

# A UTOPIA OF MODERNITY : ZLÍN REVISITING BAŤA'S FUNCTIONAL CITY

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# PREFACE

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The architect Ivan Bergmann lets his gaze wander over the rooftop terrace of Building No 21. He smiles. The café high above the roofs of the former Baťa shoe factory in Zlín is extremely popular. The clientele that has settled in on this summer afternoon is young – no one had envisaged such crowds when the city’s architectural landmark was renovated and redeveloped in 2003-4. This random scene says a lot about the city as a whole. Zlín is an architectural manifesto, an early social and urban utopia, built by the entrepreneur Tomáš Baťa. As such an everyday moment shows, however, the city also points towards the future. Now, long after the Baťa era has come to an end, a new generation is present.

With the cessation of shoe production at the main factory in 2002, the face of the city changed. At the beginning of 2000, the Tomáš Baťa University – which today boasts some 10,000 enrolled students – opened its doors. Although there is no longer any large-scale industrial manufacturing, Zlín is not a shrinking city. This is due to the foresight shown by the entrepreneur brothers Tomáš and Jan Antonín Baťa, who, as their company expanded in the 1930s, also diversified it into a conglomerate. Besides shoes, plastics, tyres, and light airplanes were manufactured as well. Today, mechanical engineering and the plastics industry form the backbone of economic development. The role played by the City of Zlín in the surrounding region has changed as well. Building No 21, the former company headquarters, now houses the Zlín Regional Government, which decides on future development. A product of the far-reaching administrative reform of 2000, the Zlín Region (Zlínský kraj) is one of 14 new regions formed out of 80 Czech districts. The restructuring was a precondition for gaining financial support from the European Regional Development Fund. Although this step furnished the Regional Government with even greater regional autonomy, it was the merger with the neighbouring region of Olomouc to form the EU NUTS-II region of Central Moravia that first lent it European importance. Six decades after the Baťa company was forced into exile, Zlín is once again emerging as a region aspiring to play a significant role in the Czech Republic and Europe.

Zlín is an exceptional place, one where past and present overlap. The architectural and intellectual heritage of this city is still tangible. Today’s Zlín is at once a historically significant architectural monument of European Modernism and a city with an active commercial life as well as a lively education system. It is neither a post-industrial wasteland, nor a museum-like

relic of an erstwhile ideal city: this is what interested us in this city from the outset. Far away from the large Czechoslovak urban centres of the interwar period, here a large-scale experiment was undertaken: all aspects of social life were subordinated to a single purpose. While the ideology primarily concerned the production process, it also permeated educational institutions, cultural bodies, and recreational facilities, and thus ultimately took hold of life in the city in all its diversity, for the latter was subjected to the rhythm of the factory. In this thoroughly planned construct, discipline and emancipation entered into a paradoxical relationship. As a planned city, Zlín is still an illustrative model for a laboratory situation: this conception for the future from the past sheds light on the topicality of historical utopias. Are they still relevant for contemporary planning? Seen from this angle, Zlín is an auspicious object of research, and not only for urbanists and architects; the discussion on the viability of planned cities and social order has lost none of its relevance since the 1920s.

These were the background considerations for staging the symposium 'A Utopia of Modernity : Zlín', which was held in Zlín and Prague over several days in May 2009. We prefaced this event with two questions: Firstly, to what extent is Zlín of interest for the contemporary problems and issues facing urban planning and architecture? And secondly, is it suitable as a learning model for the future? Along with local experts, we invited international theorists and scholars; their contributions are collected in this publication. They broach both aspects, evaluating the city's architectural and intellectual heritage. Granted equal importance is also the currently relevant question of learning from Zlín. What place, symposium participants considered, can utopian thinking still claim in political and urbanist conceptions? How sustainable the architectural heritage in today's Zlín is will be determined, amongst other things, by how a young generation nurtures its own contemporary cultural identity.

Instead of a chronological arrangement of chapters, aspects of current research on the Bafa phenomenon are interlaced under six thematic focal points, each casting an eye towards the future. A synopsis on each focal point presents the key lines of argumentation pursued by the individual authors and shows the relationships between the various academic disciplines and approaches. This complex kaleidoscope of themes yields a changeable overall picture. It seemed to us that this was the only feasible way to describe Bafa's original goal of forming an organic unity out of the city and company.

Maps make orientation possible. This book therefore includes a city map, providing readers with the opportunity, parallel to reading, to spatially trace a path through Zlín, its topography, and architectures. This map was specially produced for the symposium by the Brno House of Arts and the City of Zlín, and is now available for free to visitors in Zlín.

We begin the book with a chronology of the Bafa enterprise. The historian Zdeněk Pokluda shows how a small shoemaking workshop is turned into a global corporation. In addition, he traces – against the backdrop of political, economic, and cultural conditions – the history of the rapid rise of the brothers Tomáš and Jan Antonín Bafa, which culminated in the

'Zlín model' and ripened into a viable export product. Juxtaposed to this portrayal are excerpts from a fictive diary, researched with historical meticulousness by the Polish reporter Mariusz Szczygieł. They protocol the history of the Baťa family and lend the chronology, generally told as a success story *par excellence*, ironic and critical shades. These contributions are accompanied by a photo spread by filmmaker Martina Kudláček, who was intensely involved with Zlín and the traces of Baťa four years ago within the project 'Film, Memory, Politics'.

## A FACTORY IN GARDENS

The impressive achievements of the Baťa family have left behind a unique architectural heritage in Zlín. Consequentially implementing the principles of Functional urban planning, a factory in gardens was built, one that even today has lost none of its charisma. The political upheavals of the 1990s triggered far-reaching social and economic repercussions and these impacted on property rights and urban development in Zlín. Indeed, they continue to have an effect today, in particular within the former factory grounds in the city centre. The architect of the City of Zlín, Dagmar Nová, presents distinctive stages in the city's development. 'They were ahead of their time' is the programmatic message of her analysis. This holds not only for the progressive implementation of the conception of a functional Zlín and the cooperation between the Baťa brothers and the avant-garde architects of their time. The promises of seemingly unlimited technological progress, rapid economic growth, and an architecture that testified to the dynamism of the era also mark the careers of the Baťa brothers and their companions, who are presented by the architect and architectural historian Vladimír Šlapeta. One key player was Vladimír Karfík, who built the city's main landmark, Building No 21. The careful renovation of the high-rise by the architects Bergmann, Pastrnek, and Všeťečka incorporates the preservation of the historical structure and the spatial demands made by a new, contemporary utilization. Enjoying equal status, old and new exist harmoniously side by side.

A look at the history of Zlín, however, reveals that this was not always the case. The art historian Rostislav Švácha traces how the triumphal march of Modernity overran the historical town centre of medieval Zlín. Švácha has demonstrated for the first time how Baťa skilfully linked political and economic power to push through his plans for rearranging the city, purposively deploying architecture and the media to achieve his aims.

The rapid growth of the factory and the urban expansion it facilitated is mapped in a series of urban development plans which are accompanied by commentaries from the art historian Ladislava Hornáková and the architect Zdeněk Chládek.

## LIFE IN A UTOPIA

The rich store of drafts and designs, studies on town planning, and historical documents from the archives contain a gap, however: the everyday lives of the people who lived in this city at the time of its greatest transformation, hitherto hardly explored. How does it feel to become an industrial man?

And how does one live in a utopia? These are the kinds of questions posed by the sociologist Annett Steinführer, who is primarily concerned with plotting how Baťa's vision impacted on individual biographies. The ideal-type serving production was to be the embodiment of a quintessentially new social order that, based on the model of Zlín, was to then set off on a triumphal march around the world. The result was a global network of almost identically constructed satellite towns where Baťa's economic, technological, and social precepts were to be implanted, irrespective of national borders and cultures. Ladislava Horňáková, who wrote about the European Baťa satellites as early as ten years ago, presents these locations which, as 'Zlín in miniature', took over some sections of production and the processing of raw materials, as well as conquering new markets.

But what are the personal memories this modern and international success story has left behind as its legacy? 'It was extremely modern and nice,' recalls Svatopluk Jabůrek. His father had already worked for Tomáš Baťa in Zlín, so that he was completely familiar with the world of shoes from his earliest years. Besides education, training, professional advancement opportunities, and prosperity, Baťa offered the company's young men and women a host of recreational activities, culture, and entertainment, where the young generation of 'Baťa people' came together and found common ground. Zlín, as Jabůrek recalls today, has never again been as modern as it was back then. For Joan James, too, who moved to the British Baťa satellite of East Tilbury as a child with her family, the past is still very much alive today. A founding member of the Bata Reminiscence and Resource Centre, she has dedicated her time to gathering and preserving memories of this period. She takes us on an excursion to the British Baťa of her childhood and adolescence. Shoe production was discontinued in East Tilbury in 2005, but the artists Nina Pope and Karen Guthrie nevertheless adopted Tomáš Baťa's saying 'we are not afraid of the future' as the motto for their *Bata-ville* travel agency and film project. They initiated a bus tour from East Tilbury and Maryport, another former Baťa satellite, to Zlín. Against the backdrop of the economic decline gripping both locations in the wake of factory closures, the trust in the future that was a hallmark of Modernity needs to be redefined.

## **OBSCURITY AND ORDER**

Why should a city designed to last for only a limited period of time be conserved as a monument? By broaching the issue of 'obsolescence' in modern architecture, the American architectural historian Daniel M. Abramson identifies an interesting contradiction that characterizes Zlín's functional buildings. In the shadows of Modernist euphoria, a debate on buildings becoming redundant unfolded at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was feared that the built environment would rapidly depreciate through the growing capitalization of the property market. Architects were under increasing pressure to design their buildings for shorter and shorter lifetimes. For his part, Tomáš Baťa was convinced that the buildings on the factory grounds would be antiquated after 20 years. However, due to the flexibility of his buildings, they are ideally suited to reutilization and alterable spatial

structures. Despite their originally conceived limited lifetimes, they evade the fate of obsolescence and evoke permanence, as witnessed by numerous examples on the factory grounds. 'Baťa's Grid between Restoration and Transformation' takes us on a tour of today's factory grounds. The architect and monument curation expert Petr Všečetka presents sustainable planning strategies which, thanks to innovative restoration and reutilization, have a positive impact on the environment and thus counteract the downward spiral of devaluation and decay.

## MODERNISM IS HEALTHY

The former factory grounds are not alone when it comes to re-orientation. As far as manufacturing and distribution are concerned, the shoe itself faces great changes in the new global economy. Against this backdrop, Petr Hlaváček, dean of the Faculty of Technology at the Tomáš Baťa University in Zlín and a leading scholar on the history of the shoe and its production, traces the development of shoes from the first examples of footwear in ancient times to the historical 'prototype' of industrially manufactured models, produced in mass series. Hlaváček argues that the end of the Modernist idea of a comprehensive rational method has repercussions affecting all of us, even through such a mundane phenomenon as shoes: in an age of globalized production, shoes are a source of potential harm. Hlaváček's prognosis for the future of shoe production examines countries and continents which Baťa had identified as key future locations early on. The director of the Zlín Shoe Museum, Miroslava Štýbrová, presents selected shoes from her extensive collection, exemplifying the connection between design and production. The historical and cultural events of the time are also showcased. Baťa streamlined shoe manufacturing, giving it a new efficiency; at the same time, the research, creation, and design of tools and machinery to serve this new production were considered top priorities. This allowed a unique synthesis to take place between art, design, and mechanical engineering. This focus was also fostered by the founding of an in-company art school. Czech avant-garde artists found a safe haven here at the end of the 1930s and applied their talents to designing better and safer tools for the production process. Andrea Scholtz presents some of these outstanding Zlín pioneers of industrial design.

## A COMPANY TOWN ORGANIZED BY MEDIA

The cooperation Tomáš and Jan Antonín Baťa entered into with architects, artists, and filmmakers was based on pragmatic and rational considerations, seeking to harness and utilize the achievements of functional architecture, avant-garde film, and the new media technologies of the 1930s. A comprehensive communications and media network arose that turned the city of Zlín into a functional and political extension of the factory and linked the company's far-flung production satellites and shoe stores across the globe to the headquarters in Zlín. 'An aesthetic of rationalization' is how the media theorist Petr Szczepanik characterizes the Baťa media network. Film played a particularly prominent role in forging the identity of the new Zlín and its articulation as an 'ideal industrial city'. The varied history of the Zlín Film

Studios since their founding – famous directors, groundbreaking productions, and early cinematic innovations – is presented by their former director, Jiří Novotný. His narrative is accompanied by a look into his own family archive, which graphically illustrates an important chapter in Czech film history.

## REVISITING THE FUNCTIONAL CITY

In her article “‘The Earth, a Good Domicile’: Ambivalences of the Modern City’, the architectural historian and theorist Karin Wilhelm compares current concepts of ‘urbanity in the digital age’ with those articulated in classical Modernism, which themselves were then subjected to biting criticism by Postmodernist thinkers. These points of criticism levelled at the modern city are recapitulated by the cultural theorist Regina Bittner in her essay ‘Elevator Effect Urbanity’. She provides a differentiated picture of the promises urbanity seemed to hold in the twentieth century and their architectural manifestation in Zlín. The topicality of urbanism and Modernism is not the sole issue offered up for discussion. The adaptability of modern architecture to the changing living conditions of its users is another facet that sheds light on Modernity as a possible model for the future. A look into the historical garden city of Zlín shows that the single and multi-family houses have been subject to the styling and designing proclivities of residents for some time. Often undertaken in small piecemeal steps, these additions, extensions, and refurbishments articulate – in addition to a process of social transformation – a new self-understanding in dealing with the modern heritage, which is presented by the architect Jitka Ressová and the sociologists Lucie Galčanová and Barbora Vacková. A new approach in dealing with public space is being demanded for the city centre as well. Using a simple optical device, the architects Adam Gebrian and Igor Kovačević blend out the grid façades of the famous Baťa architectures and redirect the reader’s attention to the city’s interspaces, the arterial roads, the squares, and the infrastructure axes. As a result, the poor quality of Zlín’s urban space becomes apparent, demonstrating the need to reconsider its use in the twenty-first century. The two architects make a case for a new centre, animated and shaped by Zlín’s citizens.

Historical black-and-white photographs, taken at regular intervals after the completion of various stages of construction, shaped the image of Zlín for some time. Many of them taken from an aerial perspective, the photographs captured the vibrant public life of the population: the shots show how, during their summer lunch breaks, workers poured out into the streets and squares on their way to sporting events and rallies. The Dutch photographer Bas Princen takes these photos as the starting material for a new photographic rendering of the city’s early iconography: he portrays Zlín from an angle that captures the aura of the architecture while also managing to record the traces of its use. His photographs thus represent, side by side, the varied past, present, and resonances of the not-too-distant future. It is in this field of tension that contemporary thinking and debate on Zlín is to have its place. Princen’s photographic snapshots in time may therefore be taken as a leitmotif for this anthology – as a framework for the discourses collected under the title ‘A Utopia of Modernity : Zlín’.

The present publication is a joint achievement, relying on intensive cooperation with our colleagues from the partner institutions of the symposium as well as the authors and photographers. For the symposium 'A Utopia of Modernity : Zlín,' Zipp – German-Czech Cultural Projects brought together institutional partners from Germany and the Czech Republic – amongst them the House of Arts in Brno, the Regional Gallery of Fine Arts in Zlín, the National Gallery in Prague, the Bauhaus Kolleg of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, the Thomas Bata Foundation, the Tomáš Baťa University, the Zlín Film Studios, and the Zlín Shoe Museum. In addition to realizing the symposium and this publication, Zipp was able to persuade the Architekturmuseum der TU München, Pinakothek der Moderne, to stage the exhibition 'Zlín – Model Town of Modernism' in late 2009. The exhibition is also based on collaboration with the Regional Gallery of Fine Arts in Zlín, and the National Gallery in Prague. This networking idea is the basis and objective of Zipp, an initiative of the German Federal Cultural Foundation. Behind Zipp are cultural projects merged together as in a zip – artists, cultural practitioners, scholars, and theoreticians are linked together as smoothly as possible: the interaction functions beyond the usual boundaries of disciplines and nationalities in hopes of establishing a set of stable collaborative practices and shared avenues of thought.

This publication represents another important step towards a multi-layered exploration and interpretation of the 'Baťa phenomenon'. Research into this phenomenon cuts across national borders and academic disciplines, and valuable work is being done to shed light on this rich heritage. While significant progress has been made in many areas, new issues continue to emerge as a young generation of scholars stakes out the research fields of the future. It is our hope that the dynamic interaction of concepts and disciplines, an approach self-evident for us and which shapes this publication, will be continued.