

Vladimír Fischer, the Church of St. Augustine in Brno, and the Ambiguities of the Avant-Garde"

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Lecture Abstract

The Church of St. Augustine by Vladimír Fischer is one of the most visible modernist churches in Brno. Yet, like many other churches built in the First Czechoslovak Republic, it receives hardly a mention in discussion of twentieth-century architecture. Why might this be, and why does it deserve more attention?



Initial responses to the church were critical since it incorporated a number of historical references that seemed to contradict avant-garde ideals. A formal analysis would appear to confirm this idea, and subsequent scholars have gone along with such judgements. However, I argue that the church merits analysis because it raises important questions about the way the history of modernist architecture has been written. In particular, due to the influence of critics such as Karel Teige, historians of modernist architecture have been reluctant to talk about sacred buildings. Yet examples such as the church of St. Augustine suggest both that churches marked an important chapter in the history of functionalist architecture and also that the values traditionally associated with avant-gardism – materialism, positivism, functionalism – are not the only ones. The language of functionalist architecture lends itself equally to metaphysical and spiritual interpretations. Including churches in the narrative of the avant-garde thus requires its history to be rethought, since they reveal its polysemic character.

Finally, I argue that consideration of the church casts light not only on how we write about the avant-garde but also on the role of the Catholic and other churches in interwar Czechoslovakia. Masaryk explicitly declared that the founding of the state was a spiritual task, but this has been generally marginalized by historians, because it contradicts the image of Czechoslovakia as the leading progressive and secular state of interwar central Europe, which managed to cast aside the legacy of the Habsburg Empire. In this sense I view the church as an important symbol of the complex position of Czechoslovakia, which it sought to define itself as a new beginning, but was also unable entirely to free itself from the past, particularly when it came to the place of religion in public life.