

INTERVIEW WITH ELIA ZENGHELIS

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CENTRAL EUROPE - ARCHITECTURE AND REGIME



- In developing the idea of Central Europe with The Centre for Central European Architecture, we feel that a paradox exists for this region. A paradox in defining Central Europe: according to some thinkers Central Europe exists and to others it does not. We have a feeling, not during these days of the workshop, but through pure living experience here, that something like the actual existence of a Central Europe can be formulated. Do you feel a difference, being here, from what you would call Western, or Eastern Europe?

I have always been conscious of the presence of "Central Europe", primarily in geographic rather than any other terms, in the same sense as one is instantly conscious of "the Balkans"

as distinct from what we are used to calling "Western Europe". While none of these are either clearly defined, distinct entities, or culturally homogeneous (in fact they are bestowed with a heterogeneous cultural richness) nevertheless they each call to mind a phantom 'character', partly induced by our imagination, partly by our literature and partly by their geographical, historical and (real or presupposed) cultural reality. Yet even this is hard to define and the definition (such as it is) is somewhat vacillating. Most of us think of Germany as "Western", yet it stretches from the West to the East. Slovenia was part of Yugoslavia; Yugoslavia was clearly part of the Balkans, hence the region that defines South-Eastern Europe. Yet we conceive Slovenia as decidedly part of "Central" Europe. And Romania? Is it Eastern Europe? Southern Europe? It embraces all categories, even the beginning of the North. In my consciousness it is also part of Central Europe. The way our imagination defines these regions, where they begin and where they end, is more important than their geographic accuracy. It defines it by a motley assortment of

inferences, like our relative knowledge of history and literature, our conception and/or experience of myths, geography, mountain ranges that we have read about or visited and finally the seas that surround the continent (from the Baltic to the Atlantic and the Mediterranean) which determine our vision of the interior continental regions. Central Europe is the "Interior" of the continent. The ancient Greeks saw Delphi as the "navel" of the world. Central Europe - and certainly the Czech Republic being more or less in the "Centre" of Central Europe - is the navel of Europe. As such it has, throughout its history and culture fulfilled this role. There are no national boundaries formulating central Europe, it is a kind of mentality: both our own mentality and the way we imagine it and the actual mentality of its inhabitants. Whether it is the combination of the Slavic element (traditionally thought of as North Eastern) and the proximity to its Teutonic and Magyar neighbours, it is a mixture that has produced a richness of intellectual and artistic resourcefulness that is unique to the region. Whether this comes from Western, Eastern, Northern or Southern influences, it is exclusive to this region - and this fact makes it the Centre and its difference: serious, intense and sincere.

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At the same time, there is an experience of forty years here in Central Europe, which is now read in a certain way by contemporary observers..

These forty years are exceptionally important. The legacy they conferred on the collective unconscious of the nations behind the "Iron Curtain" is considerable and we can regard this as having had both positive and

negative, but very important and ineradicable consequences: we cannot deny or forget this stirring part of History, as is the wish of certain German architects, politicians and planners (think of Berlin and the physical erasure of the Wall: such an important and poignant part of the city's History has been set to wilful oblivion - a tragic act of amnesia and loss of opportunity for Berliners). This forty-year period temporarily shifted our view of Central Europe as being part of the "Eastern Block": the "Iron Curtain" was the dividing line of a politically divided Europe: East and West, both conceptually and in fact; there was no "centre" of any kind in this.

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These forty years were miserable for human rights, the law, ownership etc. But at the same time, during that period, architects realised fabulous buildings, some of which we visited.¹ Do you think that the regime took from something that already existed or is it basically something that it developed by itself?

I am sure that initially the regime took the principles of modernism that existed, since they were 'socialist' in nature. Even though Modernism was applied to the capitalist world it was essentially a socialist ideal: Socialism was part of the modernist dream. What is interesting (and this I attribute to the cultural sophistication of the Central European countries) is that the Stalinist maxim for a return to conservative principles in architecture (palaces for the people) did not get hold of in the built projects on the more sophisticated European countries to the same extent that it did in the USSR (for a similar reason you see so many successful Unités d'habitation built in Yugo-slavia at the time). The whole

idea of collective living in the 'Unité d'habitation' was perfectly suited to a socialist dream. Le Corbusier had his own idiosyncratic view of socialism. So I believe that here it was definitely a question of continuing with something that had already been envisaged. Partly because of this, the Stalinist criticism of Modernism as corrupt and degenerately bourgeois, not only had a valid point, but in the case of the return to academicism did also produce magnificent urban contributions, as are the so-called 'quartals' of Moscow: urban perimeter blocks on a very large scale, built for socialist apartments, palaces that have adorned the city and are amongst its most impressive Urbanist achievements, even as they recall fascist principles. Recently we saw the hotel Intercontinental in Prague². It is easy to call it a 'fascist' building: but we must not forget the common principles between fascism and socialist realism and the fact that both ideologies produced striking architectural and 'urban' realizations. What was interesting is the fact that the modernists and the constructivists failed to contribute to the city: theirs were essentially anti-city projects, in that they rejected the legacy of the city as it had evolved during the autocratic principles of the Renaissance or the mercantile principles of the bourgeois revolution and sought to reconceive it on the ideological premise of a new relationship between the collective and the individual, a relationship that could only be accomplished by a "tabula rasa".

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Let us focus on this relationship between the collective and the individual: perhaps seeing the relationship of city versus sprawl as a political issue makes a connection, which can help explain the sprawl as 'non-citiness'?

It should be a dialectical relationship; but it is not: it is a kind of escape from the city and the collective, which are seen as dangerous and corrupting. The city is the locus of 'protest' and escaping from its dangers is the outcome of the present form of 'liberalism', which engenders the cult of privatisation. Everything is now being privatised. It's the 'coup de grâce' of the public domain.

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But this privatisation is actually also the process we have had here during the last twenty years - because we were in the collective - and now?

This is the point: it is a reactionary reflex, to do the opposite of what you did during forty years of oppressive collectivity. Imposed collectivity is repressive to the individual; and as such it cannot work; one of the prime flaws of Marxist socialism has been its disregard for the rising science of psychology: only a socialist ideology that embraced human psychology and could accommodate private desires would stand a chance to engender a successful collectivity. What is interesting is that after the Second World War, faced with what it saw as the communist 'threat', capitalism absorbed socialist values and practices, on the one hand out of self-interest (in order to survive as such) but also out of some desire to improve social conditions; a shift towards a kind of capitalism with a socialist content: the 'welfare' state. It is noteworthy that such measures would have been inconceivable in the kind of capitalist democratic countries of the 1920s and 30s.

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If we put the city as something common, the sprawl as something individual, where would be the nature in this very social hierarchy?

Let's face it; there hardly exists such a thing as 'nature' in our continent anymore. What we have in terms of nature is mostly artificial, agricultural, or inaccessible and hostile, as in the highest mountain peaks. If we look at this question in purely idealistic terms, nature should be collective, but in the present circumstances it is mostly in private hands, with exceptions that are comparable to the public parks that are set within the city (hence not 'natural'). The private gardens of the sprawl that spread around the cities are neither nature nor city: they are a cancerous erosion of the countryside by cities that have no limits. The only way we could safeguard the existence of any kind of 'nature' would be if cities had inviolable limits. By saying this I do not preclude the right of people to live outside the city. But I think that a careful and ecological balance of areas of habitation in the countryside should be designated outside the cities, with equally inviolable limits. They could form a dialectical relationship with the city - and the countryside as well. I should clarify that I also am not in principle against private property, because I believe that this would be totally against human nature. One would only wish that there was a political system that would make this available to all in equitable terms - and I don't think this is a utopian wish: I am optimistic that one day our civilization will achieve it. In retrospect this is a reflection towards your earlier eloquent question "and now?" - It's the 64000-dollar question: no regime or religion has managed to implement the Christian notion of 'Equity'. While previous Socialist regimes failed, the appalling discrepancy between power and powerlessness, between "haves" and "have-nots" in our 'democracies'

remains in one piece. Is this the result of our collective negligence, or the product of the primordial nature of our species? Is it something that not even our civilization can discard?

EDUCATION

- **An idea of the workshop 'Urbanity Twenty Years Later' was to research and produce critical remarks on what happened in the last 20 years. There were moments when I felt that this period did not warrant such critical remarks.**

On the contrary, I think the aims of the workshop were crucial and well conceived. If anything, I felt that there was an insufficiency of critical evaluation for the last 20 years; this, as a want for a critical comparison between 'before' and 'after', was perhaps the Achilles' heel of most presentations. I felt that there was too much of a celebration for what was won after the fall of communism, without any commentary on what was lost, which in fact is something that a large sector of the population in Russia (and even in Albania, the harshest of the communist regimes in Europe) is very much aware of and often reminisces about, with a degree of nostalgia: benefits that they used to have which they now don't, while life has become a struggle for survival of the fittest, in a perspective of capitalist exploitation.

- **You therefore had the feeling from these three days, that there is a need for this kind of criticism by the young generations?**

Yes, in general I believe that criticism of our status and a critical mind is always essential if we are to have any hope of improving our lot. This goes back to education. Without being partisan this should encourage a sense of political awareness. And the problem with education, especially secondary education, is that political awareness is treated like a hot potato, in the name of impartiality (and 'fear' of encouraging mutiny). But as a result, students leave secondary school intellectually underprovided, a prey to extraneous trends and without the ability to discern or develop their own value system.

- **So basically we are some kind of 'criticising protagonist' here in Central Europe, but how can we avoid mistakes made before us in welfare countries?**

Unfortunately, this is the question of a kind of farsightedness that we are short of: looking beyond our own lifetime and into that of future generations. It is not only a question of simply avoiding or repeating old mistakes, or even making new mistakes. It is another aspect of our negligent human nature. Even though our children are the most precious things we have, we are blind to the kind of future that we are building for them. It is a collective mentality. Think of the scientifically established fact of Global Warming: we cannot avoid a rise of 2 degrees. This means that Europe's Mediterranean will be like Egypt by 2050. We know that a rise of 5 degrees will mean the end of life for us on Earth. But we'll be dead by then: this is the kind of ephemeral thinking of today's politicians, who are totally impervious to what might be when they are already dead.

- **Yes, what happens after elections, today and in four years.**

Politics in the real sense of the word is dead and we don't have a political future.

- **Speaking about society and architecture we always have politics as partners so how can we speak about a future in these circumstances? At the same time we have been trained to not forget the client, but thinking of the private client within the perspective of society is a puzzle. So the question is in which format our profession can communicate with the client?**

We are facing a kind of schizophrenia about what is architecture. We have been trained to think that architecture has to be built, be 'rational' and comply with clients' requirements. But we are rarely reminded of the importance that unrealised architecture, (judgmentally called "paper architecture") and of the fundamental role it has played in the development of the discipline throughout the history of architecture. We only have to think of Boulée, Le Corbusier or the Russian constructivists among others, whose most important projects have been unrealisable within their social political and economic context: symbolic projects that demonstrated "possible" alternatives. I think that this is an imperative area of investigation. There should be a significant body of this kind of paper architecture being produced, published and being promoted by schools of architecture. It is not enough to train architects so that they know how to build, something that is too abstract in the classroom and that only can be learnt by experience.

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So is there some kind of misconception about what schools should do then?

I think so; in the main, schools endeavour to train 'practitioners', which is by far not a priority, nor are schools the proper place in which to learn practice: throughout history architects learned the practice of the architecture in the course of apprenticeship. Schools of architecture are a modern phenomenon and one would think that their primary 'raison d'être' would be theory. But paradoxically, Schools of Architecture are primarily empirical. Learning from History (both architectural and general) and matters of ideology and generally principles (or the ability to formulate theoretical speculations) are either avoided - I believe for political reasons - or (such as are actually taught) are anachronistic and result in an intellectual illiteracy that deprives students of the necessary authority to take a "position" in their forthcoming career.

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Thank you very much

 1 National Assembly in Prague designed by Karel Prager realization: 1966-72

2 Hotel Intercontinental a socialist realism building constructed in Prague during the dominance of Stalinist dictatorship by size incomparably smaller than the Warsaw Palace of Culture and in Prague designed by architect František Jeřábek, 1951-59