

INTERVIEW

JAN KAPLICKÝ

THE SPACE TO CREATE

What led you to the decision to leave your motherland in 1968?

If you see the tanks in the streets you have no doubt that you have to get out even if it's already too late. You can't waste more years of your life to fight something that uses tanks. 130,000 people left at that time. Those who stayed suffered.

I was 30 then; it was almost the last moment to run. We were worried that they would do what the Russians did in Hungary: arrest people who would then disappear. Luckily that didn't happen. But they destroyed the culture. Look at Czechoslovakia between 1968 and 1989. Nothing happened, culturally or otherwise.

So your reason for leaving was mainly so that you could pursue your profession freely?

In no oppressive regime can art, design or architecture ever happen. You have to have, particularly in architecture, freedom:

Czech Jan Kaplický is one of the most influential avant-garde designers in the world, but this status has not come without a struggle against political, and sometimes social, limitations. He talks to *Klára Smolová* about breaking through boundaries

freedom of expression, but personal freedom as well. You have to travel, you have to see people, and buy books and magazines. You couldn't buy any in Czechoslovakia. You couldn't travel, and you couldn't teach if you were not a member of the Communist party.

Was your departure dramatic?

Of course it was. You could take very few things. You couldn't get a visa, as most countries closed the embassies. Some countries closed their borders too, like the US. Austria's borders were open, so you could only go

through there. And I had no money. Don't forget that you rely entirely on what you have in your pocket. I borrowed a hundred dollars and that was literally all I had. But it's acceptable in a way because you gain something that is worth millions of dollars.

How did you start in England? Did you immediately work in architecture?

Yes, I began in a miserable office, but it was architecture. They were not doing very good things, but there was not much choice. Finally, I ended up in an office that worked on the National Theatre here and then it started to get serious. And then, luckily, I worked with the firm Piano & Rogers, which doesn't exist now, but Rogers is a very famous architect. At that time he wasn't. There were only six of us and I was very privileged to be there.

You can't immediately start your own business. Maybe some people can, but they would probably do a lot of rubbish. I was interested in doing better things. I'm 10, or maybe more, years behind now, but that's OK.

What was the first job you did under your own company, Future Systems?

We started with some flats for some people, and we slowly started to become known, and bigger things came our way. The breakthrough project was Selfridges in Birmingham. We did the whole building, which will be featured on a UK postage



The NatWest media centre at Lords

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stamp this month. That's a big success. Now we are doing a museum of Maserati cars in Italy. And I want to take part in a competition, which started last week, for a National Library in Czechia.

But you have to keep going ahead on several levels. I'm also interested in small things, so we do furniture, jewellery, cutlery, some glasses, and even bikinis.

That's a bit of an odd mixture, isn't it? How do you handle that?

No, no, it shouldn't be. But the truth is that some people can do it, and some can't. Some great architects cannot do smaller things and lots of designers can't do buildings. For me it doesn't make any difference. Sometimes the smaller the object the more difficult the design can be.

You used to complain that you never had much interest from the Czech Republic in terms of architectural participation on projects. Has it got any better recently?

Lately there has been a little interest, but sometimes it's a very bizarre interest.

Do you have any explanation for that? Eva Jiřičná, who has a similar life history to you, already has a few buildings in Prague. Why don't you?

Well, she spends every other week in Prague. And how much is she doing in London now? I believe you can work

internationally. There's a preconception in Czechia as to what architecture is; it has something to do with education and a lack of tradition.

Are you too innovative for the Czech Republic then?

Possibly. Maybe there is jealousy involved too. I don't know. But it doesn't surprise me. Czechs are very bad at one thing: anybody who lives abroad doesn't exist anymore. There was a huge celebration when it was the anniversary of Werich's death. But nothing was done to commemorate the anniversary of Voskovec's death [*factors and*



Jewellery designs by Kaplický

founders of V+W theatre between the wars]. Why? Because he died somewhere in the US. And they've done it to other great personalities. For instance to Ema Destinová [opera singer of the First Republic]. This is different to what the Hungarians or Poles do.

You mean that if you live abroad – even if you achieve something on an international level – you are still forgotten in Czechia?

Yes – the point is that Czechs only go abroad as tourists. They don't study or read in other languages.

So London is really your home now. What do you like about the city?

Well, London is certainly a very important city in terms of architecture. Lots of things are happening here. If you name a couple of cities around the world, then London is certainly one of them. Lots of important people live here that were not born here. All together it creates an environment and inspiration which doesn't exist anywhere else.

London is architecturally rich, but what do you think about the mix of buildings in the City?

Every big city is a 'mishmash' but that's fine. London has changed tremendously in the last 10 to 15 years and now the City will go upwards rather than outwards. Prague will too. Just wait, it will go up. ■

PROFILE

JAN KAPLICKÝ was born April 18, 1937 in Prague. He left Czechoslovakia in 1968 after the Russian invasion and settled down in London. After practising at architectural studios such as Piano & Rogers and Foster Associates, he set up his own practice, Future Systems, with David Nixon in 1979. Together with his current partner, Amanda Levete, they realised several remarkable projects: the Natwest Media Centre at Lord's cricket ground (1999), and Selfridges in Birmingham (2002). *The Independent* included both structures on a list of most influential modern buildings in the world. Future Systems received the Stirling Prize, a prestigious British Architecture Award for Selfridges in 2004.

In 2004 young Czech director Jakub Wágner documented his life in a film *Profile: Jan Kaplický*. The documentary had its British premiere two days ago during Architecture Week and is now available on DVD.

Selected bibliography:

Jan Kaplický Album (Labyrinth, 2005)
Czech Inspiration (Fraktály Publishers)
Sketches (Alba Design Press, 2005)

In August a Future Systems monograph by Deyan Sudjic will be published by Phaidon Press.