

## Writing ‘The Architecture of Prague and Bohemia’

Brian Knox

*In the late 1950s when Brian Knox was writing The Architecture of Prague and Bohemia he was a pioneer not only in introducing the subject to an English-speaking audience but also in visiting the country at all. Today when endless numbers of tourists stream from the Old Town Square across the Charles Bridge to the Castle and back again, it is difficult to imagine how isolated the country then was. A by-product of that isolation was a wide-spread failure in the West to appreciate the art and architecture not just of Czechoslovakia but of Central Europe in general. The book's scholarship, warmth and insight defy any barriers of ignorance or prejudice. There is still no better guide in English to the extraordinary architectural heritage of the Czechs.*

My interest in the visual arts appeared tentatively at primary schools; it then had to struggle at a traditional boarding school, with graphic design expressed by writing unplayable orchestral scores and, appropriately for a very 'churchy' environment, architecture experienced by 'church-crawling' with a few friends and a master. But one of my contemporaries had a copy of *Vers une Architecture*, and I was hooked.

My interest in the Baroque was aroused by Sacheverell Sitwell – *German Baroque Art* had appeared as long ago as 1927 – who encouraged lushness in my prose style. My attention was swung towards Central Europe by my military service in 1950 – 51 in Germany, briefly in charming Verden, then in escapes on 'local leave' from Lüneburg Heath to the Bavarian Alps. When I was at Oxford there was no course in art history, but my interests were evident enough for one bit of (unsolicited) career advice to be “I suppose you'll finish up in a museum”. Becoming an architect was ruled out by the protracted tutelage and lack of income. Instead, a career on the Stock Exchange brought me the means to travel to Franconia in 1955 and my pursuit of the sources of what I had seen took me on a first visit to Italy which began with Turin (for Guarini) and went on to Rome (for Borromini and Bernini), with a resolve not to be distracted by pictures.

All this brought me to recognise that there was a void at the centre of the architectural culture I had discovered in Bavaria and Austria and that void was centred beyond the 'Iron Curtain' in Prague. But I



*An old postcard of Prague from the time of Brian Knox's first visit*

also discovered that so far no-one had written about it in English. Late in 1956 the *Financial Times* reported Czechoslovak intentions to introduce a tourist rate of exchange. In those days my City firm was regarded by competitors as 'cheating' by coming in to work at 9 and dispersing at 5.30, so I had time on my hands. Martin Wedgwood borrowed his mother's Morris Traveller. We negotiated visas and all sorts of coupons through Progressive Tours. Blessed by 1957's autumn weather and sustained by roast goose with dumplings and cabbage, in three weeks we covered an astonishing number of the sights of the Czech lands.

For two years or so I had spent my spare time compiling a card index from very heterogeneous sources – tomes dedicated to the Emperor Franz Josef, surveys published in Czech between the wars, wartime German efforts to argue that the culture was all German really, and even some shaky English translations of post-war work by Czech scholars. One evening, buried in a pile of books at a desk in the British Museum library, I was tapped on the shoulder by a tall figure with an immaculate jacket, Karel Just; he was to provide ideas, encouragement, and back seat driving. On reading a first draft, he deplored what he felt was a lack of overt enthusiasm; “it would not make me want to go there.” As a response I converted to a much

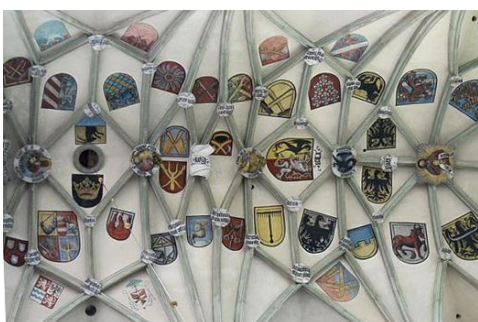
more lush Sitwellian style; not all reviewers liked it, and it had unexpected social consequences.

There were friends to be made in the Czech lands too – in Prague Dobroslav Líbal, the eminent historian of Czech Gothic, who also gave me a copy of an unpublished survey of the development of the plans of Czech towns, and in Brno Kamil Fuchs who took me to see the Tugendhat House, to taste wine in the cellars of Valtice, and to discuss with his father Bohuslav the choice of furniture for the refurbishment of his Hotel Avion. And in 1959 I bought my first car, a sturdy Rover 90, which took me and Tony Mitchell on a tour which went Prague - Tatras - Cracow - Wroclaw and back.



Brian Knox's car parked outside the Villa Tugendhat in Brno, 1960

My interest in Central Europe had been stimulated by the Baroque, but I quickly came to love Czech architecture of both the Gothic and the Renaissance – the elegance of hall churches and the coolness of castle courtyards. I claim to have been one of the first historians to have asserted the debt owed by Peter Parler's work to the 'Decorated' Gothic of England. I did appreciate the early appearance of Modern in Czech building. Where I failed was in grasping the variety and richness of nineteenth-century architecture; I made some small amends in a pull-out map guide to Prague architecture from 1800 which I provided to *Architectural Design* in 1967.



The ceiling of St Barbara's Cathedral in Kutná Hora, an example of Parler's Decorated Gothic style

I first approached likely publishers in 1958, and it was Faber & Faber who took the bait. With the encouragement of Peter du Sautoy I set about collecting potential illustrations from sources of all kinds; the most helpful was the *Státní ústav památkové péče a ochrany přírody*; I relied a lot on postcards and used only four taken with my faithful Voigtländer. Inspired by the dustjacket of Sedlmayr's great monograph on Fischer von Erlach, I was particularly proud of an eighteenth century engraving of a procession in Malá Strana which Faber for some reason printed on a deep orange which did not catch the potential buyers' eyes. But Faber acceded to my tyro choice of Plantin for the text and granted me the treat of running heads – chapter titles on the left hand pages, the current subjects on the right. They also had to endure much fussing over the placing of the illustrations in the text. After allowing me £75, or 15% of composition cost, they charged me just £3.7s.7d for excess author's corrections.

At last, after printing 3,000 copies, we published on 13 July 1962. I received an initial royalty cheque for £100. Fumbling through my file of old cuttings, I am astonished by the number of reviews – even if mostly short – and by their generally kindly tone. The *TLS*, however, reproached its arrangement: "It would be difficult to think of a more confusing organisation of the book's content"; and I have to admit that the reviewer, Norbert Lynton I believe, was right. I just could not bring myself to compose a gazetteer and not the more literary form of a sort of travelogue, the influence of Sitwell again. But the slightly overblown style, described in the *Architectural Review* as 'vivid' and 'engrossing', seemed to go down well.

Alas, however, tourism to Central Europe had not taken off. In two and a half years only 526 full price copies had been sold. This spurred Faber to try a reissue with a new dust-jacket – for which I provided a punchier image of Broggio's church at Osek – and a new title, *The Architecture of Prague and Bohemia*, which met their desire for something with 'Prague' in it. This stimulated a bit more demand; in the first half of 1965 174 copies more went. Then sales slowed to a trickle again, and at the end of 1969 had crept up to 974. In May 1970 the rest of the stock was remaindered.

However, there were compensating consequences. Nikolaus Pevsner had read my manuscript for Faber, and in recommending that they should publish it had added that he "hopes that you will go on to Poland and also Hungary – very badly

**Osek Abbey in Bohemia,**  
chosen for the dust-jacket of  
Brian Knox's book when it  
was reissued  
by Faber and Faber  
in 1965

*The abbey was rebuilt in Baroque  
style by the architect Octavius  
Broggio between 1712 and 1718.  
The interior of the monastery church  
was decorated with fresco paintings  
by Václav Vavřinec Reiner, and a  
new convent, library and chapels  
were added*





**Changing Prague** Above left, the Golden Well Hotel (in Czech U Zlaté studně), Karlova Street, under snow. Above right, the Dancing House (in Czech Tančící dům), nicknamed 'Ginger and Fred', on Jirásek Square. Below, the beautifully restored former ticket offices and entrance of Prague's Secessionist Main Railway Station (in Czech Praha hlavní nádraží), superseded in the 1970s by the building of a new concourse



needed!” I ploughed on with research and travel – I would never write about things I had not seen – but after their disappointments Faber understandably lost interest. Getting *The Architecture of Poland* into print would take another decade, but that is another story. And since then the academic bars have been raised; with the boom in art history – “not a subject” when I was at Oxford - the sheer volume of research to be read to update 'Prague' has vastly expanded, and with it the requirement for footnotes. I found a much more rewarding public for my views on the oil industry and on the Nordic stock markets.

I visited Prague briefly in each of three more years before publication; after that Poland took over, and visits were more spasmodic as family requirements pressed and as I became more involved with Japan.

A memorable trip was in 1990 with my future wife; after calling on old friends at Meissen we drove up the river and at the border the guard asked “Möchten Sie einen Stempel? Das letzte Mal!” and our passports were endorsed “DDR – Ausreise”; it was 23rd September, and on 1st October the DDR ceased to exist. In Prague we were able to buy the *Financial Times* at the Intercontinental. Our

daughter’s first visit was in March 2006, when we woke to see the view from *U Zlaté studně, putti* and all, covered in snow (and the airport closed). And in January this year another family visit included a guided tour by Segway.

This last visit took in old acquaintances excitingly brought to life, such as the abbey at Břevnov, and new ones such as 'Ginger and Fred' (better seen looking out) and the *Nová Scéna* (for a little Shostakovich), as well as (at last) Loos’s Müller House. I have been most impressed by the wholesale refurbishment not just of 'monuments' and smart shopping streets but of ranges of nineteenth and early twentieth-century buildings which used to be anonymously shabby; there were joyful Art Deco discoveries like the Imperial Hotel. In the centre at least it is the few neglected ones that stand out, like *Stýblův dům* in *Václavské náměstí*, put to shame by the new glitz of *Bat'a* alongside, and the exteriors of the original Main Railway Station. I look forward to using the latest publications to discover more.

Copies of *The Architecture of Prague and Bohemia* are available on [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)