

# A69: lucky generation from the normalization



Author: SF / Petr Bým | Published: 31.03.2009

Judging by the name itself, but not only the name, the architectural studio A69 is a generational concept. All three key players - Boris Redčenkov, Prokop Tomášek and Jaroslav Wertig - were born in 1969. It may be the unluckiest year of the second half of the 20th century for the Czech Republic, but for A69 the oppressive period of normalization was rather a good asset. "We may have been a reason for our parents to dwell on our existence, a kind of ventilation of the nationwide frustration. At any rate, we got a lot of love and, together with it, a decent portion of tolerance. That's the only reason we're still together, even though we're very different," Jaroslav Wertig defines the generational aspect of the studio's life. According to him, it was good luck that the preparation for the future professional carrier of the three architects finished already in freedom, which opened undreamt-of opportunities and perspectives for them. We can already say today that they use their opportunities very well, thanks to many coinciding circumstances.

## Between Sudetenland and Prague



"We found out that the region is empty and culturally non-defendable for us in the long run. Culture, tradition and morality left it with the Germans." This is a downright judgment on the topic of the former Sudetenland by Jaroslav Wertig. Today, A69 is seated in Prague, but is still highly indebted to the former Sudetenland, in spite of the above-mentioned strict verdict. That is where its key representatives were educated (Wertig and Redčenkov grew up in Františkovy Lázně, Tomášek in Liberec), and that is where they started their professional careers - and the "Sudeten" start was more than important for the development of the studio and its practical deployment.

A69 was founded in Cheb in 1994. In our situation, when everything important takes place in Prague, or possibly also in Brno, Ostrava and Plzeň, this was an unusual choice, yet soon after that it turned out to be right. At the beginning of the 1990s there were many people in the Cheb region working in Germany, plus the number of people who received their property in restitutions was growing. Therefore there was much money and, when the primary needs of clothing, electrical appliances and cars were satisfied, people logically started looking at housing. Competition was meagre, if any at all. And the newly founded studio

was therefore flooded with orders, which brought the necessary finance and experience. “Our local knowledge, including the building culture and its technology, helped us very much at that time,” notes Wertig. The strong demand gave A69 good conditions for well-elaborated projects. And after serving individual citizens, it started receiving orders from municipalities and enterprises.



Unfortunately, A69 does not have any documentation on its production activities from those times, but this is not true of larger projects, which included for example modification of the parterre of the Anglická Street in Františkovy Lázně, reconstruction of the Elektra department store in Cheb and the new-built house of the Dr. Peták Sanatorium and its later extension. These projects guaranteed great response to the studio. “We were something like heroes of the red library for Prague - unspoiled boys from the borderland forests, wielding new ideas,” Wertig recalls the time when the studio became a hit among the media and other professionals. For example Rostislav Švácha described the Elektra store as the first really modern architecture in Cheb since the 1920s.

The growing number of projects brought also the first rewards from various contests, and then a real breakthrough arrived - participation in an award procedure for a residential complex in Strahov, Prague. A69 beat the domestic architectural elite, including one of their teachers, Josef Pleskot, with its highly unusual concept (which was later somewhat “standardized”, since the developer feared excessive extravagance). And the Villa Park Strahov project was followed by an even greater one - Central Park Praha. A69 obtained this contract among competitors of not only domestic, but international scope, including R. Bofill and MVRDV. Given these circumstances, Cheb started to be too small for the studio and the time came to move to Prague. And the growth opportunities in the region were already exhausted. In addition, the large projects by A69, which were praised on the pages of specialized magazines here and abroad, did not meet much success at home. “I have a feeling that my father was ashamed to admit that the Anglická Street was also his son’s doing,” Wertig remembers.

### Architecture according to A69



There is no point in talking about style in connection with contemporary architecture, with few exceptions. However, it is not so inapposite as far as A69’s work is concerned. Perhaps all of its projects are highly characteristic, but on a case-by-case basis. It is caused by their mode of work. “We’re democrats internally, and autocrats externally,” Wertig explains. Translated into practice: each contract has a guarantor - one of the three studio leaders. And the person whose concept was “chosen” will bring it all the way to the end, with the help of the studio’s executive workers.

What distinguishes architects and studios today is mostly their working procedures and methods. The trio of Redčenkov - Tomášek - Wertig has a well-defined style of work. “First of all, it is necessary to properly examine and determine the client’s needs, and not only those declared. The client may not be even aware where the real problem is. After that, you have to respond to the problem or specifications accurately. “Why not?” can be the answer of a fashion designer or interior designer, but not of an architect,” Wertig

describes the fundamental methodological postulate of the studio's work. And another prerogative is innovation. "Innovation is necessary. You cannot apply old answers to new questions, because they were produced under different conditions, in a different context," says Wertig. It should be noted that the architect Lábus (Redčenkov, Tomášek and Wertig were trained in his studio) describes the work of A69 virtually in the same terms: "...they attentively respond to the specifications ... a typical feature of their projects is distinct conceptuality, converted into reality ... they consistently watch the emergence of new attitudes and values."



A69's work, i.e. projects, has one other visible feature - courage and self-confidence that result in untraditional "answers." This is very obvious especially on smaller projects, such as Eggo, Plot and Lea houses. Their concept goes beyond the established habits and patterns. Yet it is not an aesthetic exhibition; function, purpose always comes first. However, the courage and will for its own original attitude in A69 does not have anything in common with the solution of a problem that is perhaps crucial for contemporary architecture: approach to client.

### Compromises do not degrade



"I don't understand the perpetual complaints about clients. How can anyone complain about someone who's giving him work and the possibility to deal with reality?" Wertig asks rhetorically. According to him, it is the customer that deserves the least criticism in the customer - architect - end user chain. "I don't know who's the better customer - developer, public institution or private builder. We cooperate smoothly with frequently criticized developers. The cards are clear on the table. The developer wants to invest as little as possible, yet wants to get a product acceptable for the market - and you should help him," says Wertig, adding: "Of course, you have to look for compromise. But it's the main task for each architect: look for real, yet creative and functional solutions given the specific conditions. The word 'compromise' has negative connotations for architects; they would do with a little humbleness."

While A69 tries to understand its direct customers as much as possible, it is more critical of the end users, i.e. mostly flat buyers. "Developers only respond to demand. If their customers are unable to recognize high quality, are not cultivated and buy low-quality products, this supply will obviously emerge," Wertig says categorically. According to him, the surviving scorn for relatively high-quality flats in prefabricated houses and the uncritical preference of new brick houses, often with hasty architectural and construction design, testify to the poor level of people interested in housing: There's no point in blaming only the developers for the current level of construction activities. It's as unreasonable as blaming only architects for prefabricated houses."



Pragmatic approach to market needs is also visible in other areas in A69. The team consults each contract with specialists in other professions, especially economists and lawyers. A69 may be also our only studio where public relations are tackled professionally; a PR specialist is a full-time employee of the studio. The outcome of his work is also the recently launched webpage. “We’re expressly surprised about the response - it comes from the US as well as from Korea. We have invitations to lectures, workshops and exhibitions abroad and hope to live long enough to start obtaining invitations for tenders,” says Jaroslav Wertig.

Figures:

1. Eggo
2. A69
3. Dr. Peták Sanatorium
4. Plot
5. Lea
6. Villa Park Strahov
7. Central park Praha

---

31.03.2009 08:00, SF / Petr Bým