

Observations from Prague

Behind every great piece of architecture is a great client and other thoughts

By Hugh Hochberg, The Cox Group



Hugh Hochberg

RECENTLY PARTICIPATED IN THE CONFERENCE OF THE AIA COMMITTEE ON DESIGN IN PRAGUE, the theme of which was "Architecture in Transition", and I gave a wrap-up talk, from which I extracted the following comments, some of which draw specifically on experiences while in the Czech Republic and others of which are more general.

How do Czech architects differ from U.S. architects (not too much generalization here, is there?!)?

Perhaps the biggest difference, and it's a change only since the Velvet Revolution, is their elevated spirit, fueled by the rejuvenation achieved through gaining freedom to practice after decades of restriction while under Communist rule.

Observations about "Architecture in Transition" in the Czech Republic

- Transition and development of urban design and architecture in Prague cover more than a thousand years. Each generation has built on what previous generations left behind. Prague's fabric results more from continual, sequential transition than from collaboration.
- Time compression today eliminates the luxury of non-collaboration.
- Transition reflects socio-economic-political changes.
- Transition reflects evolution of classes and ethnic groups and in some cases the architecture around them; to wit: The Jewish Ghetto in Prague.
- Transition reflects shifting geographic focus and influence, from provincial to national to international in Czech architecture.

- The strength of Prague's urban fabric results in part from compression and decompression of space, and that same concept of compression and decompression in a philosophical way is an aspect of "creative tension."
- Virtually all of the work the committee visited and experienced is the legacy of the architects involved, none of whom left a legacy of an ongoing practice.
- Transition challenge: The keys to effecting a transition from where you are today to where you will be tomorrow, if you choose to influence it, lies in what you do in such aspects as creativity, collaboration, constructability, "continuity" of the firm (ultimately a leadership issue), culture and client rapport.
- Eva Jiricna, a Czech architect practicing in London, observes, "We're becoming 'coordinates' much more than human beings." In that context, she also contrasts "technical excellence" with "design that makes you feel better." Above all, Eva exudes passion.

Observations about Architects

- Architects are extraordinarily good about speculating on the future, talking about creativity and planning their influence on the world around them...and notoriously good about why they can't—and therefore won't—do the very things to which they aspire.
- Pressures, largely driven by time and finance, require more diligent assessment of where, when, and how to be thoughtful, because ultimately thoughtfulness will separate shapers from mimics.
- Behind every piece of great architecture is a great client... served by great talent, working in a milieu enhanced by leadership, process and culture. The self-absorbed, client-ignoring genius who nonetheless produces great work is a myth. Great design requires great clients.
- Extreme budgets don't necessarily lead to great design, or in some cases, even to good design... although it can help.

- Sustaining efforts that produce great architecture requires profitability, the more the better. It is absurdly naive to trap oneself into thinking that the higher value offered by better design warrants lower fees and lower profitability.

Observations about Great Design

- Great design has clear, though not necessarily singular, authorship.
- Great design incorporates multiple perspectives and multi-disciplinary understanding.
- Great design is generally more explainable than only intuitive. "Explainability" enhances the potential for project-focused collaboration.
- Great design is timely, but not necessarily timeless. Think, for example, of a seasonal floral landscape design, a fireworks display, the sounds of a musical score.
- Creativity is largely driven by intrinsic rewards... Truly creative individuals... are primarily driven by internal motivations. —Richard Florida

- Teresa Amabile of Harvard Business School observed, "Internal motivation is conducive to creativity, but external motivation is detrimental. It appears that when people are primarily motivated to do some creative activity by their own interest and enjoyment of that activity, they may be more creative than when they are primarily motivated by some goal imposed upon them by others." [Emphasis mine.] And therein lays the challenge, since architects generally work for a client.
- The world is very possibly experiencing more great design today than in any period in its history, but often today as in the past, great design is surrounded by mediocrity. Maybe that's how we recognize the great things.
- Design is about creativity and innovation, among other things. Implicit in creativity and innovation is risk, about which the profession of architecture is noticeably averse, spending more energy determining why not to do certain things rather than how to do them. ■

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