

# Ivan Krejčí: Czech architecture is formalistic, Scandinavian prefers function



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The Nordica complex, co-authored by his studio Tengbom, profoundly enlivens Ostrava's architectural and development landscape.

**You have lived most of your professional life in Sweden, but now, after the Nordica project, you can draw comparisons. How much does an architect's work differ in Sweden and in the Czech Republic?**

I don't intend to criticize or prophesize, I don't know the local condition well enough for that. I hope my opinions will not be deemed as such. The biggest difference I can see is in the way work is organized, and in the lifestyle in general. In Swedish society there is much more democracy, which also applies to work relationships. I think that in the Czech Republic there is still a pyramidal management model in effect, while in Sweden preference is given to teamwork, but at the same time individual initiative is supported. Teamwork brings people closer to each other physically as well as mentally, which has a positive influence on the decision-making process. In consequence this process is shorter and responsibility is delegated to lower levels, i.e. things are faster.

**Were these differences a problem for you when you worked here?**

Sweden is, just like the Czech Republic, a very bureaucratic country. The authorities often raise the same obstacles as those that Czech architects have to face. However, the different method of work and relationships in Sweden makes it easier to overcome them. In a horizontal system everyone, including public officials, has larger powers, but also responsibility, and therefore has to and is allowed to decide by himself. It is therefore easier to search for compromises and solutions more flexibly, which is impossible if all standards and regulations are taken too rigorously. People in the Czech Republic are very cautious, are afraid of errors and their superiors, that is why interpreting regulations and standards is very obsolete. And it is a problem in today's dynamic world...

**It may have been always a problem...**

It is much bigger now because savings are needed in all areas, including realties. The prices of services areas in administration buildings are growing constantly. Companies therefore have to optimize their areas, with a significantly smaller space per worker than in the past. Corporate structures are also

changing very dynamically, the pace of work is growing, new forms of work are created, modes of communication are changing. It is therefore necessary to look for a solution that would make it possible to respond to these changes flexibly. A modern administration building should be designed to allow an easy conversion of a workplace as required by the user. It should be possible to choose between open-space offices, traditional small-room offices and their combinations. Architects and people approving projects have to count on these circumstances.

**Some time ago Scandinavian architecture had a great reputation. However, national differences are less marked in today's global world in this industry, too. Are there still any differences between Czech and Scandinavian architecture?**

Of course. The main difference is that in Scandinavia it is clearly the function of the designed building that is given preference to its form. Here, in the Czech Republic, it is often quite the opposite, or at least so it seems to me. Architecture is very formalistic and highly depends on momentary trends. The building may be "modern" on the outside, often using exclusive materials, complicated details, but with less consideration given to its function, to the optimum working conditions for its users, to the necessary comfort, good ergonomic conditions, light, air and acoustics for everyone, without any regard for their position. There is also a certain difference in the preference of local, natural materials in Sweden, which is to some degree caused by the economic conditions. Not so long ago Scandinavian countries were poor, buildings were therefore designed purposefully, simply from any materials available. To some extent it also mirrors the different social context. Sweden is a Lutheran country, so there is certain dominance of esthetic austerity in the society and, of course, also in architecture.

**Is this all true today?**

Certainly, these traditions are still evident. The economic conditions are different today, of course, but a very good principle has survived as heritage of the past humble times - make sure that the function of a building could be changed, adjusted to the momentary needs. In addition, Scandinavian architects obviously have to take into account the specific natural conditions. There is a certain cult of light in Sweden and in the north of Europe in general, because days are very short during the long winter season. There is therefore much more work with daylight, which has to be used to a maximum, even if you lose some area or space. On the other hand Czech architecture could be described as more colorful, vivid. Scandinavians are more temperate in this respect, with an evident influence of the above mentioned Lutheranism. Unless we talk about northern Norway, where the colors of buildings substitute their shortage in the nature, or the timber country houses painted in red, i.e. a traditional cheap color obtained from waste generated during iron ore mining. Last but not least, you have to count on a more inclement weather in the north; heat and energy in buildings are managed very economically and a lot of consideration is given to them during designing.

**We have arrived at a much discussed topic today - energy savings. Probably nobody doubts about their necessity now, but there are certain differences in the opinion on the state's intervention in this area. What about Sweden?**

The state is engaged in the field of energy a lot, in the form of education and training as well as through tax exemptions and conversely special taxes for nonconforming projects. In Swedish state also makes huge investments in stimulating the development of new technology and information systems. But to some degree it is all rooted in the minds of people. For example driving in Sweden is much slower and calmer than in the Czech Republic, because very driver "educated by the state" is aware how "expensive" and dangerous high speed is.

**Another discussion focuses on low-energy architecture and the fact that it could be potentially too limited esthetically, taking into account the numerous technical and building imperatives?!**

I don't see it like this and I think the same applies to my colleagues. And I'm getting back to what I have already said - Nordic architecture emphasizes the functionality of the building, which doubtless includes its highly economical operation, and the whole society is aware of the necessity of energy savings. Another thing is that this results in high demands on the knowledge of the latest technologies and constructions systems among architects. New and new things are coming to the market and architects have to know about them and be able to quantify what would pay off for the builder. Here, in the Czech Republic, interior lighting in administration buildings is still provided by cheap fluorescent lamps, which emanate an unpleasant, cold light. But the market offers lamps that may be more expensive, but provide much better illumination properties and higher efficiency. Therefore you need fewer of them, so the acquisition costs may not be so different, while operating costs will be much lower. Not to mention their ergonomic impact! But it's up to the designer - he has to be aware of these options and submit enough arguments to the builder to use such technology or equipment, which may seem more expensive at first sight, but in consequence is more economical and friendlier to the environment.

**There has been a lot of construction activity in the Czech Republic in the last several years. Which project attracted your attention, positively or negatively?**

I like ČSOB's head office in Radlice, designed by Josef Pleskot. Some time ago I met Pleskot in Stockholm, he worked on the Czech embassy project. I'm inclined to say that in designing ČSOB's building he was inspired by this Scandinavian propensity to open interiors and the use of daylight and greenery. But I noticed that some time ago the so-called postmodernism got a foothold in the Czech Republic, while at present it is mostly the dominating neo-constructivism with the use of much glass and steel. Aside from the high energy demands of these buildings, the costs of maintenance and the lifetime of these buildings are also questionable. I also find many projects excessively decorated, with many useless, yet expensive details; in short there is too much emphasis on the exterior, while forgetting the specific purpose.

**Every building has a value not just for its direct users, but for the town, for the passers-by - it is really possible to disregard the form, the exterior of the building, the way it works on its surroundings?**

Of course function is not to be overly dominant. The form is important as well, but you can achieve the intended effect in multiple ways. Scandinavia prefers simple solutions, which can have the same effect as complicated approaches. The form is important, but you always have to think about the content of the project, its purpose and function and the fact that we are not building houses only for the present. The future generations will be using what we leave behind us. A good balance between the function and the form is ideal.

**You participate in a major project in the Czech Republic - the Nordica administration complex in Ostrava. Did you feel any technological limits or deficits during your work in the Czech Republic?**

Quite to the contrary. The Nordica complex is a concrete monolith. Rather paradoxically, this method is probably still cheaper in the Czech Republic than prefabricated structures, which would be most likely used for the same building in Sweden. In terms of energy demands, a concrete monolith is highly advantageous because concrete has excellent accumulation properties, and therefore can easily level off heat variations. In addition, using this method ensures better building isolation and low air permeability.

**And what is your experience with Czech builders?**

It should be noted that Nordica was my first project here in the Czech Republic, but based on that experience I have to say my experience is exceptionally good. In Ostrava I cooperated with an excellent team whose work was comparable to what I am used to in Sweden, and in some regards may have even exceeded that standard. It might have been a lucky coincidence, but it's true.

**Are you preparing another project in the Czech Republic?**

Skanska Property wanted to bring Scandinavian architecture to the Czech Republic; our studio was therefore invited to work on Nordica. I hope I will have a chance to use the experience gained during this project for another project, but it's too soon for anything specific. No doubt it would be interesting for me to use a method that has been quite common in larger Nordic cities recently - when the builder, the architect and the city administration all cooperate on improving the surroundings of a specific new project. It results in higher costs for the investor, but at the same time increases the quality and appeal of the whole place, which obviously have a good economic effect. Our experience shows that everybody profits in the end - the investor, the town and its residents.

Ivan Krejčí was born in Ostrava in 1940. He graduated in Architecture from the Technical University in Brno and later, after emigration, from the Royal Academy of Arts in Stockholm, majoring in Architecture. He has lived in Sweden since 1969 and is employed in Tengbom, the oldest private architectural studio in Sweden. In 1989 Krejčí became a co-owner of the studio.

His major projects include the general plan and reconstruction of the ASEA Finspang industrial complex, the Kiruna iron-ore mine information center, the extension of officially protected residential towers (Kungstornen) in the center of Stockholm, the conversion of a printing complex of the media group Bonnier and work on Stockholm's underground transport circuit "Södra Länken". At the beginning of next year, the Nordica administration complex, a project created by architect Krejčí and his studio Tengbom, will be completed in Ostrava. As regards its energy savings, the building has the following features:

- highly insulated facade with exterior shutters to save heat,
- airtight building shell,
- ventilation system designed for slow air flow,
- central air-conditioning system using heavy-duty AC units and external air cooling,
- underground parking lot with ventilation and temperature control using air discharged from office areas,
- the form and the position of windows take use of daylight as much as possible,
- artificial lighting is based on power-saving lamps with modern control and high ergonomic efficiency.

Photo: Nordica Ostrava

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