

# BUILDINGS OWNED BY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND THE PROTECTION OF THEIR VALUE WITH A FOCUS ON THE ÚSTÍ REGION

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## Abstract

Very often, public administrations do not treat their buildings in a way that is appropriate to the architectural value of the property. The research focuses on the Ústí Region and deals with buildings from the second half of the 20th century. Its purpose is to search for an appropriate approach to the management of valuable public buildings. The paper focuses on the research to date and presents general options for improving the approach to valuable public buildings within the framework of current legislation.

## Keywords

Public administration, building management, valuable buildings, monument care, post-war architecture

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The topic of the research is the search for an appropriate approach to the management of valuable public real estate. The term ‘management’ here does not mean routine maintenance, but rather the meaningful management and use of buildings. Public administrations in the Czech Republic often do not treat buildings in a way that is appropriate to their architectural value. This applies mainly to the reconstruction of buildings or changes in their use, and most often to buildings that do not have the protection granted to monuments. The work is therefore focused on buildings from the second half of the 20th century. The topicality of the work lies in the fact that these buildings are currently at the end of their designed lifetime, and the public administrations that own them are now considering the future fate of the buildings.

The risks associated with this situation are related, for example, to the loss of the building's original appearance (architectural value) or its public function (social value).

The topic was chosen on the basis of the author's personal experience with the property management of the Ministry for Regional Development of the Czech Republic and the Prague 6 Municipal District. The author has verified that in the departments of these institutions dealing with property management there is a lack of experts who are able to recognize valuable buildings and protect their value. Listing (i.e. heritage protection) is usually the only criterion which a public administration considers when deciding on the approach to take to a given building. If a building is not listed, the public administration usually opts for the simplest procedures, focusing on the lowest price criterion, where the preservation of the original value of the building is not a factor. The author's motivation is therefore to look for procedures that ensure consistency between the economic essence of building management and building value.

The research works with the hypothesis that valuable public buildings that do not have heritage protection can be managed more responsibly in the public interest.

Public administrations often dispose of valuable buildings in a manner that favours the private sector. However, this research focuses on the use of buildings, i.e. it does not deal with the sale of assets, but with the process of adapting existing buildings so they may continue to serve the public administration that owns them.

## Theoretical basis and selected literature

The theoretical basis of the research is based on the themes of conservation, the value of buildings, the functioning of public administrations and their property management, public procurement, architectural policies and architectural consulting with a focus on the activities of state, regional and city architects. Some of the topics are described below in relation to the literature that was used in the research.

As far as buildings from the second half of the 20th century are concerned, conservation in our country is based on methods published by the Národní památkový ústav (National Heritage Institute), entitled *Metodika hodnocení a ochrany staveb 2. poloviny 20. století* [1]. In the international context, the approach to these buildings from the conservation point of view is addressed, for example, in the publication *Time Frames: Conservation Policies for Twentieth-Century Architectural Heritage* [2], which uses specific examples from selected countries around the world to show which aspects of a building were considered valuable enough to lead to its listing, and how long after the construction of the building the listing took place. An interesting perspective on such architecture in post-socialist countries is provided by Mark Escherich's article entitled *Denkmal Ost-Moderne*, which concerns the approach of conservation authorities to the valuable buildings of the former GDR [3]. The cultural and economic value of buildings, especially in relation to heritage conservation, is discussed by David Throsby in *The Economics of Cultural Policy* [4].

The management of public buildings in relation to architecture is discussed in a publication by João Bento entitled *State and City Architects* [5], which describes the role of these architects in some European countries as advisors overseeing the portfolio of public buildings. Architectural consulting in general is the subject of a book by Frank Peter Jäger entitled *Der Neue Architekt* [6].

The overarching government document upon which public administrations should base their actions is the architecture policy of the Czech Republic [7], which touches on the topic of research, for example in the field of quality public buildings as examples of good practice, or in the field of support for state, regional and city architects.

## Region

The research focuses on the Ústí Region (hereafter referred to as 'the Region') for several reasons. Firstly, it is the region of the Czech Republic in which the position of regional architect has been established for the longest time [8], and one of the topics of this research is the role of regional architects in relation to the portfolio of public property (in this case the property of the Region).

Secondly, this is a region that is perceived in the European context as being 'handicapped', as its strategic planning has been subordinated to coal mining for several decades since the 1960s. The region is now in a process of transformation linked to the phasing out of coal mining. One of the key themes of this transformation is resocialisation, which, in addition to working with the inhabitants, also applies to working with property, as the use of buildings and their role in the public space is a social issue.

Thirdly, this is an area that has seen large investments in the post-war period (mainly to compensate for urban redevelopment as a result of mining activities), which have enabled the creation of a number of public buildings of high quality.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The research on public buildings in the Ústí Region will take place in several phases. First, based on the author's personal experience and a literature search, a brief overview of the factors influencing the issue and how it is generally approached at home and abroad will be provided.

In the second phase, a database of valuable public buildings in the Ústí Region from the second half of the 20th century will be created as a basis for regional strategic documents.

The third phase will focus on specific selected buildings, to which reference buildings (both domestic and mainly abroad) will be compared as inspiring examples of public building management (international comparative research). Subsequently, these examples will be analysed in order to find procedures (methods and measures) that would be applicable within Czech public administrations, specifically focusing on the Ústí Region. This should be both an exploration of practices and their transferability to the Region's environment. At the same time, it will also be a comparison of administrative environments (public administration) and real estate management. A specific approach to valuable public buildings will be explored through a questionnaire-based survey (email communication) or face-to-face interviews (live or online).

The object of the research is primarily to determine an appropriate approach to the buildings mentioned, not a methodology for assessing their value. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, a valuable building is one whose value (architectural, urban, social, etc.) is already recognised by the professional community. This means that such a building is cited as significant or valuable, for example, in the professional literature.

As regards the definition of public administration, the first two phases of the research mentioned above will be dealing with buildings owned by the state and its organisations (state administration) as well as buildings owned by the Region and municipalities (local administration). From the third phase onwards (selection of specific

buildings), the research will focus on the Region's local administration and its methodology for managing valuable public buildings.

## 3 RESULTS

The research is still in its initial phase, and the research results obtained so far are summarised in several chapters below. These include a description of the current methodology by which the Region treats its buildings along with a review of the current state of knowledge and the presentation of options for a more responsible approach to building management. As an example, the risks associated with the current management of a selected specific building are then described, and methods of preventing these risks are suggested.

### Existing methodology

The Ústí Region manages its own buildings on the basis of schematic catalogue sheets where their basic technical parameters are quantified. When carrying out projects related to the maintenance or reconstruction of buildings, it follows the standard procedure of the Public Procurement Act, but the types of procurement procedures defined by the Act are often not used in the most appropriate way.

Tenders for design work are usually evaluated on the basis of the lowest price criterion, with the quality of the design not being a required criterion, even though the buildings in question deserve it. The Public Procurement Act emphasises the use of qualitative criteria and also allows for using an architectural competition (a design competition), but from the point of view of public administrations this is a non-standard and therefore more complex procedure.

The above does not mean that there are no examples of good practice, i.e. inspiring approaches to building management, in the Czech Republic. However, their occurrence is exceptional, because it depends on an enlightened approach and a shift from standardised procedures [5]. In order for such examples to become the norm, it would be necessary for public administrations to understand the value of the buildings and, in this context, to make optimal use of the options laid out in the Public Procurement Act and to develop these options in its own methodologies. The research therefore focuses on the options present within the existing legislation.

### Current state of knowledge

From the author's own experience, as well as from the research conducted, any project involving a valuable building should be considered strategically and should begin with a thorough analysis of the building with emphasis on the following topics:

- the context of the site and its development potential (urban and social value),
- desired functions and layout (verification of usability),
- architectural value,
- structural and technical condition,
- building services,
- sustainability.

The analysis should be followed by the preparation of a project brief. For example, in the case of reconstruction, the method of selecting a designer should be appropriate to the value and importance of the building, i.e. in the case of a valuable building, an architectural competition should be held [7].

One of the valuable buildings analysed in detail in the research is the building of the Regional Office of the Ústí Region (see below). The in-depth analysis is closely related to the role of the supervisor, who is a consultant that, due to his competence, helps the public administration with a given project.

This position is generally referred to abroad as a design champion [5], and can be held by an individual or a team of experts. At the level of state administration, it is a position in a team of government advisors, sometimes held directly as a 'state architect'. At the local administration level, the role of supervisor is most often performed by the city architect.

The consultants do not have the power make binding decisions (it is always a political decision), but the public administration has the obligation to submit plans concerning valuable public assets to them for review. This could involve, for example, the new construction, renovation or sale of a building. This is where the main benefit of supervision comes into play, as the consultants will then prepare a detailed analysis, as previously mentioned. We could call it a feasibility study or, more generally, a comprehensive basis for further decision-making when dealing with the property in question. The public administration then proceeds with the said decision-making on the basis

of this analysis. The consultants are then usually involved in the next phases of the project; in addition to preparing the brief, their other activities in the case of building projects include, for example, supervising the selection of the designer or architect who will prepare the project for the public administration, and then checking and providing feedback on the project.

### **Example of a specific building – the Regional Office of the Ústí Region**

A building that will be covered in the next phase of the research as one of the case studies is the headquarters of the Regional Office, formerly the headquarters of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party – Fig. 1. The building was built in 1985 and is a valuable example of Brutalist architecture [9], [10]. Currently, its owner (the Ústí Region) is planning to reconstruct the façade in connection with the insulation of the building. The existing façade is at the limit of its service life, and at the same time it is necessary to reduce energy costs. One attempt by the Region to reconstruct the façade was already made in 2022, when the Region issued a tender for a project to insulate the building with the lowest price criterion, without taking into account any qualitative criteria. At that time, no one was concerned with the fact that the reconstruction of the facade should be approached with regard to the value of the building. However, the tendering procedure provoked dissent among the professional and lay public alike, which eventually led the Region to cancel the tender and its management to start talking about an architectural competition, which would be an appropriate procedure given the value of the building.

Architectural competitions, however, do not necessarily guarantee a desired result; it is necessary to define the conditions of the competition as well as the project specification precisely. As the existing façade is made of suspended travertine slabs, it is not possible to insulate the building sufficiently and then return the slabs to their original position. The question is whether to completely redesign the anchoring system of the slabs (create longer anchors so that there is sufficient insulation thickness between the slab and the masonry), or to go down the route of changing the original façade material. One feature of Brutalist architecture is its monumentality, which in this case is achieved by the travertine cladding. The preservation of this aspect of the building (even if the façade material is changed) should therefore be one of the main criteria of the competition. The result definitely should not repeat the mistakes made with the façade of the neighbouring building – Fig. 2, where the originally Brutalist concrete façade was replaced by insulation with aluminium cladding, which was rendered in several colours and thus completely negates the original monumentality of the building.

The reconstruction of the façade is linked to the risk of losing the original appearance of the building, i.e. its architectural value. However, another perhaps more significant risk concerns the possible loss of the social value of the building, which is linked to the loss of its public function.

Brutalist buildings sometimes have a problem with context, i.e. integration into the existing environment, but in the case of the selected example of the Regional Office, it is a building which was built with the aim of providing a ground floor area that fulfils specific appropriate public functions. The ground floor of the original building thus included two restaurants, several shops, an art gallery and a reprographic centre. By concentrating these services practically around the entire building, a lively public space was created. Today, most of the original commercial space is vacant or used by the Regional Office as offices or warehouses. The public space around the building is thus deteriorating because people have no reason to go there. Above all, the building is no longer fulfilling its original function as a provider of necessary services in the city centre.

This situation has been caused by poorly conceived modifications that have gradually been made over the past twenty years. Each new political leadership of the Region has had a different idea about how the building should be used, with the common feature being the growth of their agenda and the search for additional space for officials. As a result, most of the commercial space on the ground floor has been taken over by the Regional Office. The building has gradually lost its urban and social value. The preparation of the reconstruction of the facade is an important topic, but even more important should be the adjustment of the immediate surroundings of the building, including the restoration of the original function of the ground floor. Such a procedure would be consistent with the idea of a responsible approach to building management with regard to the public interest.

This approach relates to the themes of analysis and supervision outlined above. In order to protect the valuable aspects of the building, the building needs to be analysed. The impetus for this can come from the supervisor, who works externally (for example in the role of the regional architect), or from someone else who is an internal part of the owner's team (for example, property management departments abroad employ architects). The important thing is that there is generally someone competent in the process who recognises the quality of the building in question and establishes appropriate procedures.

If we stay with the example of the Regional Office building, then for a public building that should also fulfil important public functions, there is a need, as part of the public interest, to communicate with other stakeholders affected by the building's functions. The main ones in this case are the city of Ústí nad Labem and the public. Public opinion is divided about post-war buildings, and especially the older generation perceives these buildings negatively with regard to the socialist regime. Younger generations, who did not experience the regime directly, have a much more open attitude towards such buildings. We could take inspiration, for example, from

neighbouring Germany, where after German reunification there was a palpable resistance to the post-war buildings of the former GDR (both among the lay and professional public), but gradually, thanks to public discussion and the involvement of the younger generation, the tarnished image of such buildings has been rehabilitated [3]. A public discussion on the future form and function of the Regional Office building should therefore be necessary.



Fig. 1 Building of the Regional Office of the Ústí Region: view from the south, original state in 1985.



Fig. 2 Building of the Regional Office of the Ústí Region: view from the north, current state. In the left part of the image you can see the insensitively reconstructed facade of the neighbouring originally Brutalist building.

## 4 DISCUSSION

The research results to date are an introduction to the topics on which the research will focus in its next phases. The limitations that could affect the research are as follows and will be briefly described below:

- the functioning of public administration and property management departments, the position of advisors at different levels,
- current legislation or methodologies, and their transferability to the Czech environment,
- the competences of city, regional and state architects, and their mutual cooperation,
- the economy of building operation and building management priorities,
- the public and its relationship to post-war architecture,

- heritage conservation and the listing of the building as a cultural monument.

The first three points from the list above relate to foreign research and to efforts to implement foreign practices in the Czech environment. Some things in terms of the different functioning of public administration may be completely non-transferable, but some may serve as inspiration for the future, as they will require a change in legislation. As the research primarily focuses on options within existing legislation, there will be a need to explore the possibilities offered by foreign methodologies and the roles of consultants [6] at different levels of government. Very closely related to this is the role of city, regional or state architects, who are taking on the role of property management advisors in some countries. It will be important to evaluate the competences of these architects and compare them with the competences of such architects in the Czech Republic, specifically in the Ústí Region.

Another limit will be the economy of operation, i.e. the financial resources allocated to the management of a specific object. It will depend on the value of the building, i.e. its importance to its owner, and the level of investment will be determined from this. The above-mentioned in-depth analysis should determine which adjustments to the building have the highest priority in terms of public interest.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the public's opinion (both lay and professional) on specific buildings will also play a role.

Heritage authorities can influence the process of managing a public building through the listing of the building. Therefore, it is possible that some selected buildings within the research will gradually be listed and thus protected in some way (in terms of architectural value). However, this does not change the fact that supervision and a thorough analysis of the building will be necessary in such cases as well.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The purpose of the research is to search for an appropriate approach to the management of valuable public properties and to describe strategies that lead to the preservation of the value of such buildings. The research focuses on the Ústí Region and deals with buildings from the second half of the 20th century that do not have heritage protection. The author's motivation is to look for methods that ensure harmony between the economic essence of building management and the valuable aspects of managed buildings.

The aim of this paper is to present research topics that have been identified based on the author's personal experience and previous research. This has involved presenting the current methodology according to which the Region approaches its buildings, along with the current state of knowledge, where the tools of detailed building analysis and supervision were presented. The risks associated with inappropriate building management were then described using a specific building as an example.

In the next phases, the research will deal with the creation of a database of valuable public buildings in the Ústí Region (as a basis for regional strategic documents) and the selection of specific buildings as case studies, to which reference buildings both domestic and mainly from abroad will be compared as inspiring examples of public building management. These examples will be analysed in order to determine procedures (methods and measures) that would be useful for the building management of the Region. The research will also focus on the role of the regional architect of the Ústí Region as a possible advisor for the management of valuable buildings.

The aim of the research is not to write a methodology, but to present options for a better approach to the management of valuable buildings. The results of the research are potentially further applicable to other regions or other public authorities in the Czech Republic.

### Acknowledgement

This paper was written with the support of the Department of Architectural Design I at the Faculty of Architecture, CTU in Prague.

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