)

Przedstawione badanie ma na celu określenie podobieństw pomiędzy Białym Domem a często wskazywanym źródłem inspiracji, z którego czerpał projektant, jakim był Pawilon Szwajcarski w Miasteczku Uniwersyteckim w Paryżu autorstwa Le Corbusiera (1929–1933). (ŠVÁCHA, 2020) Celem artykułu jest wskazanie kompleksowości projektu Spurný'ego oraz zastosowanie analizy kompozycyjnej w celu zrekonstruowania symboli i idei zakodowanych w jego architekturze oraz zestawienia ich z narracją minionego reżimu, aby zasugerować nowe sposoby postrzegania i odczytywania tego budynku, w przeszłości służącego totalitarnej ideologii. Dla uzasadnienia tych hipotez i kontynuacji badania dużą wartość miałaby analiza i kontekstualizacja innych projektów Spurný'ego.

Podziękowania: Badanie korzystało ze wsparcia Projektu Badawczego nr FA-J-23-8101.

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