

PROMETHEUS IN THE COMPANY OF TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND OWL (ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS ON THE CAMPUS OF VŠB - TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY OF OSTRAVA)

Eva Spackova, PhD

VŠB - Technical University of Ostrava, Czech Republic

Abstract

The paper deals with the connection between sculptures and architecture in the second half of the 20th century. The research focuses on artistic works in public space of the VŠB – Technical University campus in Ostrava. In the socialist era, during which the campus was established in Ostrava – Poruba, the funds for artwork were allocated directly in capital budgets for each structure. Presently, the purchase and installation of fine artefacts is left to random decision. An example illustrating hereby the connection between the sculpture and architecture is the history of a relief by the sculptor Vladislav Gajda from the years 1968-1974 located above the VŠB-TUO main building entrance.

Keywords: The 20th century architecture, sculpture in public space, university campus, art collection

Introduction

Since the life of VŠB campus, the construction of which began fifty years ago (in 1964), the sculptures located within create a collection whose value is not just artistic and historical, but also financial. The research objective is to put together a gradual assessment of the current condition of art, knowledge of the history as well as documenting the genesis of artefacts by use of archival material. The purpose is to show the necessity to protect and maintain the existing works of art and the opportunity to conceptually complement the modern art collection established by VŠB - Technical University of Ostrava.

I.

Socialist city – new ostrava

Approximately ten kilometres northwest of Ostrava, where the original farming village Poruba was located, preparation for the construction of a housing development for miners began after the end of World War II. Beginning in 1952 the plans to build the New Ostrava in this location were being realized. The new socialist city was supposed to replace the historic centre of Ostrava, which was to be destroyed and sacrificed for coal mining. The Communist Party failed to fully implement the intention (Strakoš, 2010) and so the great plans for the New Ostrava were completed only partially resulting in the historic city centre still being located in its place.²¹

The Communist plans for New Ostrava instead turned into this area becoming one of the Ostrava City districts – today's Poruba. The central part is located along the Hlavní (formerly Lenin) třída (Main Avenue), built in the style of Socialist Realism. Other urban Poruba complexes built after 1955 bear the signs of modernist architecture, even though the districts maintain the predominant axis of the urban composition along Hlavní třída. The plan, drawn up by Stavoprojekt Ostrava in the 1960's, shows the assumed construction of the University Hospital and VŠB – Technical University (Fig. 1).

Foundation of the campus at vřb - technical university

The management of VřB - Technical University in the 1960's intensively tried to solve the unsatisfactory situation of the growing campus located in different areas of Ostrava. This situation has continued since the university's move from Příbram to Ostrava in 1945. The idea of placing the new university campus in New Ostrava was already considered in the early 1950's. Having decided on the location of the new campus in Poruba, the construction process was divided into three construction phases. The first construction phase ceremonially began on 22 April 1964 and the construction commenced with two buildings of new student dormitories and a cafeteria for two thousand students. The university had at that time a total of approximately 4,000 students.

The initial project for the construction of the university section was approved in 1966. The project originated in Ostrava Stavoprojekt in Studio 6, which was led by the architect Zdeněk Strnadel. The team responsible for design of the university buildings consisted of architects Zdeněk Kupka, Vladimír Svoboda, Zdeněk Šťastný and Milena Vitoulová. Project costs for

²¹ The centre of Ostrava is again under threat – a new "shopping mall" located in a former coking plant Karolina drained vitality from the historic city centre, which again must prove its historic resistance.

the construction of the university itself were 279 million Czechoslovakian crowns. The teaching section involved the department buildings, lecture halls and small laboratories, large indoor workshops as well as the Rectorate building, which was supposed to create a central landmark of the university district. This phase of the construction was completed in 1973 and most of the departments of the then three faculties (Faculty of Mining, Faculty of Metallurgy and Faculty of Mechanical Engineering) were moved to Poruba. The construction also gradually continued in the 1970's and 1980's, when another three buildings of student dormitories, a vehicle fleet building, a new cafeteria, a geological pavilion and Central Library were built. The campus of the Technical University until now is continuously complemented by new buildings, whose spatial location fills vacancies on the premises in only a utilitarian way without emphasis on the context and quality of public space, with architecture that does not exceed the local average (Fig. 2).

The architectural design of the campus from the turn of the 1960's and 1970's is reflected in publications presenting the architecture of socialist Czechoslovakia (Vebr, 1980), but thanks to its extent and importance the VŠB - Technical University campus is also recorded in the current literature devoted to the history of architecture of the 2nd half of the 20th century. Martin Strakoš classifies the campus as one of the examples of "*late international style*" (Strakoš, 2009) and Ševčík with Beneš (2009) compare the Poruba campus in its extent similar to that of the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra by Vladimír Dedeček and Rudolf Miňovsky. However, the Slovak University campus was designed and built almost a decade earlier, in the period of 1959-1965.

Architecture and fine arts on the campus of vřb - technical university

The works of art in architecture after 1948 were intended to ideologically impact the working class and the environmental aesthetics (hence the term "*art decor*", which became part of the socialist vocabulary and is used in contemporary texts). Production of artwork was precisely laid out by artistic master plans and coordinated by the public agencies regulating artwork contracts (řřastná, 2008). Dílo, the Czech Fund for Fine Arts, provided organization and coordination of the procurement of artwork contracts. Given that Dílo distributed a great number of artwork contracts, it also held a relatively large number of art competitions, in which the artefact was selected by an expert committee (jury) from more proposals. A common method included competitions by invitation, where specific artists were approached and following the submission of competition proposals the "*sketch allowances*" were divided amongst all of them, to help refund the

non-winners for basic costs.²² *"The conceptual plan"* was both part of the competition contracts and copyright messages, and the correspondence was commonly ended with a friendly greeting *"Art for Peace"*. During the more liberal era in the late 1960's, ideological, propaganda aspects of art were somewhat weakened and a greater emphasis was placed on formal consistency between the architecture and work of art. During the normalization era pressure on the proper ideological tone of works of art in public space again increased (Karous, 2013).

At the time of seeking an architectural solution to the VŠB-Technical University campus, the artwork was almost an obligatory part of the architecture of public buildings. The construction budgets included the funds for *"art decor"* representing 1-4% of investment costs (Title V of the Building Act).²³ Architects factored in artwork integrated into buildings and participated in the decision-making process together with expert committees that evaluated the proposals resulting from art competitions.

Marie Štastná notes in the publication entitled *Sculpture in the City* (2008) *"fitting all the VŠB-TUO premises in Poruba with sculptures is a textbook example of the planning of art production and central decision-making process regarding its form."*²⁴ There are still several works of art from that period (1968-1982) in the VŠB-TUO premises (in both the teaching section and the campus) illustrating the era in which they originated and were installed to complement the architecture. Archive materials and literature illustrate the method of assignment and creation of works of art and the level of care that was paid to both, the need for harmony of the artwork with architecture and the need to maintain proper ideological tone. The most significant of the collection is a relief of the sculptor Vladislav Gajda located on the facade of the Rectorate.

Birth of prometheus

As of June 1 1968 DÍlo, the Czech Fund of Fine Arts, announced *"an art competition to provide work of art for the first construction of VŠB-Technical University in Ostrava - Poruba."* The competition task was to *"acquire an artistically valuable relief design, or another work of art, which would be located in a designated place of a new building façade at departments of VŠB-Technical University in Ostrava - Poruba. The theme of*

²² *"Sketch allowances"* commonly ranged by several thousand crowns.

²³ If the estimated costs of construction of the University premises accounted for 279 million Czech crowns, then 1% of this amount set for the fine arts complementing the architecture represented 2.79 million Czech crowns, if we only count one per cent.

²⁴ The statement relates to construction of the VŠB -Technical University campus in 1960's – 1970's. Presently, we can no longer talk about the planning process of the acquisition of the works of art for the area.

this artwork is not determined in advance, however, it must comply with the social importance of the given task and mission of the University."

The following registered artists were invited to the competition with a letter of recommendation: Jiří Babíček, Vladislav Gajda, Čestmír Kafka, Eduard Ovčáček, Zdeněk Palcr and Rudolf Svoboda. In addition to the invited artists, other artists were allowed to participate in the competition. However, it was with no right for compensation for the proposal submission.²⁵ The deadline to submit a proposal was determined to be December 16, 1968 and the proposal needed to be presented with a model, with a montage photograph of the model in the building facade plan and an accompanying report with a limited budget of 700,000 Czech crowns. The jury was appointed as follows, by the Union of Czechoslovak fine artists: Jiří Bradáček, Vladimír Janoušek, Milan Obrátil, Karel Nepraš, Jiří Myszak, Petr Holý, Jaromír Zemina; by the Association of Czechoslovakian Architects: Radim Dejmal and Evžen Tošenovský; by investor Josef Widner; by Main Designer Zdeněk Strnadel. The alternates were Rudolf Chory and Valerian Karoušek. Academic sculptors (6x), architects (4x), visual theorists (2x) and an academic artist (1) were represented in the jury. The proposed implementation deadline for the winning proposal was January 31 1970. On the reverse side of the envelope, in which competitive conditions were delivered to V. Gajda the sketch proposal appears, which he later submitted in the competition (Fig. 3).

The expert jury was in session on January 8, 1969. Six members of the jury were absent from the evaluation and another juror was added, architect Radim Ulmann. All the invited authors submitted the proposal except Jiří Babíček. Some artists issued more than one proposal. After evaluating the proposals, the jury decided to announce the second phase of the competition for invited authors (Kafka, Palcr, Gajda), in whose proposals *"it evaluates efforts for an autonomous expression of artwork and a certain respect for the given architecture"* (Fig. 4). The second-phase of the competition deadline was set for 4 April 1969.

Vladislav Gajda entered the competition with two proposals. One proposal was represented by *"a relief sculpture"*, which was supposed to become the artistic dominant of the entire building. The author presented a proposal as *"relief wings growing out of the vertical druse of a central section, which extends from ground level - interconnects with the Earth."* The second proposal was a free-standing sculpture placed isolated, outside the building. The genesis of the proposals is documented by a number of sketches that have been preserved in the archive of the artist. On one of the

²⁵ The so-called *"sketch allowances"* for submission of the proposal amounted to CZK 7,000.

sketches includes the author's note "*Prometheus*" as one of potential inspiration (Fig. 5).

The jury was again in session to evaluate the second phase of the competition on April 17, 1969. Three jurors were absent, one of who was also the main designer, Zdeněk Strnadel and an investor proxy. V. Gajda and Z. Palcr submitted their proposals for the second phase of the competition. The report from the jury's meeting indicated that jurors voted to come to the conclusion that V. Gajda should be entrusted with implementation, because his proposal "*addressed a more consistent connection with the architecture.*" However, before the end of the meeting, the jury found that one of the proposals by Z. Palcr was overlooked and after having re-examined the proposal decided by a 6:1 vote that recommended the implementation of the "*significantly better*" Palcr's proposal.

The next report from the jury's meeting is dated September 23, 1970. According to available documents, the date for this meeting was changed several times for the jury's inability to make a quorum. An extraordinary meeting of the jury was announced because the main designer and the representative of the investor failed to participate in the previous meeting, which decided to award the first prize. The architects Bláha (on behalf of the investor) and Strnadel (the designer) expressed their disagreement with the conclusion of the jury. Other jurors insisted on their original decision. In the report the jury emphasizes the "*far-objective steps in further stages of negotiations, as it is of primary cultural significance.*" Satisfaction of the dispute should be achieved by further negotiations between the investor and the Czechoslovakian Dřilo, the enterprise of the Czech Fund for Fine Arts.

The documentation does not make it clear how the further decision-making process of the author of the artwork progressed. Another in a series of documents available from the archive of Vladislav Gajda is the contract for work from December 1, 1970 where the subject is a relief above the entrance to the premises of VŠB-Technical University departments for which he was commissioned. Another contract from April 27, 1971 adds to the relief an artistic design of the lobby wall. From the artist's sketches that have been preserved it is evident that the author considered the penetration of exterior relief to the interior of the building, and even considered a connection of both parts of the artwork through its indication in the floor (Fig. 6). In an undated author's note, Gajda describes this penetration of the sculpture above the entrance into the interior of the lobby. According to available records (March 15, 1972), the author himself had expanded the scope of the task with the interior stone relief, while respecting the original financial sum.

The author describes the theme of the artwork as follows: "*The sculpture reflects the expansion of technology, science, civilization - its*

wings penetrate the mass of the cube, by which creates a common dominant of the entire glass block. The general idea of the entrance sculpture is expanded and specified in the relief of an interior wall based on the structural components of the composition of metals and minerals, and is transformed into an art form that matches the content and function of the building. The overall effects involve reflections of plastic elements in a polished pavement, reinforced with artistically selected lighting, both indoors and outdoors." In this paper, concrete casting is listed as the material of the exterior, and the interior wall with the relief should be constructed from structurally processed slate (corresponding to columns facing the building).

In the following period (spring 1971) there was a partial change in the shape and material of the exterior relief, which was ultimately designed from copper sheeting. Interior relief was supposed to be created from Hořice sandstone. The works from summer 1971 were accompanied by issues associated with the extent and coordination of the construction work and implementation of art works. The author complained about the lack of funds and in the report from April 18, 1972 emphasized that the costs of copper relief were increased from 356 thousand Czechoslovak crowns (CSK)²⁶ to 623 thousand CSK²⁷ by the Arts and Crafts and because of this the author *is forced* to deliver the stone relief worth 150 thousand CSK free of charge (emotionally underlined). Even in the socialist economic system it was the author of a work of art who served as a guarantor of its implementation and compliance with the expected price, including e.g. construction works associated with the installation of the artwork into the building. The extent of the design (including statics) and construction works were among the reasons for the increase in planned costs.

Another issue was coordination of the construction work and building readiness for installation of artwork. The building was not supposed to be ready until the second half of 1972, when the artwork was to be installed. The relief sandstone wall in the interior was approved by a building inspection with no comments on September 19, 1972. Then on March 6, 1973 the exterior part of the relief was approved (Fig. 7). The report from the meetings of the Commission for Cooperation of artists with architects indicated that the user (VŠB-Technical University) raised comments *"regarding the degree and approach of ideological commitment of the artwork"*, which needed to be clarified by the author in a personal meeting

²⁶ The relief was constructed at the headquarters of Arts and Crafts in Brno. A 1:10 copper model is now located in the artist's studio in Třebovice.

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with representatives of the University, leading to "a removal of doubts on the ideological problematic nature."

The biggest issues came when putting finishing touches on the interior part of the copper relief. The author lacked the funds, the proposal continued to be modified and the supplier was changed; the Brno based Arts and Crafts was in the implementation stage replaced with a more inexpensive group, the Ostrava based Dyhor. By the end of 1973 the artwork still had not been completed, and the author was facing a penalty for failure to meet the deadline and assumed price.²⁸ Arbitration proceedings lasted from August to November 1973. The deadline delivery of all parts was set for January 31, 1974. The art commission approved the work of art on this date with reservations.²⁹

Present – prometheus in the company of teachers, students and owl

Forty years after its approval the artwork is still in place. The exterior part of the relief is in its original form. The glass facade of the building was replaced with a new facing, which lacks the fine vertical-horizontal structuring of the original facade (the original state in Fig. 7 and the current state in Fig. 8) resulting in the architecture of the facade having had lost its fine plasticity. The space around the relief (under the bracket protruding from the façade volume) was used to install ATMs and has also served as a covered exterior smoking area. To assist smokers a number of large trash bins used as ashtrays spaced at regular intervals were installed. Likely in order to ensure the safety of people walking around the area a number of concrete troughs decorated with neglected plants were installed by the edge of the elevated platform in front of the façade.

The area outside the main entrance to the building was paved in 2002 and was completed by the sculpture by Olbram Zoubek that VŠB-Technical University received as a gift. A group of seven figures is in the book *Socha ve městě [Sculpture in the City] [5]* presented under the name *People*. In the records of the Technical University (University Department of Administration and Operations), the sculptural group is entitled *Teachers and Students*. Across from the entrance to the building, in the middle of this

²⁸ The penalty amount was calculated based on the cost of the whole artwork, and in case of failure to meet the deadline would reach 11,130 CSK. In the event of exceeding the contract price of the artwork the penalty would be 130,000 CSK. The penalty would be charged under the contract with the author.

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area, there is a small drinking fountain with a granite body in the shape of an owl, which is currently non-functional (no water).

There is still a sandstone relief by V. Gajda located in the wall facing the entrance to the main building lobby, which M. Šťastná lists under the name *Coal and Iron*. The author of the relief describes it as a geological section of the Upper Silesian Basin, which captures the evolution of the earth's crust. Gajda's sketches include a great number of study drawings, in which the artist verified the appearance of plants, whose bodies formed black coal. At present, the bust of Georgius Agricola has been placed in front of the relief (dated 1999, author not stated), accompanied by a symmetrical composition of four plants in pots, two of which are made of plastic and two are live (Fig. 9). The whole arrangement is accompanied with a glass-door display case, where there is one tall vase in the centre and another smaller in the corner, with no description. This artefact probably corresponds to the list of artwork kept by VŠB, as "Bory glass vase" item, dated 1986. Gajda's relief, subtly conveying the history of coal, is in other sections surrounded by advertising banners (Fig. 10). This example of *preservation of works of art* and its presentation does not indicate any sophistication and awareness of the value of environment that we care for.

Conclusion

For those who may have a better understanding of numerical values, it can be said that works of art have financial value which, provided that the art collection is well-preserved and the attention is paid to its reproduction, can increase over time. The fine art collection owned by VŠB-TUO up to now certainly has a value that could be cultivated in the future. If we realize in time that the things we walk past every day are in fact art. Michal Třeščík in the book entitled *Umění sbírat umění* [Art of Art Collection] (2013) characterizes the role of artwork we buy in three aspects - decor, representation and pleasure. A necessary condition of the collection is that it is under control. This is represented not only by the ownership of collected objects but also by an intellectual control, represented by intentional replenishment of art objects and their preservation. Building a collection is a conscious activity, following some concept and intent. Unfortunately, the contemporary state of acquisition of art objects in the possession of VŠB-TUO does not follow this approach. The artwork that the University has collected since 1989 is marked as gifts. As for donated items, the recipient of the gift does not usually get to decide on the quality of new works of art, and so those works, which VŠB-Technical University received after the Velvet Revolution are of a very diverse quality. Any such work can be located somewhere in the campus, with no regard whether it is a work of the famous artist or an amateur project. At the same time universities around the world

often invest in a valuable art collection to demonstrate for example, a particular aspect of their activities and also to enhance their prestige.

The conclusions can be summarized in several points, the fulfilment of which can help restore the place of art in the life of the University:

- Works of art in the VŠB-Technical University campus need consistent record keeping; they should be traced, marked and summarized.
- Information on the individual works of art, illustrating their creation and proposal, including the characteristics of the author and historical context, can be traced.
- Existing works of art can be financially assessed (and price quantified).
- Each work of art in the possession of the VŠB-TUO should be assessed in terms of its technical condition, and suitable repair and maintenance should be designed as needed.
- The fine art on the Technical University campus needs future vision; the architectural concept of a desirable form of both the VŠB-TUO campus and the spaces between them should be established. This concept then can be complemented with works of art that would not only be perceived as décor, but as a systematically built collection, whose theme can be linked to the focus of a modern technical university.
- When assigning the projects in both the architectural and art field the University can use a method of open proposal competition. The competition can be used to obtain alternative proposals, from which the expert jury may choose the best solution.
- An interesting aspect is the art viewed as a marketing strategy of the University – a principal wings motif on the relief above the entrance was used by its author, the sculptor Gajda, in his design of commemorative VŠB medals (Fig. 11a and 11b). It is unfortunate that these elements are not utilized and developed for visual representation of the university.

We surely do not want to go back to times when there was a central planning of the production of art, and whereby works of art in public space were assigned a role of an ideological and propagandized nature. The story of one piece of the sculpture mosaic complementing the architecture of the university campus has attempted to prove the value of fine art from any period, provided that the author was looking for interpretation of an idea that can address the perceptive observer in a more universal way, rather than a purely descriptive ideology. Whether we see Prometheus repeatedly suffering for the fact he gave mankind fire, or the wings opening for him to

take off. If a work of art gives open possibilities for interpretation, we can look at them every day anew.

Even a technically oriented university can accommodate in its environment quality artwork that stimulates imagination and creativity. Art education is not a subject in the curriculum of most branches taught at VŠB-Technical University, however it is the architecture of environment and artwork that can help rationally based academic workers and students escape subjectivity. It is sometimes just enough to look closely.

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Material from private archives of the sculptor Vladislav Gajda was used for compilation of the paper. The paper documentation as well as sketches and models are archived in his studio in Ostrava - Třebovice. I would like to thank you to the son of the sculptor, Jakub Gajda for facilitating my studies of the materials and their reproductions.

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