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Ian Bryan Architects adds complementary layer to Prague's famous cityscape

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By Johanna Breen, For the Post



Michael Heitmann

One of the things architect Ian Bryan finds refreshing about working here is that, while there are strict rules about preserving historic buildings, if something new is added on there's no reason it can't have a modern touch.

Certainly this was Bryan's experience when his company proposed to glaze over the historic courtyard garden of the 17th-century building now occupied by the Kempinski Hybernská hotel in Old Town. The project involved working closely with heritage officials to preserve the building's original legacy, while at the same time creating a truly modern lounge area within the completely reconstructed hotel complex.

Interestingly, the architects used drawings from the 1920s that detailed an earlier, unrealized proposal to glaze over the courtyard, demonstrating the idea has held up over the years.

In many ways, it's more interesting to do renovations and additions to existing buildings than to build from scratch, Bryan explains, because you are working within an existing framework.

"We're adding another layer, a modern layer," he says.

Dealing with history can also uncover the odd pleasant surprise. For example, when working on the British Embassy in Prague, Bryan's team discovered 300-year-old graffiti when hacking off some old render.

"It's almost like archaeology," he says. And it's not just the older buildings that offer the opportunity to find out about the past. There was as much to be learned when the company took on the reconstruction of a 1930s Functionalist villa in Prague 5's Zbraslav neighborhood.

Unconstrained by regulations and seized by a desire to create something truly original, the original architect, Hynek Svobodová, a contemporary of Adolf Loos, had experimented, using reinforced concrete in a way that went against architectural norms. Theoretically, the building shouldn't have stood. That it has survived is a tribute to the optimism and defiance of its instigator.

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"I have great respect for Czech Functionalist architecture, which still feels as bold and fresh to me today as it must have ... 80 years ago," Bryan says.

His company's approach with this project was to incorporate the building's original features, while giving them a new twist.

"Each project we do has its own characteristics, which we focus on," he says, noting that he likes to use traditional materials in a fresh and contemporary way.

Ian Bryan Architects was also heavily involved in the Hermitage project. The company restored an old print building in Vyšehrad where a hotel and apartment complex is set to open this month.

Bryan explains that one of the key aspects of the work his firm did on this project was its focus on maximizing the site, making use of every single inch of space, including the basement area.

When the company started out in 1997, this kind of renovation work made up the lion's share of the business. It has continued to do this kind of work but, at the same time, has embraced more new-build projects such as a block of residential accommodation at Nad Petruskou 14a in Prague 2.

Part of the joy of the work they do, Bryan says, is the variety. They have successfully worked on offices, residential accommodation and hotels. More recently, they have taken on the design of whole urban spaces such as the one at Statenický Mlýn in Statenice, a village in Prague 6 out toward the airport.

This was an unusual project in that it envisioned a whole lifestyle for the development's future residents, and care was taken to build facilities as well as housing. The development centers on a square with shops, a doctor's surgery and public transport links. Also onsite, a restaurant hovers over a lake that was created when land was reclaimed for building.

The same principles have been applied to one of the company's current works in progress: a development in Karkov, a city of 3 million people in Ukraine on the Russian border, which presently has few good residential accommodations.

"We have a responsibility to the public to provide quality buildings and public environments whilst also ensuring that it will be commercially successful for the developer," Bryan says.

This responsiveness to clients' needs is one of the things that Ballymore Properties, an international developer, appreciates about Bryan's working style.

"He has a habit of starting the initial meetings by listening to what the client might expect from the completed work," says Paul Kemp, a spokesman for Ballymore.

Kemp is also effusive about the architectural practice's ability to turn its hand to a variety of different projects.

"The work [Ian Bryan Architects] has undertaken for us is varied," he says. For instance, "master planning studies of very large residential developments, including all infrastructure networks, complete architectural services for high-end residential projects and, finally, the supervision of our five-star Kempinski Hotel."

Bryan believes the Czechs are more tolerant of modern buildings thanks to their rich culture of modern architecture. He says one of the reasons new things naturally integrate here is because there is so much variety.

"I like architecture [that] has a clear creative idea, expressed with conviction and self-confidence," Bryan says. "Prague is so full of such examples from all ages, and it's a privilege to work in such an environment."

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