

THE PAST AND FUTURE OF PRAGUE, POVERTY AND HOUSING: REVIEW OF RECENT EXHIBITIONS



POOR PRAGUE: PEOPLE — PLACES — INSTITUTIONS (1781-1948)

17. 4. 2019 — 25. 8. 2019, curated by Jana Viktorínová

HOW WE WANTED TO LIVE: CZECHOSLOVAK HOUSING POLICY 1918-1938

18. 10. 2018 — 18. 11. 2018, curated by Michal Kohout, David Tichý

Recently, Prague museums and galleries seem to have caught up to the current debate on pressing issues of the (in)affordability of housing, and have hosted several exhibitions on historical housing policies and its particular forms. After the large 2018 exhibition on the history of housing estates in Czech Republic, closing the project *Paneláci* at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, and the Jaroslav Fragner Gallery, which focuses mainly on architecture, landscape and urbanism, exhibition titled *How We Wanted to Live: Czechoslovak Housing Policy 1918-1938* portraying various approaches to providing housing for the newly established state and its populations in the first two decades of the Czechoslovak Republic, the City of Prague Museum hosted two exhibitions this year, addressing the issue of poverty in the context of the city of Prague, doing so from two rather different curatorial and historical perspectives. What these exhibitions share is an important point to be made regarding issues which prominently feature in the current social and political debate in the Czech Republic — the need for affordable housing and social housing, and by extension, issues of housing insecurity faced by a growing population of socially and economically marginalised people, as well as, increasingly, by middle-class citizens. Let me briefly comment on two of the exhibitions mentioned: *Poor Prague: People — Places — Institutions (1781-1948)* and *How We Wanted to Live: Czechoslovak Housing Policy 1918-1938*.

The Jaroslav Fragner Gallery exhibition introduced the results of a research project encompassing several subtopics: state housing policy, social housing, housing co-operatives, collective housing, housing shortage and slums etc. The last two provide a strong link to the City of Prague Museum exhibition, which is mainly based on historical visual material and maps.

Poor Prague: People — Places — Institutions (1781-1948) provided a historical excursion into the life of poor and marginalized population chiefly in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century; it was also accompanied by a current art project titled *Smoke Mountain* by the artist EPOS 257, based on the author's engagement with a homeless community in a specific location in Prague.

Two notable common denominators of the exhibitions discussed are slums, and workers' colonies. Advancing urbanization and industrialization created the need to house large numbers of people migrating to the city. After the establishment of Czechoslovakia, the new capital suffered a housing crisis. The viewers are shown various ways in which one could find a, more or less, permanent place to sleep — ranging from refuge on the outskirts of Prague, sleeping rough in holes in the city walls under Karlov, spending nights in brickworks in large numbers and in rock dwellings, to makeshift colonies. Most makeshift colonies were built between 1925 and 1930 on the



outskirts of Prague and housed approximately 25,000 people in extremely poor conditions. Made from old rail carriages or huts, they gave the name to a specific housing formation and consequently, the terms “hut colonies” or “carriage colonies” were used generally. Having no water, sewage system, roads nor electricity, groups of huts or carriage dwellings were effectual slums, and were used up until the 1960s when slum clearance began. Currently, an (albeit much improved as to living conditions) example of a makeshift colony, partially remodelled into a garden allotment colony, can be found in the Prague 10 neighbourhood of Slatiny.

Unlike numerous other cities in the Czech Republic, Prague only had two worker’s colonies. The first were being built starting in the late 1860s, by the Company for the Construction of Workers’ Flats, which had been established by a group of wealthy industrialists and later featured a majority share of the Ringhoffer family. One of the two workers’ colonies was built in the Holešovice neighbourhood, the other in Smíchov. Both were fast developing industrial areas of Prague, which included numerous factories, and also affordable land along two major railway stations. Undesired by middle-class families, they allowed for the growth of a local working class. Unfortunately, unlike many still existing workers’ colonies in other Czech, Moravian and Silesian cities, the Holešovice and Smíchov colonies did not survive the 20th century. It remains to imagine what course their fate would have taken — that of dereliction and demolition, or perhaps that of uncompromising gentrification? Or would they become an option to get a roof over one’s head to a reserve army of tenants relegated to sub-standard housing in the peripheral regions in the countries socially excluded localities? These hypothetical questions are perhaps interesting thought experiments, but there are far more pressing ones, which — hopefully — will engage curators of future exhibitions: What is the future of socialist housing estates built as modern-day workers’ colonies? What is the future of housing and housing policy in the Czech Republic in general?

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