

Zlín and the Invention of the Panelák

Kimberly Elman Zarecor, Ph.D.

Iowa State University

Department of Architecture

The structural panel building, what is called a "panelák" in Czech, was a ubiquitous housing type in the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union. Long associated with Soviet domination, this paper argues that the Czechoslovak version of a panelák was actually an invention of architects working for the Baťa Company during and after World War II. The architects, Hynek Adamec and Bohumil Kula, began their work by designing prefabricated duplex houses for the Baťa Building Department in the early 1940s. Their designs were based on existing Baťa house types—only the method of construction was different. After World War II and the nationalization of the company, there was a fundamental shift away from building houses toward apartment construction. In this context, Adamec and Kula shifted their research toward larger-scale prefabricated buildings and eventually the panelák, which was unique because it had no structural skeleton. The first panelák, which they named the G house for Gottwaldov (formerly Zlín), was designed in 1950. By this time, the former Baťa Building Department had become part of Stavoprojekt, the state-run system of architecture and engineering offices. During this period, Adamec and Kula worked at a Stavoprojekt research center named the Institute for Prefabricated Buildings. In addition to the events in Zlín/Gottwaldov, the paper will discuss the debates within Stavoprojekt surrounding prefabrication, typification, and standardization in the 1950s. By 1960 paneláks accounted for a significant percentage of overall housing production in the country. Today more than one-third of the Czech population lives in these buildings. The paper will conclude with some reflections on the contemporary state of panelák neighborhoods and possibilities for their future.