Karel Teige/1900–1950: L’Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde  
Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha, eds.  
MIT Press, 1999  
440 pp., 178 illustrations (b/w and color)  
$50.00 (cloth)

Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia and Other Writings  
Karel Teige  
Introduction by Jean-Louis Cohen  
Translations by Irena Zantovský Murray and David Britt  
Getty Research Institute, 2000  
384 pp., 328 illustrations (b/w)  
$65.00 (paper)

“How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing.”

—Sir Neville Chamberlain

When British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain justified the 1938 Munich Agreement with this infamous remark he not only ceded Czechoslovakia to the Nazis, but he summarized the curious fashion in which the West viewed, and would continue to view, Czechoslovakia for nearly fifty years. Despite religious, artistic, and political connections between the Czechs and Western Europe—most especially the Western allies’ role in establishing and promising the security of the young, socially progressive democracy—the Czechs have been marginalized to the terra incognita of history. This brand of selective ignorance also coincides with the relative obscurity of a Czech modern architectural history. Czech architecture’s limited exposure in European journals, the relative difficulty of the Slavic language and, after World War II, the cold war seclusion exacerbated the existing bias. Even the prolific Kenneth Frampton was only able to remark in his Modern Architecture: A Critical History that “an adequate history of Czechoslovakian Functionalist movement has yet to be written.” Fortunately, the end of this obscurity seems to be in sight, as architects, historians, and theorists enter into an exchange across the now fallen Iron Curtain: westerners have more access to Czech cities, archives, and buildings, and Czechs more readily present and publish their research and writing to western audiences.

At the end of World War I, the new Czechoslovakian nation set the stage for a unique form of social democracy. Spearheaded by philosopher-president, Thomas G. Masaryk, the Czechs embraced modern social policy, art, architecture and industry, and became, by the mid-1930s, a democracy akin to post–World War II democracies in Scandinavia. Modern architecture became the national style. Historian Vladimír Slapeta noted that it was “a symbol of (Czechoslovak) national identity, providing an ‘image’ for the new state and even . . . an important element in the national propaganda.”

Karel Teige was a key, if tragic, figure in the story of the Czechoslovak avant-garde, one of Czechoslovakia’s more vociferous critics and innovators in all aspects of the design world. Teige’s résumé could include critic, photomontagist, theoretician, editor, politician, artist, architect, painter, poet, typographic designer, graphic designer, and more. His more notable achievements include helping found the Czech artist and architect group Devětsil, the surrealist group Skupina surrealista (Czechoslovak Surrealism Group) and the Leva Fronta (Left Front)—avant-garde organizations that helped shape artistic and architectural theory and practice in Czechoslovakia throughout the 1920s and 1930s. It is in this role as perennial designer and critic that Teige set his sights on the design world by not limiting himself to any specific field but as ars una or cross-fertilization of all design arts. As editor of the Czech architectural journal, Stavba, Teige’s opinions spread throughout Europe and helped establish him outside of the Czech lands with Hannes Meyer, LeCorbusier, Walter Gropius, and other architects and theorists. In the end it was his revolutionary tenacity that marked Teige as a seminal modern idealist who embraced the concept of modernity’s role as questioner of all things—even the new he had forged. Teige’s constant criticism of all sides of a story, and his questioning of the questions was bold and revolutionary. This would eventually lead to efforts from all sides of the artistic and political ideological spectrum to muzzle his observations. Even his dedication to communist ideals failed to align with policy: Teige, declared persona non grata by the Communist regime, died of a heart attack within two years of the overthrow of Social Democratic Czechoslovakia. The new Communist government suppressed Teige’s work and writings for nearly fifty years with only a brief resurgence during 1968 Prague Spring. Yet the interval did allow Teige’s works to escape to the West where it was kept alive, if only in limited fashion, by an interested few.

Two new books, Karel Teige/1900–1950: L’Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde and Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia and Other Essays, are important additions to this critical, missing facet in early twentieth-century architectural history.
Editors Dluhosh and Švácha’s *Karel Teige/1900–1950* is a balanced and objective presentation of Teige’s life and his writings set in historical and cultural context. Four of Teige’s essays are juxtaposed with essays by ten historians, and these are followed by a chronology of his life and a postscript by his nephew, Miloš Aulický, that contributes a more personal study of this Czech personality. Although the essays are well written and of interest, the more compelling aspect of the book is the editor’s attempt to bring Teige’s typographic design into the writing. As the essays move freely from poetry to typography and from Teige’s architectural commentary to surrealist photo collages, something of Teige’s personality comes through. In three of his essays, the use of expanded text gives us a sense of his view of functionalist font design and the effectiveness of text transformation in the meaning of the written text. It is not clear if expansion of the text is the actual emphasis used by Teige, but its inclusion gives a sense that there is something more and that something might be lost, beyond translation, in the content and language transmitted through Teige’s typography and graphic design.

As a well-rounded look at Teige—from general overview of Teige’s historical context and impact to examination of his specific areas of commentary and work—the book is good for both the historian interested in this very specific aspect of Czechoslovak modernism as well as a more general design audience. This exquisitely crafted cloth edition is well worth the $50.00. In contrast to the *ars una* organization and content, *Karel Teige/1900–1950*, the Getty Research Institute’s release, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia and Other Essays*, is a focused presentation of Teige’s seminal text on the underpinnings of modern architecture in Czechoslovakia and includes three essays commenting upon the state of architecture in Western Europe. The principal essay in the book is the 1930 text “Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia.” The text traces the evolution of architecture from the late nineteenth century through 1930, and includes an extensive review Jan Kotěra’s and Adolf Loos’ work. The inclusion of Kotěra and Loos, two internationally respected, Czech-born architects, is significant. As Cohen surmises, it may be Teige’s attempt to validate the Czech avant-garde among international audiences. Despite these possible nationalist intentions, the inclusion of Loos with Kotěra does in fact reveal the substantial role they played in forming much of the aesthetic and theoretical underpinnings of Czech architecture in the modern era. Overall, the essay is a thorough study of Czech architecture during these decades and makes an important contribution in creating a modern architectural history for Czechoslovakia.

This focus on texts of the Getty Institute’s book results in some sacrifice of the aggressive spirit of Teige’s original works, yet the book makes a welcome contribution to the scholarly writing on Czech modernism. Jean-Louis Cohen’s extensive introduction gives an adequate contextualization and interpretation of Teige’s work. The book is probably best suited for an audience looking for specific documentation and translation of specific texts.

Together these books contribute much beyond the sporadic journal article and help in the larger examination of Eastern European modern architectural theory and history. Moreover, these writings from authors outside the traditional borders of Western Europe are a vital addition to the history and theory of modern architecture.

Eric J. Jenkins
The Catholic University of America

**10 x 10**

Vivian Constantinopulus, editor
Phaidon, 2000
468 pp., lavishly illustrated
$60 (cloth)

I remember when first hearing the term “weighty tome” being confused as to whether the phrase referred to a physical weight, or perhaps something more profound. A perusal of Phaidon’s new book, *10 x 10*, leaves me in something of the same quandary. The physical is beyond dispute: weighing in somewhere between a laptop and a bowling ball, *10 × 10* is truly a publishing heavyweight. Some of the weight, physical and otherwise, is in *10 × 10*’s cover, which features one of those alternating two-way images employed in the postcards of my youth. This graphic construct is a metaphor for the book’s concept, where the oscillating bands represent a process in which ten critics have each selected ten architects, firms, or in in a curatorial parable, “entities.” The format is a reprise, minus the explicit ageism, of the designation “40 under 40” that used to identify architectural “prospects and suspects.”

Another component of *10 × 10* gives it a more intellectual heft. The ten critics have each selected ten readings, presumably to help us understand the present predicament of architecture. But ironically the lushness of the visual images in *10 × 10* overwhelms attempts to create a theoretical dialogue. Organizationally, a minuscule preface immediately gives way to a four page spread for each of the one hundred architects. The book’s design, by Julia Hastings, features large, abutting, color images that project a strange graphic homogeneity, given the diversity of the work. Tiny, caption-like text by the critics provides a very basic narrative for the images. The
ten reading lists of the critics follow, accompanied by an essay by each critic justifying and contextualizing their choice of architects and readings. Given the priority the format cedes to the image, one might assume a conscious abdication of the wordiness of nineties architectural discourse in favor of a more visually based dialogue. Under such a scenario, the "required readings" suggested by the critics provide a dialectic for the visuals. In the end, the dialogue between text and image in 10 x 10 provides a Forrest Gump "box of chocolates" for interpretation by the reader or, more particularly in this case, the viewer. And while the work represents the cutting edge of architectural design, it also makes reference to some of the historic controversies of modernism. For example, the belief that the evolution of technology sponsors architectural innovation emerges in several ways: the role of conceptual and paper architecture in challenging the discipline, the role of craft, materiality, and assembly in building, and, finally, in redefining architectural practice.

The book presents several manifestations of what has been referred to as "blobitecture," the computer-enabled expressionism whose proponents often reject this association and cite instead an inspiration from non-Euclidean mathematics. In the case of Greg Lynn, a guru of the movement, there is an interesting dichotomy between the glowing translucency of the computer images and the lifeless, gray-scale photographs of his Korean Presbyterian Church, one of the few built examples of the genre. Under more careful scrutiny, the "blobitects" are also revealed here to be more diverse and evolving than they first appear. Neil Denari, for example, has moved from forms inspired by aerospace iconography to a more playful use of warped and folded surfaces.

That we can now render complex forms in exotic materials has sponsored a counterexploration of "primitive" technologies and Platonic forms and spaces. This approach may be seen in the elegant minimalism of the Norwegian Carl-Viggo Holmebak, an architect who seems tied to both "techne" and landscape in a timeless way. A garden storage shed that in America would be a plasticized "tupperware" item, is interpreted by Holmebak as a brick cylinder spanned by a square wood and translucent fiberglass roof from which the workspace and internal storage units are hung. The doors of the shed, hinged from the interstices of the staggered bricks that frame the opening, typify the playful intelligence in detailing that mark this architect's work. A Holmebak cabin that nestles among the rocks at the water's edge contains a series of spaces, openings and glazing materials that cinematically frame views of a spectacular Nordic landscape.

10 x 10 also offers some provocative alternative models of architectural practice, such as London's Dunne & Raby and one of the new entities, Ocean, perhaps the first model of a practice tailored for the e-economy. The revived public interest in "design," and the blurring of distinctions between disciplines are clearly reflected in the influence of industrial design methodology on the projects of Dunne & Raby. Their work explores architecture through the creation of environments and products more linked to consumerism than the traditional relationship of architect/client. Ocean is an internet-linked consortium of architects and designers from several European and North American cities. It is difficult to see evidence of the "network collaboration" in their work, which features the increasingly familiar topographically warped surface. And the idea that very similar forms might be either a couch or an urban design recalls the mythical product on Saturday Night Live that was both a floor wax and a salad dressing.

Early on I mentioned that 10 x 10 was without the ageism of the "40 under 40" format and this allows for the inclusion of several veterans among the mostly rookie prospects. Intriguingly, two of these architects share a unique understanding of highly particularized vernacular contexts combined with a continuing interest in innovation. In Southern California, Craig Hodgetts and Hsin Ming Fung continue to simultaneously explore the environmental theatrics of Hollywood and the technologic ethic of hot rodding the fruits of American industry, while back in New England, Turner Brooks and partner Eve Pelkonen exploit the quirky collage of forms that characterize agricultural, industrial, and other "hard working" buildings of that region in a way that comments on these vernacular models while remaining comfortable among them.

The cultural scope of 10 x 10 is impressive: it includes work produced in places like Australia, Brazil, and Ireland rarely seen in our provincial professional media. As regards the intellectual arena, after a first read of 10 x 10, I wanted to see more of a dialogue between the critics about their selection of architects and writings. After living with the book awhile, I would amend that position in favor of the personal interpretations that visual images not only allow, but actually encourage. And if, as according to the Greeks, a combination of the intellectual and the physical is the ideal—I think my forearms are actually showing a little more tone.

JEFFREY HANNIGAN
Smoke+Mirrors Studio