

The National Style and Crime

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Abstract. This study explores the impact of visual culture and architectural theory on the formation of national identity in early Czechoslovakia, with a particular focus on the interwar period and the debates surrounding the so-called “national style.” It examines how key figures such as Pavel Janák and Karel Teige articulated aesthetic frameworks that either reinforced or challenged nationalist discourse. Janák’s attempts to define a distinctively Czech architectural style reflected a synthesis of vernacular inspiration and modern formal language, demonstrating the tension between cosmopolitanism and local tradition. By contrast, Teige’s classification of architectural trends, particularly his advocacy of Jaromír Krejcar, reveals an ideologically charged attempt to canonise modernist principles. The article also considers the broader cultural and political context, particularly the use of architecture to legitimise the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic. Ultimately, the study emphasises the intricate relationship between politics, identity, and aesthetics in the cultural development of a post-imperial nation-state.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, national style, modernism, Pavel Janák, Karel Teige, nation-building

Introduction

The establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 created a new political reality and a pressing cultural problem: how should the newly formed state present itself visually, materially, and symbolically? Architecture and the built environment played a central role in this process. Public buildings and spaces, urban expansions, and the aesthetic vocabulary of modern design became tools for consolidating democratic legitimacy, distinguishing the republic from its Habsburg past and communicating cultural confidence both domestically and internationally. However, architecture was not merely a neutral reflection of politics; it was also shaped by competing visions of modernity, identity, and belonging.

This article examines the role of architectural discourse and practice in the formation of interwar Czechoslovak identity, with a focus on two emblematic figures:

Pavel Janák (1882–1956)¹ and Karel Teige (1900–1951).² Janák, who was educated before World War I, became a leading proponent of a distinctively Czech national style that drew on vernacular traditions, historic models, and modern formalism. Nearly a generation younger than Janák, Teige emerged as the polemical voice of the avant-garde, dismissing both nationalist sentiments and ornament in favour of an uncompromising constructivism or functionalism that aligned with international networks. Their often contrasting views not only illustrate aesthetic debates and the development of architectural discourse, but also the broader tensions in the cultural politics of the First Republic.

The article builds on recent scholarship that complicates the narrative of interwar Czechoslovakia as a significant democratic experiment.³ The concept of “national indifference,” pioneered by Jeremy King, Pieter Judson, Tara Zahra, and James Bjork, has revealed that nationalism did not automatically command the loyalty of ordinary people in East Central Europe at the turn of the twentieth century.⁴ Similarly, Vratislav Doubek’s work on “latent Czechoslovakism” has highlighted the constructed and fragile nature of the republic’s founding myth of Czech–Slovak unity. Against this backdrop, architecture can be understood as a medium through which cultural elites attempted to determine identity and project national cohesion, often in the face of indifference, ambivalence, or resistance.

At the same time, it is necessary to address the gendered structures of cultural production. As Melissa Feinberg has argued through her notion of “elusive equality,”⁵ the 1920 Czechoslovak constitution proclaimed gender equality but did little to change entrenched inequalities in education, employment, and political participation.⁶ Women’s access to professional careers in fields such as architecture was severely limited, ensuring that male voices dominated the design and interpretation of the built environment. Examining Janák and Teige, therefore, also means recognising how their prominence was conditioned by structural exclusions that silenced or marginalised women’s contributions.

By situating Janák and Teige within these intertwined contexts—nationalism, democracy, and male dominance—, the article seeks to provide a critical reassessment of the architectural history of interwar Czechoslovakia. It argues that architecture was simultaneously a site of creative experimentation and an arena of power, where cultural authority was asserted, contested, and often denied to those outside the dominant male elite.

1 Kiesling, *Janák*.

2 Michalová, *Teige*.

3 Rákosník, Spurný, and Štaif, *Milníky*, 71–166.

4 Bjork, *Neither German*; Judson, *Guardians*; King, *Budweisers*; Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*.

5 Feinberg, *Elusive Equality*.

6 Doubek, “Latent Czechoslovakism,” 37–67.

The Czechoslovak nation: politics and identity

The idea of Czechoslovak unity emerged in the nineteenth century primarily within liberal intellectual circles. As Michal Doubek and others have shown, what existed before 1918 was not a fully formed political programme but a “latent Czechoslovakism”—a sense of cultural and linguistic proximity between Czechs and Slovaks, nurtured by educated elites but not yet widely embraced by broader society.

For Czech liberals, Czechoslovakism provided a way to expand their demographic base and strengthen claims to autonomy within the Habsburg monarchy. Slovak elites, however, were more hesitant.⁷ While they shared cultural affinities with the Czechs, they also feared being subsumed into a larger Czech nation, and often turned to Vienna or Budapest for protection. Latent Czechoslovakism, therefore, was a double-edged idea: it offered the potential for cooperation but lacked the institutional grounding or popular legitimacy to function as a genuine political project until after World War I.

The collapse of Austria–Hungary in 1918 provided the opening for transforming latent Czechoslovakism into state policy. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the philosopher-politician who became Czechoslovakia’s first president, was instrumental in this process. From exile during the war, Masaryk worked tirelessly to gain international recognition for an independent Czechoslovak state.⁸ His arguments strategically combined appeals to democratic principles with demographic calculations.

On its own, the Czech ethnic group was not a convincing majority in Central Europe. By fusing the Czechs and Slovaks into a single political nation, Masaryk could present the allies with a more coherent case for self-determination. The resulting Czechoslovak nation was, in effect, a deliberate political construct—one designed to bolster Czech claims while simultaneously reducing the influence of large German and Hungarian minorities.

The establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in October 1918 was celebrated as a triumph of national self-determination, yet the state was multi-ethnic from the outset.⁹ Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Jews, and Poles all lived within its borders. While the constitution proclaimed equality for all citizens, political reality was different: Czechs, and to a lesser extent Slovaks, dominated public life. The republic thus rested on a paradox. It claimed legitimacy through democratic and humanist ideals, but it relied on a myth of a unified Czechoslovak nation to justify Czech hegemony. This myth was reinforced through education, public ceremonies, mass Sokol sports events, and the arts, all of which sought to present Czechoslovakia as a coherent national project. Yet for minorities—and indeed for many Slovaks—this was experienced less as inclusion than as cultural domination.

7 Lipták, *Slovensko*, 62–70.

8 Masaryk, *Světová revoluce*.

9 Heimann, *Czechoslovakia*, 20–86.

One of the most visible arenas where this politics of identity played out was the transformation of urban space, especially in Prague.¹⁰ The city was cast as the capital of the Czechoslovak nation, and its architecture became a symbolic battleground. Street names were changed, monuments both torn down and erected, and buildings repurposed to project the dominance of Czech identity. The demolition of the Marian Column in Old Town Square, or the transfer of the Estates Theatre from German to Czech hands, exemplify how cultural memory was recast through physical interventions.

This environment directly shaped the work of Czech architects such as Janák, Jaromír Krejcar, Teige's favourite architect, and their contemporaries. The question was not simply how to design buildings, but how to encode national and political meanings within them. Whether through Janák's ornamental "national style" or Krejcar's functionalist internationalism, architecture was inseparable from the larger project of legitimising Czechoslovakia as a modern, sovereign nation-state.

The creation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 did not only require new political institutions; it also demanded new symbols that could embody and legitimise the young state. Tomáš G. Masaryk, in his essay *The World Revolution (Světová revoluce)*, emphasised the significance of ceremony and visual culture as instruments of education and political pedagogy.¹¹ For Masaryk, rituals, symbols, and material expressions were indispensable for communicating abstract democratic ideals to citizens. In a society with multiple languages, religions, and historical loyalties, architecture and public art offered a powerful means of projecting unity.

This urgency was particularly acute because Czechoslovakia, unlike nations with centuries of continuous sovereignty, could not rely on a deep reservoir of shared historical state traditions. Its very territorial borders were contested; its ethnic composition fragile; and its religious landscape divided. Thus, the invention of state symbols in stone, colours, and ornaments was not an accessory but a constitutive act of nation-building. The new transformation resulted in German architects being marginalised, as they received hardly any state commissions.¹²

Generations and ideologies: Janák and Teige

The careers of Pavel Janák and Karel Teige illustrate the ways in which architecture became an arena for negotiating identity, ideology, and generational authority in interwar Czechoslovakia. While both men were central to defining the republic's

10 Hnídková, *Spirit at Work*.

11 Masaryk, "Světová revoluce," 378.

12 Kerdová, *Klein-Berlin*, 71, 90.

architectural discourse, their approaches diverged sharply in the 1920s. Their opposition highlights the tension between national and international, between an older generation shaped under the multi-ethnic Habsburg monarchy and a younger one intent on severing ties with the past in the name of modernity. Despite their initial differences, they both held Adolf Loos and his architectural legacy in high regard.¹³ However, it took them almost the entire decade of the 1920s to recognise the mutual qualities in their approach.

Janák was part of a generation educated during the final decades of the Habsburg monarchy. Having studied at both the Czech Technical University in Prague and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, he was influenced first by Otto Wagner and the Viennese Secession movement. Since his Viennese years, he had also been familiar with Adolf Loos and his notorious polemics that largely contributed to shaping modernism. Like many of his contemporaries, Janák grappled with how to reconcile universal modernist forms with local identity. His early experiments with Cubist architecture—seen in the robust pedestals to Štursa’s sculptures by Hlávka Bridge in Prague (1911–1912) (Figure 1), and the Fára House in Pelhřimov (1913–1914)—represented a radical attempt to apply thoroughly transformed aesthetics to the built environment. Yet in the course of World War I, Janák shifted his architectural agenda toward what is called the “national style.”¹⁴

Among the members of the pre-war leading art and architectural associations, such as Artěl, Skupina výtvarných umělců (Group of Visual Artists), and Svaz českého díla (Czech Werkbund), Pavel Janák stood out as the most theoretically ambitious. Janák developed pre-war writings that reflected on the modern architecture coined by Otto Wagner and the polarity of European culture, borrowing from Wilhelm Worringer’s ideas of northern and southern artistic sensibilities and determinations.¹⁵



Figure 1 Pavel Janák, pedestals to Jan Štursa’s sculpture by Hlávka Bridge, Prague, 1911–1912

13 Teige, *Moderní architektura*, 63–90.

14 Hnídková, *The National Style*, 54–55.

15 Worringer, *Abstraktion*.

Even before independence, Janák was sensitive to the way local factors shaped artistic production.

By the end of World War I, Janák had translated these insights into a concrete programme: the creation of a “Czech type” of architecture.¹⁶ This type was not to be a slavish reproduction of folk motifs, but a synthesis of modern form and vernacular resonance. Houses, settlement layouts, and interiors were to speak in a language recognisably Czech yet attuned to international developments. In Janák’s writings, ornament and rhythm were not decorative afterthoughts but the very expression of the Czech spirit—a poetic counterweight to the cold utilitarianism he associated with Germany.

His conception was ideological as much as aesthetic. By insisting on the inevitability of Czech tendencies toward ornament, melody, and rhythm, Janák framed the national style as the outward manifestation of inner spiritual life, placing it in opposition to purely constructive modernisms. This insistence aligned his architectural vision with broader cultural efforts to assert Czech identity in a fragile republic.

In his manifesto *Ve třetině cesty* (A Third of the Way),¹⁷ Janák set out his vision for locally determined architectural production. Here, he pointed out that

“[...] matter is identical with soil—the homeland on which the tribe grows—national life and spirit, which emanates from this series of identities, returns to it and creates organized architectural entities from its individual areas. Such architecture, which already creatively embraces life, is national architecture. Therefore, above the same soil and for the same tribe and national life, architecture has internal permanence, immutability, and character. Here, architecture is parallel to, or even equivalent to, the construction of animal dwellings: it must organize dwellings for the body, life, and spirit of man, both individual and collective national dwellings, so that they are in harmony with the body of the national and individual types. Each national tribe has its own specific and unique types of architecture—dwellings, just as each animal species has its typical den. Within the limits of the national type, an individual’s dwelling is shaped according to his personal scope, characteristics, and needs. Thus, many purposes are not included at the beginning, but in a series of organisational activities of architecture, which begins with the organisation of matter and ends with it. And architecture, encompassing this stage, this social sphere, becomes a national art from a pure art.”¹⁸

16 Janák, *Výstava*, 323; AAS NTM, Collection 85 – Janák, box 44, Janák, *Československý interiér*, 8.

17 Janák, “*Ve třetině cesty*,” 218–26.

18 Janák, “*Ve třetině cesty*,” 220.

Calling for a national type did not oppose Janák's rejection of crude folklorism. However, it did not mean folk culture was absent from the national style. On the contrary, the years immediately after independence saw an ethnographic turn.¹⁹ Folk embroidery, woodcarving, and vernacular building were mined for motifs that could be translated into urban architecture. Alois Riegl's earlier rehabilitation of folk art as a subject worthy of scholarly attention now found political resonance: in a state dominated by Slavic populations, drawing on Slavic cultural traditions offered both legitimacy and popular appeal.²⁰

Artists and architects therefore found themselves balancing between two poles: the desire to appear modern and cosmopolitan, and the imperative to root their designs in recognisable national forms. The result was an architectural vocabulary that, while often rhetorically distancing itself from vernacular sources, nonetheless carried their imprint.

The national style was not a simple revival of folk architecture. Rather, Janák sought to extract formal principles from vernacular sources and historical legacy and translate them into a modern idiom. Ornament, colour, and rich decoration became central to his theory of Czech architecture. In his writings, he repeatedly contrasted the "poetic" and "expressive" character of Czech art with the "rationalist" tendencies of German or Viennese traditions.²¹ This framing was not purely aesthetic; it resonated with the broader nationalist discourse that sought to define Czechoslovakia's distinctiveness in the wake of independence.

The roots of this project can be traced to the pre-war activities of the Czech Werkbund (Svaz českého díla). Before 1918, Czech artists and architects sought to distinguish their cultural production from Austrian hegemony. Their separate exhibition at the 1914 Werkbund show in Cologne was a bold act of symbolic secession: it declared that Czech modernism had its own trajectory and should not be subsumed under the imperial umbrella.²²

The catalogue of that exhibition, titled *Čechische Bestrebungen um ein modernes Interieur*, made clear that even styles seemingly cosmopolitan, such as Cubism, could be reframed as national. By placing Cubism within a Czech narrative of innovation and cultural distinctiveness, the Werkbund circle laid the groundwork for what after 1918 would be theorised as a national style—an architecture and crafts production that bore the mark of Czech identity.²³

19 Czumalo, "Architektura," 264–86.

20 Berounský, *Ohlasy*, 84–85.

21 Janák, "Hranol," 162–70.

22 Štech, *Čechische Bestrebungen*.

23 Hnídková, "Rondocubism."

Urban landmarks of the national style

The dominance of the Czech community in Prague had been growing since 1861, when the number of Czech political representatives surpassed that of the German community, radically reshaping the city's political landscape. This trend was further boosted by post-war development. The new spirit of Czechoslovakia was evident in the renaming of the main boulevard that formed an inner ring between the Old Town and the New Town. After 1918, this ring was given names such as "Národní třída," which celebrates the Czech nation, and "28. října Street," commemorating the date on which Czechoslovakia was founded. On the other side of the ring, nationalist achievements found their climax in "Náměstí Republiky" (Republic Square) and "Revoluční třída" (Revolution Prospect). "Revolution" was the term used to mark the founding of Czechoslovakia. All of these names were powerful symbols of Czech dominance over the capital.

Following these national sentiments, Janák's vision of a Czech national style gained recognition in line with the ambition to establish Prague as the capital of Czechoslovakia. This is evident in the architectural competitions held to design a parliament building that would dominate the city from the Letná plateau,²⁴ and in the proposals to build a second National Theatre near the Municipal Building in a neighbourhood predominantly inhabited by Germans. Although none of these monuments were ever constructed, Prague's transformation into the capital of Czechoslovakia was achieved through both public and private investment.

This radical urban transformation is best exemplified by two buildings in Prague's New Town district. Designed by Josef Gočár and Pavel Janák, they originally served as the headquarters of major financial institutions. Although they have become spectacular landmarks of the Czech national style, the processes that led to their final designs were different, if not contradictory.

The first building is the headquarters of the Bank of the Czechoslovak Legions (*Banka československých legií*), popularly called Legiobanka (1922–1923)²⁵ (Figure 2). Conceived in the euphoric aftermath of World War I, the project embodied the new Czechoslovak Republic's ideals and the self-image of its war heroes—the legionaries. The bank's founding documents reflected a dual mission: to harness the intellectual and material potential of returning soldiers and to express, through architecture, their role in building the new state. Legiobanka's origins lay in financial institutions formed by the legions in Siberia during the Russian Civil War, which later merged to create a symbolically charged, nationally significant bank.

24 Hnídková, "Letná," 78–122.

25 Hnídková, *National Style*, 112–22.



Figure 2 Josef Gočár, Bank of the Czechoslovak Legions, Prague, 1922–1923

Gočár's headquarters represented both economic power and national pride, translating the ideological aspirations of the First Republic into a physical form. The commission was the result of an architectural competition held in 1922, in which Gočár successfully defended his vision against other leading Czech architects. His winning proposal reflected a careful balance between national symbolism and modern expression. Gočár also invited his friends, sculptors Otto Gutfreund and Jan Štursa, to decorate the main facade.

The building's facade and interior were designed as a cohesive narrative: the triumphal-arch composition, monumental sculptures, and rich colour contrasts (notably red and white, symbolising revolution and patriotism) conveyed themes of victory and return. The sculptural programme—including reliefs depicting battles such as Zborov and Piava—celebrated military heroism and national unity, while the building's stylistic vocabulary blended modern dynamism with classical symbolism. The integration of sculpture, fresco, and architecture reflected contemporary

calls for *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art that harmonised all media to express collective identity.

Ultimately, the Legiobanka building stands as both a culmination and a turning point in Czech architectural modernism. It embodied the optimism and mythmaking of the early republic but quickly became a target of the avant-garde generation's rejection of nationalist aesthetics coined in the term "Legiobanka style."

By a striking historical irony, the other of the most significant monuments of the national style was not commissioned by a domestic authority but by the Italian insurance company Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà.²⁶ Its construction in the symbolic heart of Prague—on the corner of Jungmannovo náměstí and the newly renamed Národní třída—became a matter of national debate. The company's initial choice of Josef Zasche, a respected local architect of German nationality, provoked a wave of public opposition led by the Klub Za starou Prahu (Club for Old Prague), the Státní regulační komise (State Regulatory Commission), and various artistic circles. Critics argued that Zasche's design was too "exotic" and was incompatible with the national symbolism of the site.²⁷ Under pressure from this nationalistically charged criticism, Riunione Adriatica withdrew Zasche's commission and announced a limited architectural competition for a new design.

The competition invited several prominent Czech architects, among them Bohumil Hübschmann, Bohumír Kozák, Miloš Vaněček, and Pavel Janák, who ultimately emerged as the clear winner.²⁸ The jury, composed of leading figures like Josef Gočár and Jaroslav Guth, favoured Janák's proposal for its rhythmic massing and dynamic facade composition. However, practical constraints meant that Janák had to retain Zasche's original structural scheme, as the building permit had already been granted. His intervention therefore focused primarily on the facade—concealing the earlier German contribution while asserting a new national visual identity. The building's exterior, with its rich ornamentation, turreted skyline, and profusion of decorative motifs, was celebrated by contemporary critics like František Žákavec for evoking both Slavic and Oriental inspirations, and praised by the Club for Old Prague as more in harmony with Prague's Czech character.²⁹

Janák's design thus embodied the ideals of the national style: the use of ornament, colour, and craft detail to express a distinctively Czech sensibility. Sculptors of national renown—including Jan Štursa, Bohumil Kafka, Otto Gutfreund, and Karel

26 Hnídková, *National Style*, 129–33.

27 vd [Vilém Dvorák], "Palác pojišťovny," 97.

28 AAS NTM, Collection 85 – Janák, box 81, folder 101 Riunione. Letter from Riunione to Pavel Janák, Prague, 21 February 1922.

29 "Činnost Klubu za starou Prahu v roce 1922," 39.

Dvořák—were enlisted to enrich the facade with allegories, decorative reliefs, and scenes reflecting both everyday life and the mythic spirit of the Adriatic. The project's conception rested not only on formal considerations but also on Janák's theoretical position that architecture should express the spirit of place, a notion shared by critics such as Zdeněk Wirth and Václav Vilém Štech. The palace became a manifestation of how ornament and craftsmanship could serve as a visual metaphor for the national character—a view deeply rooted in Czech folk traditions and in the post-1918 cultural optimism of the new republic.

Yet this idealised vision was soon challenged. The completed Riunione Adriatica palace drew fierce criticism from the avant-garde, who viewed its ornate facades as reactionary and provincial. Figures such as Karel Teige dismissed it as a “box of chocolates,” a hollow pastiche devoid of true modernity,³⁰ while Le Corbusier and Henry van de Velde publicly condemned it as retrograde and theatrical.³¹ By the mid-1920s, the notion of a Czech national style was increasingly regarded as a hollow ideological construct, overtaken by the rise of purism, constructivism, and functionalism. These international movements redefined architectural progress and consigned Janák's ornate facade to the margins of history, transforming the Riunione Adriatica building into both a symbol of early republican idealism and a cautionary emblem of the fleeting triumph of national decorativeness in modern architecture.

Karel Teige: the avant-garde polemicist

Karel Teige represented a younger generation unburdened by direct ties to the Habsburg monarchy. A member of the Devětsil artistic collective,³² Teige emerged as a central figure of the interwar avant-garde in Czechoslovakia and beyond. As an avid art critic, he exercised influence through polemical writings, campaigning, editorial work, and tireless participation in international networks. He did not gain his authority through commissions, but through his ability to theorise, classify and canonise artistic and architectural movements.

Teige's advocacy of constructivism and functionalism placed him in stark opposition to Janák's ornamental nationalism. In his seminal text *The Minimum Dwelling*,³³ Teige argued for rational, economical housing as the core task of modern architecture. By framing functionalism as both scientifically rational and socially progressive, Teige aligned architecture with the broader leftist project of radical social transformation.

30 Teige, *Moderní architektura*, 105.

31 Sokol, *Moje plány*, 110.

32 Pomajzlová, ed., *Devětsil*.

33 Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*.

For Teige, the national style was little more than a nostalgic illusion. He rejected the very premise that architecture should embody national identity, insisting instead that it responds to universal needs of housing, hygiene, and efficiency. He claimed that

“[...] official and fashionable architecture at that time [in the early 1920s] sought to revive some kind of (fictitious) national style; elements of national ornamentation were revived and stylised in the spirit of a kind of pseudo-Cubist decorativism. This decorative fashion, led at the time by Pavel Janák, Josef Gočár, and decorative graphic artist František Kysela, represented in the field of furniture making and the arts and crafts industry in general by the Czechoslovak Werkbund, transformed architecture into ornamental facade design, enamored with garish colours. It became the official and recognized Czechoslovak architectural style in 1922–1925 and set the development of Czech architecture back by at least half a century. [...] National decorativism, essentially reactionary, evoked long-banished specters of historicism and stylistic falsification. The pompous splendor of materials, plethoric ornamentation, and waste of marble, reminiscent of the horrors of a perverted Renaissance: the facade of a single building is constructed for money that would be enough to build three or five normal residential buildings.”³⁴

Yet Teige's radicalism was not purely imported. His polemics were deeply embedded in the political and cultural context of interwar Czechoslovakia. His attacks on nationalist ornament were also attacks on the cultural establishment that sought to stabilise the republic through symbolic forms. Teige thus stood at the intersection of aesthetics and politics: by redefining architecture as a tool of social revolution, he challenged both the professional establishment and the nationalist consensus of the First Republic.

To underline his perception of Czech architecture in the 1920s and make his personal position evident, Teige meticulously designed a chart bearing a long name, *Srovnávací tabulka, zachycující zhruba vývojové etapy moderní architektury v letech 1919–1930* (A comparative table showing the approximate stages of development of modern architecture between 1919 and 1930)³⁵ (Figure 4).

This chart is divided into three lines in chronological order (1919–1922, 1922–1926 and 1926–1930) and five columns labelled “West; USSR; Krejcar; Czechoslovak Official Modernism; Outside development. The official architecture unaffected by the development (*Mimo vývoj. Oficiální architektura vývojem nedotčená*).” The message of the chart is straightforward. It positions the architect Jaromír Krejcar

34 Teige, *Práce Jaromíra Krejčara*, 14.

35 Teige, *Práce Jaromíra Krejčara*, 29.

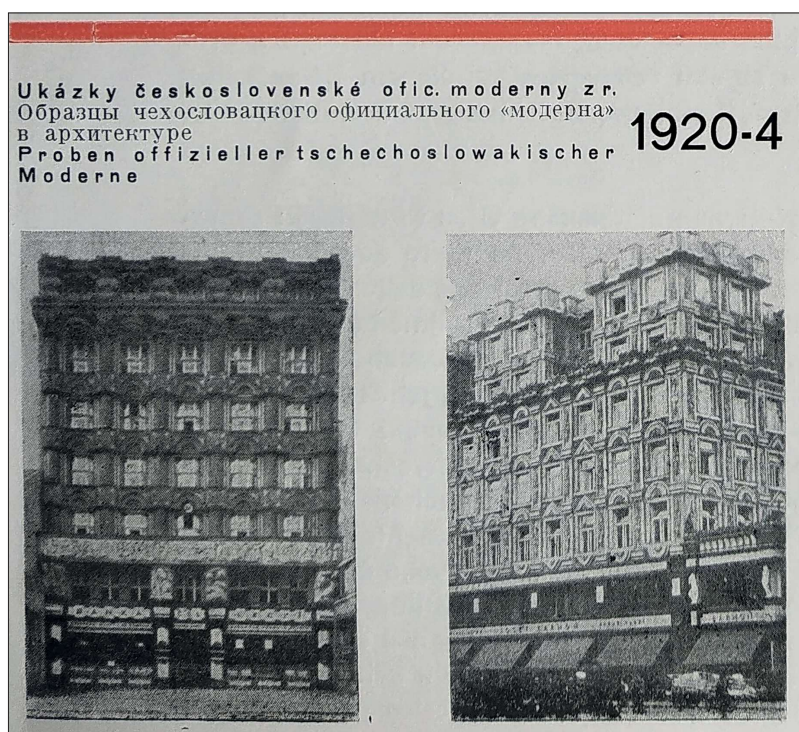


Figure 3 Karel Teige, Examples of Czechoslovak Official Modernism 1920–1924:
Bank of the Czechoslovak Legions by Gočár and Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà by Janák

(1895–1950) within the progressive international avant-garde movement, while mocking the official stance of Czechoslovak architecture. Nevertheless, Teige identifies Gočár and Janák as modernist architects (Figure 3). In his view, however, the premises of the ministries and Charles University show no evidence of an understanding of modern architecture.

In contrast to the early dominance of the national style, Teige presented Jaromír Krejcar, a fellow architect, as an early pioneer of the avant-garde movement in Czechoslovakia. He championed figures such as Jaromír Krejcar, whose work embodied the clarity and social purpose Teige associated with the leftist principles of modern architecture.

Although Karel Teige's condemnation of ornamentation in architecture appears, at first glance, to echo Adolf Loos's celebrated modernist essay,³⁶ the two positions emerged from distinct ideological premises. For Loos, the rejection of ornament was primarily a moral and cultural argument: he viewed decoration as a vestige of primitive expression, incompatible with the ethical progress and rational sobriety of

36 Loos, *Ornament and Crime*.

Srovnávací tabulka, zachycující zhruba vývojové etapy moderní architektury v letech 1919–1930. Сравнительная таблица развития отдельных моментов современной архитектуры в 1919–30 годах. Die wichtigsten Entwicklungsmomente der modernen Architektur in den Jahren 1919–1930.						
	Západ San. Evropa Westeuropa	SSSR UdSSR СССР	Krejcar Крейцвар	Ceskoslovenská oficiální moderná Чехословацкiи официальнаи модерни Tschechoslowakische offizielle Moderne	Mimo vývoj. Oficiální architektura vývojem nedotčená. Развитие не коснулось официальной архитектуры. Die offizielle Architektur ist von jeder Entwicklung unberührt geblieben.	
1919	 Le Corbusier	 Tatlin	 Ústřední Tržnice	 Gočár	 Janák	 Pražská knihovna
1922	 Theo von Doesburg	 Vesnin	 Olympic	 Gočár	 Janák	 Pražská universita
1926	 Hannes Meyer	 Svěrdlovck	 Sanatorium	 Gočár	 Janák	 ministerstva CSR
1930						

Figure 4 Karel Teige, A comparative table showing the approximate stages of development of modern architecture between 1919 and 1930

modern civilisation. His stance stemmed from an individualist bourgeois ethos that equated aesthetic purity with cultural refinement and temporal advancement. Teige, by contrast, approached ornament’s obsolescence not as a moral lapse but as a social and economic symptom of outdated production systems. Rooted in Marxist materialism, he perceived ornament as a wasteful by-product of capitalist commodification and bourgeois taste—a superficial embellishment that masked social inequality and inhibited collective progress. Whereas Loos sought cultural elevation through restraint and timeless form, Teige envisioned a revolutionary utilitarianism in which architecture, liberated from decorative excess, could serve the egalitarian needs of a new socialist society.

This ideological divergence was vividly reflected in Teige’s evaluation of contemporary Czech architecture, particularly his critique of Pavel Janák and, to a lesser extent, Josef Gočár. Whereas Loos’s anti-ornamentalism was directed toward cultivating a universal aesthetic discipline, Teige’s criticism was politically charged—an attack on what he perceived as the national bourgeoisie’s attempt to aestheticise the new republic through decorative façadism. For Teige, Janák’s Riunione Adriatica palace epitomised the failure of the national style: an anachronistic and wasteful

display of ornament that betrayed the modern mission of architecture to serve collective, functional needs. Gočár's Legiobanka, although equally rooted in symbolic expression, fared slightly better in Teige's eyes due to its structural coherence and urban sensibility, yet it too remained burdened by decorative historicism. In this sense, Teige's position marked a radical break with the romantic nationalism of his predecessors: where Loos had sought to civilise taste, Teige sought to revolutionise it. His critique reframed the rejection of ornament not as a matter of moral purity or stylistic progress, but as a demand for architecture's full integration into the social and economic realities of modern life.

Teige's uncompromising position became a decisive intellectual force in the Czech avant-garde's transition toward functionalism in the latter half of the 1920s. Through his writings in the journals *Stavba* and *ReD*, he articulated a vision of architecture grounded in scientific rationalism, collective utility, and technological modernity—values that rejected both the ornamental symbolism of the national style and the metaphysical formalism of earlier Cubist experiments. Under his influence, a younger generation of architects, including Jaromír Krejcar, came to regard the facade not as a canvas for cultural expression but as a rational interface mediating structure, function, and human use. Ornament was thus displaced by proportion, light, and material economy as the true markers of modern architectural integrity. In this shift, Teige not only reinterpreted Loos's call for restraint through a socialist lens, but also transformed it into a collective aesthetic programme—one that aligned architecture with the social mission of the modern state. The resulting Czech functionalism, characterised by its lucid geometry and moral clarity, stood as both an aesthetic and political repudiation of the ornamental nationalism that had briefly flourished after 1918.

The clash between Teige's purist functionalism and Janák's decorative nationalism encapsulates the broader ideological polarisation that defined Czechoslovak architectural discourse in the interwar period. While Janák, shaped by the optimism of statehood, sought to root modern architecture in a distinctly Czech cultural identity, Teige rejected such nationalism as an artistic regression incompatible with the universal rationalism of the machine age. Their divergent positions—one idealistic and symbolic, the other utilitarian and socially programmatic—illuminate the evolving tensions between art and ideology, between form and function, that shaped the aesthetic and intellectual trajectory of Czechoslovak modernism.

Conclusion

The architectural and artistic ferment of interwar Czechoslovakia reveals a culture grappling with the dual imperatives of national self-definition and modern progress. The early 1920s, embodied in the monumental gestures of Gočár's Legiobanka and

Janák's Riunione Adriatica palace, were marked by an exuberant effort to materialise the ideals of independence through a newly minted national style. These buildings were not mere exercises in ornamentation, but acts of political and cultural expression—visual manifestos of a young state eager to proclaim its identity in stone, glass, and colour. Their symbolic facades, rich in sculptural and decorative programmes, sought to translate the euphoria of liberation into a tangible civic language.

Yet, as the decade progressed, the initial euphoria gave way to a sober re-evaluation of these ideals. Karel Teige and the avant-garde dismissed the national style as anachronistic, its ornamentation symptomatic of bourgeois nostalgia incompatible with the social and technological realities of the new age. The debate between Teige's ascetic modernism and Janák's national style thus became a microcosm of the broader European struggle between cultural particularism and international functionalism. What had begun as a search for a uniquely Czech visual identity gradually dissolved into the universal grammar of purism, constructivism, and functionalist design that came to dominate the late 1920s and 1930s.

In retrospect, however, the monuments of the national style stand as vital historical documents—expressions of a brief but fervent moment when architecture was charged with the task of narrating a nation's birth. Their synthesis of sculpture, ornament, and architecture reveals a belief in the unity of the arts and in the moral mission of aesthetics within the public realm. Even if later generations dismissed these buildings as decorative relics, they remain eloquent witnesses to the aspirations and anxieties of a society negotiating its place between history and modernity, between the local and the universal.

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