



THE WEST FAÇADE, VIEW FROM  
HLAVNÁ ULICA.

ZÁPADNÁ FASÁDA, POHLAD  
Z HLAVNEJ ULICE.

Source Zdroj: Projekt. 1969, 11(1 – 2), p. 13

## The Prior Department Store in Košice in the Context of History, Current Structural Alterations and Engaged Preservation

Obchodný dom Prior v Košiciach v kontexte histórie,  
súčasných stavebných úprav a angažovanej ochrany

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Košickému obchodnému domu, pod pôvodným názvom Prior, sa dospelá venovala pozornosť najmä v súvislosti s reflexiou diela významnej českej architektky Růženy Žertovej (1932 – 2019). Táto stavba stojí na počiatku jej architektonickej praxe a predstavuje prvý z výrazných projektov obchodných domov, ktoré Žertová v priebehu šesťdesiatych a sedemdesiatych rokov navrhovala. Na doterajšie architektonicko-historické poznanie nadväzujeme zameraním sa na kontextualizáciu stavby z hľadiska architektonickej tvorby i dobovej produkcie. Nadobudnuté poznatky však okrem rozšírenia pohľadu na jeden zo Žertovej obchodných domov slúžia i ako východisko v procesoch hľadania najvhodnejších zásahov pri rekonštrukcii, a zároveň sú základným bodom argumentov v prospech zachovania hodnôt architektúry.

Transformácie prízemných obchodných pasáží mestských domov na zasklené dvorany s využitím tvaroslovia mestských palácov a následné uvoľňovanie dispozície predchádzali modernému poňatiu obchodného domu medzivojnového obdobia s postupne sa rozvíjajúcou samoobsluhou. Pre ten bolo príznačné umiestnenie v historickom centre, použitie moderných materiálov a konštrukcií, presklenná fasáda, otvorený pôdorys, či výklad komunikujúci s potenciálnymi zákazníkmi prechádzajúcimi sa po ulici. Nenásilné začlenenie do štruktúry v centre mesta či rešpektovanie uličnej čiary sú charakteristiky, ktorými sa košický Prior, na rozdiel od svojich súčasníkov, Prioru v Bratislave a v Plzni, približuje práve tomuto mestskému typu medzivojnového obchodného domu.

Spolu s dôrazom na racionálne poňatie dispozície tu môžeme sledovať isté funkcionalistické vzory. Zároveň však svojou plastickou fasádou, zvyrazňujúcou hmotu, tiahne k sochársky stvárneným obvodovým plášťom súdobých stavieb.

Od roku 2018 budova zaznamenáva zvýšenú pozornosť zo strany odbornej i širšej verejnosti. Zmena majiteľa, ohlásené rekonštrukcie, avizované uzatvorenie a medializácie týchto skutočností podnietili záujem opätovne prehodnotiť a artikulovať hodnoty tejto architektúry. Kolektív architektov a výtvarníkov ponúkol konštruktívnu kooperáciu v hľadaní riešenia požiadaviek nového vlastníka, presadzujúceho zásah do fasády, aj pamiatkového úradu, chrániaceho plášť budovy ako súčasť mestskej pamiatkovej rezervácie. Výsledný návrh stavebného riešenia reflektoval kontext dobovej architektúry i architektonickej tvorby Žertovej. Okrem týchto aktivít sa otázka budúcnosti obchodného domu dostala aj do širšieho spoločenského povedomia, a to prostredníctvom petície žiadajúcej vyhlásenie budovy za národnú kultúrnu pamiatku. Paralelne s touto akciou však už prebiehajúci zámer ďalšieho nového vlastníka smeroval k zachovaniu fasády bez nutnosti stavebných zásahov a prezentácii aktualizovanej identity obchodného domu pod novým názvom Urban.

V kontexte osudov architektúry povojnového modernizmu na Slovensku a komerčnej funkcie budovy môžeme rekonštrukciu považovať za úspech. Predišlo sa intervenciám do fasády a došlo aj k obnove častí presklení. Na druhej strane, interiér prešiel radikálnymi úpravami a charakteristický priestorový koncept zmizol. Pôvodne celosortimentový obchodný dom s voľným pôdorysom dnes sleduje skôr vzor nákupného centra (tzv. „shopping mall“) so samostatnými predajnými jednotkami a centrálnou pasážou. Celkové koncipovanie priestoru vychádzajúce z podmienok ekonomickej efektívnosti a poukazujúce na súčasný zaužívaný spôsob nakupovania sa však v dynamicky meniacom svete nemusí stať tým najvhodnejším riešením. Premenlivosť toho, čo znamená daná funkcia, tak nastoľuje otázku potenciálu širšieho spoločenského využitia. Strata priestorového konceptu zároveň otvára i problematiku inštitucionálnej ochrany týchto stavieb a vnímania hodnôt vybraných architektonických prvkov. Ukazuje sa, že ani výhodná poloha stavby v mestskej pamiatkovej rezervácii nemusí byť dostatočnou zárukou k tomu, aby ostali zachované všetky jej hodnotné charakteristické znaky.

V súvislosti s angažovanou ochranou môžeme už teraz považovať za úspech najmä posun vo významovej paradigme. Mediálny ruch, angažovanosť viacerých aktérov, ochota komunikovať zo strany vlastníka a v neposlednom rade aj zapojenie obchodného domu do širšej kultúrnej sféry ako miesta konania niekoľkých umeleckých projektov, postupne prispievajú k zviditeľneniu a prijímaniu tejto architektúry.

## Introduction

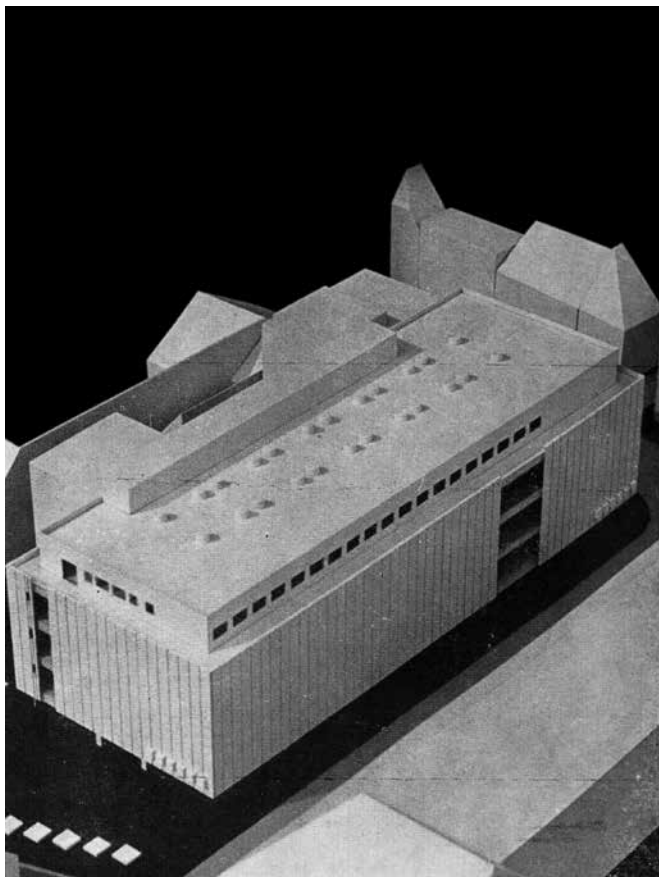
The Prior department store (OD Prior)<sup>1</sup> was constructed in the historic centre of Košice according to the design of Czech architect Růžena Žertová in the 1960s. Not only is it a significant landmark, it is also an example of post-World War II architecture that harmoniously coexists with the surrounding historical buildings.

During the course of its existence, the store has undergone several structural alterations, yet all the same continues to retain its built qualities, derived from a rational construction system in combination with a sculptural exterior. A change in the ownership of the building between 2017 and 2018 began a process of the necessary confrontation of opinions of various social groups on the building: its architecture, use, protection, value, and above all, what it should look like. Among the involved parties were the investors (in the course of the events described here, the building changed ownership), the relevant government bodies, the engaged public around the collective IMA<sup>2</sup>, academic experts, and the wider public.

Based on our analysis of recent events concerning the department store, we attempt to characterise the stances of individual actors and the circumstances that influenced the course

of the building's reconstruction, drawing upon media statements of those directly engaged and personally interested.

In the list of reasons behind the alteration or destruction of postwar architecture from the socialist era, it is common to mention changes of function, yet no less crucial are changes in ownership or technical problems of the buildings, and a noteworthy role should also be assigned to public opinion.<sup>3</sup> Working towards the protection of this architecture, though, we often encounter widely differing evaluations of its qualities and views of its value. Certain architectonic elements tend to be ranked higher than others, with the primary criterion being that of aesthetic expression, with emphasis on uniqueness and originality. Preservation of material fabric, ideally in its authentic form, seems to prevail above other values in decisions on whether to extend legal protection. What is often overlooked, or at first glance even invisible, are other circumstances: conceptual framework, technical concerns, and architecture's social role. The present contribution uses the example of the Prior department store in Košice to reflect on the given realities affecting the question of institutional heritage protection. No less, it outlines possible methods of drawing attention to this architecture in the context of civic activism with expert background.



#### THE PRIOR DEPARTMENT STORE IN KOŠICE, MODEL

OBCHODNÝ DOM PRIOR  
V KOŠICIACH, MODEL

Source Zdroj: Projekt. 1969, 11(1 – 2), p. 12

From a position of engaged preservation, the present contribution can be seen as a case study describing and evaluating the collaborative practice of civic activism, the academic community, public bodies, and private investors in the process of reconstruction of postwar architecture.

### The Department Store – Obchodný dom Prior

The world's first department stores emerged at the end of the 19th century, when the earlier shopping arcades, created in the ground levels or courtyards of city blocks, were transformed into purpose-built structures drawing on the stylistic vocabulary of the urban palace.<sup>4</sup> Characteristic features included a glass-topped atrium and monumental staircases, with the retail area divided into several sections. Examples of such early department stores include Le Bon Marché, the Galleries Lafayette in Paris, and Harrods in London. A shift in the conception of architectonic space could be discerned, for instance, in the Chicago department store Schlesinger & Mayer, realised in 1899 – 1903, where the architect, Louis Sullivan, decided to increase the sales area by eliminating the atrium, thus allowing for greater freedom of movement for customers.<sup>5</sup> This step laid the path for the later implementation of a new sales form – self-service shopping, which began to emerge in the interwar period. In Czechoslovakia at this time, one example could be the department store chains of the companies Te-Ta or Brouk & Babka, the latter best known for the Prague department store *Bílá labuť* (White Swan) from the 1930s. Generally, buildings of this type

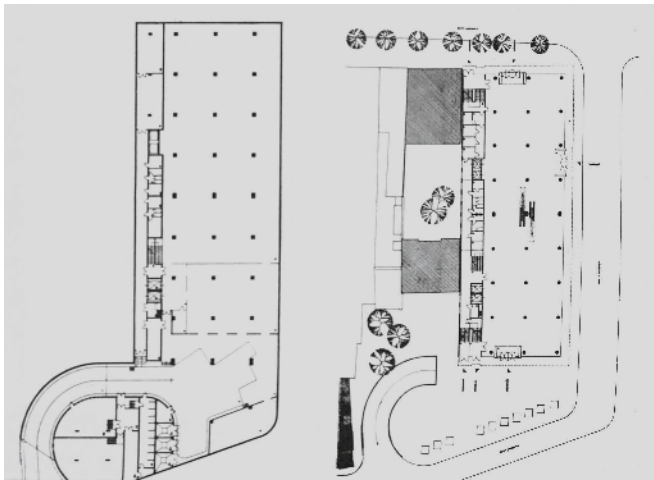
were notably located in urban centres, ideally on well-trafficked squares or streets, using a communicative parterre with large glass windows, modern construction methods and materials (e.g., glass), innovative technical facilities like escalators, designs favouring an open spatial layout.

After the war, growing urbanisation and years of neglect towards the retail sector created a need for the emergence of a new type of shopping.<sup>6</sup> Department stores offering a full range of goods were to be available in every town with a population above 30,000 residents.<sup>7</sup> One such reaction to the need to expand the shopping possibilities included the commission for building a large department store in the centre of Košice.

The design for the store, originally named Hornád after the local river, was prepared by the Brno architect Růžena Žertová between 1960 and 1964 during her employment at the State Retail Design Institute (*Státní projektový ústav obchodu*) in Brno. Realisation lasted up until 1968, when the department store, by now part of the Prior network, finally opened.<sup>8</sup>

Constructed on a site where several historic buildings were demolished, the five-storey cuboid matches the height level of the adjoining Functionalist building (though the recessed top floor makes the newer building higher). The mass of the upper levels is lightened through the all-glass entrance parterre. Bearing in mind the building's function, Žertová refrained from using extensive fenestration on the façade; working with sculptor Jana Bartošová Vilhanová, she articulated the façade using shaped concrete blocks.

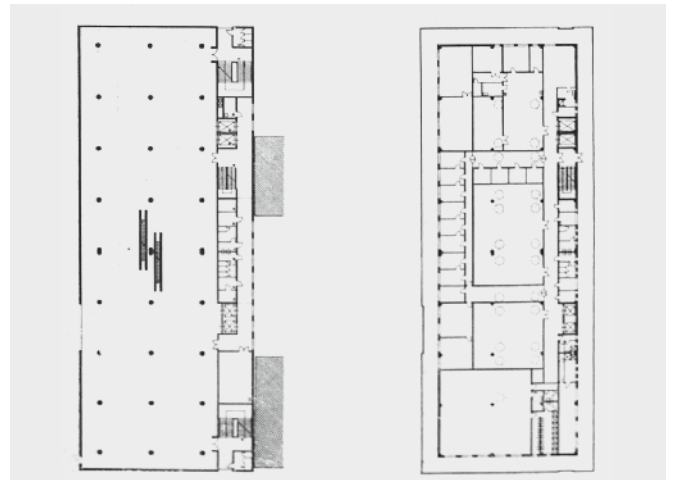
Inside, the space is derived from a rational conception emphasising the building's function, which is also determined by the construction system using a reinforced-concrete skeleton in a grid plan with field dimensions of 9 x 9 m. Service communications and toilet facilities were situated in the lengthwise strip where the building's south side adjoined its neighbour. As a result, the main volume consisted of four completely open floors, linked by escalators.<sup>9</sup> Permeability of the parterre and contact with the street were ensured by customer entrances on all three free sides. The architect placed supplies and technical facilities in the cellar level, reached through a winding below-ground ramp entered from the east side. The ground floor and the next three levels were exclusively for retail use; on the uppermost floor, given natural light through a double row of round skylights, were employee facilities, offices, common areas and a canteen. The layout articulation in this section was likewise focused primarily on functionality, resulting in a rational linear arrangement of rectangular spaces. In essence, the entire interior concept was grounded in the maximisation of the sales area.



**PLAN OF THE BASEMENT  
AND GROUND FLOOR**

PŔDORYS SUTERÉNU A PRÍZEMIA

Source Zdroj: Projekt. 1969, 11(1 – 2),  
p. 13



**PLAN OF THE FIRST FLOOR AND  
UPPERTMOST FOURTH FLOOR**

PŔDORYS 1. POSCHODIA  
NA JUVYŠŠIEHO 4. POSCHODIA

Source Zdroj: Projekt. 1969, 11(1 – 2),  
p. 14

**VIEW OF THE INTERIOR,  
FIRST FLOOR**

POHLAD DO INTERIÉRU  
1. POSCHODIA

Source Zdroj: Projekt. 1969, 11(1 – 2),  
p. 16



The strict grid created a legible, right-angled plan, where the separation of the functional communications and their placement into a narrow strip ensured that the open self-service shopping area could match the ideal free movement of customers.

During the completion of Prior in Košice, two other department stores in the same chain were also under construction in Czechoslovakia – in Bratislava and in Plzeň. Together, these three realisations formed the basis for the company guidebook then being compiled, the *Unified Organisation of Managing and Operating the Prior Department Stores*.<sup>10</sup> While the department stores in Bratislava and Plzeň are freestanding, the Košice branch was integrated into an extant built fabric; hence its architect needed not only to address the task of creating a new type of retail space but also of harmonising modern architecture with the historic city centre. The difficulties of the assignment and the built

outcome, providing new and intriguing ways of dealing with these questions, sparked praise from critics of the time.<sup>11</sup>

As a freestanding volume, the Prior store in Bratislava allowed its architect, Ivan Matušík, to work with greater freedom in the ground plan, which was then reflected in the external form. In contrast, the Košice Prior forms a natural part of its city block, even retaining the street line as it follows city centre's main artery of Hlavná ulica. As such, the Košice Prior – unlike its contemporaries – more closely follows the earlier paradigm of the interwar department store. Along with Žertová's subjugation of the built concept to rationalisation of its operation, we could find in the design a continuation of certain Functionalist models that the architect must have known well, primarily through her teacher, architect Bedřich Rozehnal. In his hospital designs, Rozehnal placed the significance of functional



DETAIL OF THE REGULATORY PLAN OF THE WIDER CITY CENTER FROM 1979. THE DESIGNS SHOW AN EFFORT FOR A MORE COMPACT URBANISTIC ARTICULATION OF THE SPACE THROUGH CREATING A 'PIAZZETA' AFTER THE DEMOLITION OF THE HISTORIC BURGHERS' RESIDENCES AT THE END OF KOVÁČSKA ULICA.

DETAIL NÁVRHU ÚZEMNÉHO PLÁNU ZÓNY CELOMESTSKÉHO CENTRA Z ROKU 1979. NÁVRH PREUKAZUJE SNAHU URBANISTICKY KOMPAKTNEJŠIE ARTIKULOVAŤ PRIESTOR VZNIKNUTEJ „PIAZZETY“ PO ASANÁCII MEŠTIANSKYCH DOMOV V ZÁVERE KOVÁČSKEJ ULICE.

Source Zdroj: BĚL, A., HUDEC, D. and MARTONČÍK, E., et al., 1979. Územný plán zóny celomestského centra. Košice: ÚHA mesta Košice

requirements at the forefront, yet also paid great attention to layout as well as proportions, while also taking care with the relation of the new object to its urban surroundings. His architectural approach could be described as a kind of humanisation of otherwise austere Functionalism.<sup>12</sup> A similar sensitivity to incorporate a large new volume into a historic structure could be found in another of Žertová's projects from 1967 – 1968. Her never-built design for the Prior department store in Jihlava presents a building situated in the open space of the historic central square, yet with an exterior form that works to react to the immediate surroundings. The difficult sloping terrain was the inspiration for placing part of the volume below ground level and lowering its height.<sup>13</sup> Though in this case it is no longer possible to speak about the creation of the new compact urban environment or preservation of the earlier urban structure, it nonetheless represents a search for new directions that respects the original integrity of the historic square.

Contrasting the approach detailed above, and reflecting Žertová's relationship to an earlier tradition, the outer envelope of the building is a visually striking element that (unlike other designs of its era) emphasises the building structure, pointing the way almost to the architectural concepts of the later 1960s and 1970s that stressed the built mass and its aesthetic impact. In this sense, it could best be compared to other department stores in the socialist bloc, such as the Centrum Warenhaus in Dresden or Skála in the Hungarian town of Székesfehérvár, which draw in their formal vocabulary from an extreme plasticity of the façade.

As such, we could say that several differing principles meet in the Košice Prior department store. First is the functionalist idea of logical operational relations in a simple rectangular outline with an open-plan layout, characteristic for other buildings

with the same function during this period. At the same time, we notice a desire to bring the object into harmony within a compact whole and retain the street line, which goes against the idea of the building as an imposing self-contained volume preferred by postwar modernism. Along with the emerging trend of sculpturally conceived facades and accentuation of the weight of the mass, we could describe these principles as values that make the Prior department store into an important architectonic component in the built history of its city.

### The Genesis of the Reconstruction

Until 1994, the department store continued to operate under the Prior name. From 1994 to 1996, it was owned by the US retail chain K-mart, after which it was operated up until 2018 by the British corporation Tesco. The first major structural alterations were realised under the ownership of K-mart, when a single-storey functional addition was constructed on the east side of the building.<sup>14</sup> Over the next several years, a long series of structural changes were imposed on the interiors, such that except for a few fragments in the building's service areas the original design was de facto eliminated. Partial changes were also made in the glass elements off the façade, with the generous articulation replaced by utilitarian window components.

Between the end of 2017 and the start of 2018, the department store changed ownership. The new investor Azor, a Slovak company based in Poprad, declared its *intention to renovate the building and create a modern multifunctional object*.<sup>15</sup> As planned, the reconstruction would have concerned the interior spaces and partially the façade as well, though retaining the building's characteristic exterior cladding of 'terrazzo'<sup>16</sup> bricks. These statements and other media reports sparked increased interest mostly within the scholarly community. As often happens with



**PLAN FOR THE DESIGN OF THE GLAZING, BASED ON THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE INVESTOR AND THE DECISION OF THE REGIONAL HERITAGE AUTHORITIES (KPÚ), 2018**

NÁVRH RIEŠENIA PRESKLENÍ NA ZÁKLADE POŽIADAVIEK INVESTORA A ROZHODNUTIA KPÚ, 2018

**Authors** Autori: Pavol Mészáros, Peter Beňo

**DEPARTMENT STORE DODO (JEDNOTA), MICHALOVCE. RŮŽENA ŽERTOVÁ, DESIGN 1964 – 1968, REALIZATION 1969 – 1973**

OBCHODNÝ DOM DODO (JEDNOTA), MICHALOVCE. ARCHITEKTKA RŮŽENA ŽERTOVÁ, PROJEKT 1964 – 1968, REALIZÁCIA 1969 – 1973

**Photo** Foto: Petr Jehlík



development projects, it also provoked suspicion as to the actual planned extent of reconstruction. True, the interior after the many changes in the 1990s now displayed only a minimum of original elements. Yet this fact only meant a greater interest in the announced reconstruction of the façade and the actual aims of the investor. In the spring of 2018, a lecture with public discussion was held in the 'Úsmev' (Smile) cinema on the theme of the department store, organised by Spolka, an association of architects and sociologists active in Košice.<sup>17</sup> Presenting the wider architectural and social context of the building was Petr Klíma, co-author and chief editor of a study on the building's architect, Růžena Žertová: *Architektka domů i věcí*. Plans for structural changes were presented by a representative of the investor, Matúš Choma, yet none of the visualisations were made accessible, meaning the public could only guess how the façade might be changed. However, the investor's plans to create offices on the third and fourth floors seemed to indicate that, in terms of natural light access, it would be necessary to insert fenestration

at least partially into the façade at these points. The discussion also touched upon the single-storey addition to the eastern side, facing Kováčska ulica, realised in the early 1990s for functional reasons but completely blocking the original character of the walk-through passageway.<sup>18</sup> The conditions for removing the addition, opening up the passageway and completing the originally planned idea of a 'piazzetta' at the intersection between Kováčska ulica and Kasárenské námestie are still, it seems, unlikely to occur soon.<sup>19</sup>

These ramifications, not only architectural but also more widely urbanistic, led part of the present group IMA, involving Peter Beňo, Pavol Mészáros, Dominik Kurina and others, to open a discussion on the department store's reconstruction and its connection to the urban structure on its eastern side. The authors prepared several basic variants, based on the urbanistic solution for the wider relationships and the architectonic designs of the actual façade. The urbanistic designs pointed out the potentials in the remaining clearance areas in the context



**VARIANT PLANS FOR TRANSPARENT CLADDING OF PERFORATED SHEET METAL COVERING THE ADDED GLAZING, BASED ON THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE INVESTOR AND THE DECISION OF THE HERITAGE AUTHORITIES (KPŮ), 2018. THE TEST DEMONSTRATED A SUFFICIENTLY CONVINCING VISUAL FORM DURING DAYTIME LIGHTING. STILL UNADDRESSED WAS THE STRUCTURAL DESIGN, EVENING LIGHTING IN THE INTERIOR, AND QUALITY OF LIGHT CONDITIONS IN THE INTERIOR.**



**VARIANTNÉ RIEŠENIE PRIEHLADNÝCH TVÁRNIC Z PERFOROVANÉHO PLECHU, PREKRÝVAJÚCICH DODATOČNÉ PRESKLENIA, NA ZÁKLADE POŽIADAVIEK INVESTORA A ROZHODNUTIA KPŮ, 2018. TEST PREUKÁZAL DOSTAČOČNÚ PRESVEDČIVOSŤ VO VÝRAZE POČAS DENNÉHO OSVETLENIA. OTVORENÝMI ZOSTALI KONŠTRUKČNÉ RIEŠENIE, VEČERNÉ PRESVETLENIE Z INTERIÉRU A KVALITA SVETELNÝCH PODMIENOK V INTERIÉRI.**

**Authors** Autori: Pavol Mészáros, Peter Beňo



**VIEW OF THE EXHIBITION ICONIC RUINS? INSIDE THE DEPARTMENT STORE DURING RECONSTRUCTION, 2019**

POHLAD DO VÝSTAVY ICONIC RUINS? V PRIESTOROCH OBCHODNÉHO DOMU POČAS REKONŠTRUKCIE, 2019

**Source** Zdroj: Archive of IMA

of their functional connection with the store and the new pedestrian link to the Gorkého – Štefánikova intersection. The architectonic designs, in turn, investigated the possibilities of realising the structural alterations required by the investor while preserving the essential content and expressive framework of the original architecture. Drawing on these proposals, several informal and formal meetings were held between the investor, the Regional Heritage Office (KPŮ) and the Office of the Chief Architect (ÚHA).<sup>20</sup> By the end of 2018, after the comments and personal meetings with the KPŮ, the authorial collective had prepared a study for the façade treatment of the building as well as adjustments to the addition, which the investor had decided for functional and economic reasons to retain. According to the study and the KPŮ decision, the requirements for natural light in the office floors should be met by vertical all-glass fenestration strips, ensuring that the newly inserted layer would be set off from the original fabric through the division and colour of the glazing. Justification for this solution was provided through noting the historic context of the design of the Czechoslovak pavilion at EXPO 1967 in Montréal, often interpreted as a model of characteristic typology and architectonic form – a permeable space on the ground level and a 'levitating' cube above it divided by vertical fenestration cuts. Equally, the design relied on the realisation of another department store by Růžena Žertová, OD DODO in the nearby town of Michalovce, where the mass is articulated by irregularly placed sunken glass verticals. As the

alternative approach, the architects chose a replication of the cast-concrete blocks using perforated sheet metal to be installed in front of the new glazing, in which visual tests proved it to achieve a convincing replication effect. The aim of the authors' efforts was to test and examine, in the widest possible range, the possibilities of transforming this specific architectural work from the standpoint of preserving its characteristic values, functional demands, and architectural-historical context.

Between 2018 and 2019 the department store changed ownership once again, with the new owner being the company ARKON, a. s. During 2019 the owner began to work on planned changes and a new concept for the building. Now, the installation of offices on the 3rd and 4th floors was no longer being considered, only for the recessed fifth floor, allowing for somewhat greater freedom in enlarging the window openings and the access doors for the viewing terrace. The concept for reconstruction and future use of the building was finally presented by the investor in autumn 2019. It assumed the complete preservation of the façade, which in the meantime had gained the appellation 'iconic', and slight changes to the vertical glazing that would return its appearance to that of the original form from 1968.

In May 2019, even before the public's attention, a designer and artist Peter Maukš (now a member of IMA) submitted a proposal for declaring the building a national heritage site. In the words of the petition:



CURRENT STATE OF THE FAÇADE, AUTHORS OF THE RECONSTRUCTION: ABMV WORLD, PRAHUE; M-PROJECT, POPRAD, 2020 – 2021

SÚČASNÝ STAV FASÁDY, AUTORI REKONŠTRUKCIE: ABMV WORLD, PRAHA, M-PROJECT, POPRAD, 2020 – 2021.

Photo Foto: Pavol Mészáros

*With its minimalist façade and the uncompromising placement of its cubic mass in the historic fabric, it shows a continuity with the modernist philosophy of architecture between the first and second parts of the 20th century. Equally, it is confirmed by the connection to the adjoining building, a Functionalist apartment block with a glass commercial parterre. (...) From the stereometric structuring of the coffering, we can discern references to various epochs of Slovak culture: to Renaissance-Baroque bossage, the right-angled stance of modernity, the coming age of computer technology, or even a suggestion of Slovak folk embroidery.<sup>21</sup>*

Such a method of civic and professional activism, addressing the immediate question of the department store but also postwar architecture in general, found support among the Košice public. Through the wording of the petition it became possible to imagine an entire range of interpretations that would situate the artistically conceived façade into the more open conception of an autonomous artwork. It is clear that the original idea of the author, sculptor Jana Bartošová Vilhanová, had over time begun to act upon the public to create a playing field for work with a significant range of meanings.

The request was not approved: the Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic rejected the process of declaring the building a national heritage site. As the office stated in its decision:

*(...) Though the object of the department store unquestionably has the qualities of modern architecture, the relevant government body is of the opinion that the interior is devoid of more significant heritage-value elements that would justify its inclusion in the register of heritage*

*buildings of the Slovak Republic. Bearing in mind that the said building is located directly in the centre of a protected urban district, the Regional Heritage Office has, even into the future, a sufficient level of oversight for the protection of the historically and artistically valuable exterior form and the department store itself, which is intended for retention and protection in unaltered form.<sup>22</sup>*

Submitting the proposal may well have spurred objections from the investor, who later intended at this point to keep the façade intact, and who immediately made this plan clear. Still, even unwelcome confrontations of this type can form part of the acceleration of wider public discussion, possibly even forcing its participants to a more thorough understanding of each other's motivations.

In the autumn of 2019, in part thanks to support from the investor, the building in a reconstruction mode played host to part of the Košice showing of the international exhibition *Iconic Ruins?*<sup>23</sup> Directly presented at the corner of the building was an exhibition display focusing on the problems involved in the transformation of iconic structures of postwar modernism, created in the architectural studio at the Bratislava Academy of Fine Arts and Design (VŠVU) under Ján Studený. IMA contributed its own presentation of the history and architectural context of the store as well as its author, Růžena Žertová. It seems that this architectural event and another free public opening of the exhibition during the contemporary arts festival *Biela Noc 2019*





## CURRENT STATE OF THE INTERIOR

SÚČASNÝ STAV INTERIÉRU

Photo Foto: Pavol Mészáros

contributed to a wider social awareness of this topic among the broad public.

Currently, though, the corner space of OD Urban seems to be searching for its true role. Shortly after opening, it saw the realisation of the ambitious curatorial project *Vertikály*<sup>24</sup> or new installations for *Biela Noc 2021*. At the same time, the space has also been used for more generally focused or widely popular exhibits. All the same, one cannot deny the benefits of the investor working towards communication with the active artistic or scholarly community; hence it is important that these groups grasp this opportunity to make use of the space and draw attention not only to architectural-cultural heritage but also to wider cultural and social phenomena.

OD Urban is, at present, in commercial use on basement level and two retail floors with one level of offices on the highest floor; two other retail floors (levels 2 and 3) still await their opening.

### Current State

If we were to evaluate the results of the reconstruction of this department store in the wider context of the fates of postwar modernist architecture in Slovakia, we could well declare this realisation a success. Façade interventions were entirely avoided and its sculptural form retained; the new vertical window inserts were created in a similar grid pattern to the original ones. The glass parterre is again conceived as an active, open section of the building, while the overall character of the department store remains that of an urban object forming a significant landmark along Hlavná ulica. Moreover, we should even appreciate the new owner's approach to advertising. The large-format advertising banner that for years hid the façade has been removed; informational logos for the individual retail outlets are positioned along the perimeter in the lower section, using a restrained black-white colour scheme.

After many years, once again the idea of the architect has re-emerged – the building itself as the main visual attraction in urban space.<sup>25</sup>

While the mass of the building remained unaffected and the façade was even brought closer to its original state, the most significant transformation took place inside. Here, reconstruction work could not draw upon, or indeed work, with the original interior fittings, since the interiors, themselves (partially designed by the building's architect) had not survived. The same was true for the building's artworks.

Still, the spatial layout had remained the same until the reconstruction: afterwards, the universal open floorplan, with its rhythmic patterning of striking pillars, was gone. Primarily, this change was the outcome of a new type of retail purpose. The concept of a full-assortment department store with large open sales areas, which could still be relatively profitable even under Tesco's ownership and branding, was evaluated by the new owner as unsustainable. In a major shift, the building was reconfigured as a shopping centre, grouping many different retail units under a single roof.<sup>26</sup> Now, the building's owner parcelled up the space of the object to individual tenants operating separate businesses; the universal space where the customer can move and shop freely, is now carved up into a system of various retail fragments along a single communication axis, faced by the different shops' entrances. As a result, any unifying conception is absent. Each retail unit addresses its own separate space individually, and the interior remains fragmentary. In general, the interior space is dominated by materials of less than optimal quality and design solutions where speed prevailed over forethought. The massive load-bearing pillars are at best lost in the corners between the partition walls of each unit, or at worst hidden behind displays of goods. In this way, the new use obliterates the testimony of the architectonic concept, grounded in the contrast between the stereotomy of the façade and the tectonics of the inside.

Indeed, the prominent Czech architect Bohuslav Fuchs, in his review of the newly opened department store from 1969, emphasised the unsatisfactory points of the realised interior, diverging from the original design. *The interior should form an inseparable part of the structure; it should complement it in the spatial*



CURRENT STATE OF THE INTERIOR, 2021. WHAT WE COULD REGARD AS A SUCCESS IS THE USE OF THE NORTHERN SECTION OF GLAZING FOR THE SEATING AREA OF THE CAFÉ: NO SIMILAR USE WAS EVER EMPLOYED IN PREVIOUS STAGES OF THE DEPARTMENT STORE'S OPERATION.

SÚČASNÝ STAV INTERIÉRU, 2021. AKO ZDARNÉ MOŽNO HODNOTIŤ VYUŽITIE SEVERNÝCH PRESKLENÍ PRE POBYTOVÝ PRIESTOR KAVIARNE. PODOBNÉ VYUŽITIE V PREDCHÁDZAJÚCICH OBDOBIACH PREVÁDŽKY OBCHODNÉHO DOMU ABSENTOVALO.

Photo Foto: Peter Beňo

*composition, not strive for effect but instead underscore the aesthetic intention. In this case, the intent of the architectonic composition falls away from that of the inside architecture.*<sup>27</sup> Fuchs was immediately reacting to how, in the course of construction, the aims of the architect and her original design were not followed; a similar characterisation could no less accurately be applied to the present situation.

All the same, while Žertová placed her emphasis on unity and a strong sense of materiality, reinforced through her cooperation with sculptor Bartošová Vilhanová, the current condition is far more one of material chaos, where at a single point one may encounter a clash between glass, artificial stone, and ceramic tiling all at once. Nor is the impression much improved by the ceilings with exposed utility lines painted in black, with the questionable aim of increasing the height, or the flowerpots with artificial plants. Generally speaking, in these areas, the interior design hardly differs from the standard methods of ordinary shopping centres found all across the country.

Why is it worth paying attention to the current state? Should we not view it as a necessary price for the exterior visual and material conservation of the building?

The reconstruction and current state of the department store, however, has revealed several essential findings with a strong bearing on the specifics of the protection of architecture from this period and the question of its future.

The project for the Prior department store in Košice could be regarded as truly pioneering. In an age of standardised designs for each building category, it was, from its author's part, essentially an experiment. The assignment of creating a modernist department store with a full range of consumer goods required new testing of both structural components and operational relations. Eventually, Žertová's efforts led to an ideal solution for the era, one that was later used in formulating the corporate standards of the state-owned Prior chain.<sup>28</sup> And from the start, the architectural task was addressed as a unified whole: the inside and outside of the building were both shaped by Žertová to match her

concept of rational functioning and geometrically abstract forms, masses, and spaces.

From this brief summary, and from the historical circumstance that this realisation implied the start of the professional career of a truly noteworthy woman architect, it should be immediately evident how significant this building is in the context of Czechoslovak and Slovak architectural history. Equally, the department store represents a significant element within the history of Košice as a city, a structure with which most of the residents have had their own experiences. And in its urban context, it forms an easily recognisable landmark, a point of reference and orientation upon entering the city's historic core. Hence it is truly one instance in which postwar architecture can be accepted and perceived even by the general public as a characteristic component of the city's image.

Despite clear architectonic-historic quality, and a social consensus on its importance, the building, the building has never been placed in the category of protected heritage. Hence, during the recent reconstruction, we cannot speak of 'restoration', where it is necessary to apply stricter criteria, but more about wider frameworks of significant compromises. It is therefore logical, that any elements that 'prevent' the building from full exploitation of its economic potential (in the sense of function) would have to be the first to go.

Similarly, this case also points out the impermanence of understanding function as a firm category, which usually forms a guarantee that the building will in the future serve much the same purpose and hence during reconstruction have a greater chance at retaining its valuable original elements.

In the strictest sense of the word, Prior is no longer a 'department store' in its typological character. Indeed, we could better regard it as a hybrid, something between a traditional modernist department store and the more recent model of the shopping centre or mall. As an object, it still acts as a city-forming element, retaining its accessible parterre and communicating with its surroundings, yet inside, the spatial relationships match that of the later form of the indoor mall. Ways of

shopping have changed and continue to change, particularly with the recent growth of e-commerce. For sheer economic survival, it will be crucial for the present owner to emphasise not only retail sales but other functions. Indeed, in this sense it is a positive development that the currently empty corner section, as a fragment of one field of the wider spatial concept, was used for cultural purposes. In a broader view, the considerations voiced by the owner could well lead to investments in the public space in the building's vicinity, a question intimately related to the matters of working with the building's addition and the future treatment of the adjoining Kasárenské námestie.

We should also draw attention to one further phenomenon: the treatment of architectural 'iconicity' of architecture as a marketing category. Efforts at conveying the uniqueness of postwar architecture relatively often become part of the commercial branding of various cities, which can form one strategy for the preservation of such heritage.<sup>29</sup> If the specific style is framed as a commodity that can assume greater value than the building's potential demolition or redevelopment, it is advantageous on the owner's part to preserve and present the structure in this specific light.<sup>30</sup> In our case, the investor took up the strategy where the potential customer is presented with a unique local product with an iconic image, basing its communicative campaign and business presentation on this same image of a 'modernist icon'. Also fitting well into this concept is the new name of the building: 'Urban' conveying simultaneously the connotations of the city environment alongside an additional local iconic image, the historic Renaissance campanile known as the St. Urban Tower. This new narrative of modernism that views the architecture only in the category of an aesthetic, 'edgy' style is, to be sure, highly reductive; hence it is necessary to ensure that sufficient attention is brought to the intellectual background and or the social role played by the architecture and urbanism of the given era.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Using the example of the former Prior department store in Košice, we have been able to follow several thematic lines, the understanding of which could be significant for the future reconstruction and later life of architecture from the same period.

First of all, it reveals the involvement and joint activity of various actors in the reconstruction process. Communication of the requirements of public bodies (KPÚ, ÚHA), the investor, the professional-academic community, and the the engaged civic public formed a good base to move onward to concrete proposals and solutions.

Protection efforts emerging from the group IMA were manifested in a wide range of activities which could, in turn, be regarded as encapsulating various types of strategies towards goal attainment. While the form of the petition could assist in visibility and media coverage, it turned out that a more important technique included direct actions, in the form of public lectures and discussions. More than 'social pressure' on governmental authority and private investors it involved the method of working with the public and spreading awareness among the various parties. Here, the direct actions could include the

exhibition held in the building itself. Indeed, intervention within the architecture, whether artistic or educational, were found to have a major impact in drawing the attention of the greater public to the building and the plans it was facing.

The success and the social position of the current OD Urban can probably only be judged after the start of its full-scale operations. Even now, though, it is possible to speak of an interesting instance of a process of synergy between several efforts, whether preserving the value of cultural heritage, keeping the building operational, or economic effectiveness. However, the outcome should not be viewed as either entirely bad or good: in terms of protecting a significant architectural achievement, several successes were realised, yet viewing the realisation more widely it is equally possible to say that the opportunities have not been realised in full.

What, cannot be denied is that this experience has opened new questions, the answers to which will be vital in the process of preserving postwar architecture. Here, the matter is the actual inclusion of this architectural legacy in the category of 'heritage'. In the current state of the building, one can clearly see the weaknesses that protection – when confined to the form of an urban heritage zone – might have in certain specific cases. Another is the seemingly simple question: what should be protected or preserved? Even in the awareness that certain elements must be sacrificed for others in terms of the project's economic aspects, it is necessary to draw attention to their significance. In the present case, it was the modernist spatial concept, characteristic of its era, which in connection with the creation of a new typological category should be regarded as a major architectural-historical value. Indeed, architectonic space often remains at the margins of interest and is often the first to be damaged. All the more thoroughly, therefore, we will need to think about future functions for modernist buildings and their potential changes over time.

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- 1 Later known as OD Tesco, but in the present text we will use its historic designation.
- 2 The Initiative for Modern Architecture (Iniciatíva za modernú architektúru – IMA) is a collective bringing together participants from the professional and lay publics, whose activity focuses on the protection of (primarily postwar) architecture in Košice and the wider region. The authors of the present study are all members of IMA.
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- 16 In local discussion, the term in use is 'terrazzo blocks', though in fact these are cast blocks. The visible surface was originally poured white concrete; the compactness of the material, shape, and surface are confirmed in several early photographs. In the 1990s, the façade was given a mechanical cleaning, which uncovered the grains in the blocks and partially disturbed the compactness of their shape. The result was to give the surface a terrazzo effect, although the hand-scraping process caused a loss of the original geometry of the fabric.
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- 18 The addition could be seen as a confrontation of two opposing principles in urban design in historic city centres: the modernist one, creating a new spatial organisation, and the postmodernist or 'heritage' approach, reuniting the disrupted street formations of the historic ground outline.
- 19 Through the 1970s and 1980s, several urban planning proposals were prepared that focused the wider city centre. Particularly interesting is a design from 1979, underlining the idea of a more visible articulation of the space of the "piazzetta". BĚL, A., HUDEC, D. and MARTONČÍK, E., et al., 1979. *Územný plán zóny celomestského centra*. Košice: ÚHA.
- 20 Since the city government regards the entire space of the present Kasárenské námestie as unsuitable, it commissioned an architectural-historical survey of the locality to serve as one of the key documents in an upcoming competition for the urban plan for Kasárenské námestie. JANOVSKÁ, Magdaléna and GIBALOVÁ, Lucia, 2020. *Urbanisticko-historický výskum Kasárenské námestie v Košiciach*. [online] 2020 [Accessed 10. 12. 2021] Available at: <https://www.kosice.sk/clanok/urbanisticko-historicky-vyskum-kasarenske-namestie-v-kosiciach>
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- 22 Official statement, Pamiatkový úrad Slovenskej republiky. Odpoveď na podnet na vyhlásenie bývalého obchodnému domu Prior v Košiciach za národnú kultúrnu pamiatku, dated 12. 08. 2019.
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- 31 Frieling, K. and Kip, M. (eds.), 2017, p. 5.