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# Exploring the Demystification of an Architectural Legend

A Review of: Ladislav Zikmund-Lender and Helena Čapková, eds, *Mýtus architekta: Jan Kotěra 150* [The Myth of the Architect: Jan Kotěra 150]. Prague: Academy of Art and Design, 2021. 285 pp. ISBN: 978-80-88308-41-6.

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# Exploring the Demystification of an Architectural Legend

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## Petr Janáč

The book *Mýtus architektka: Jan Kotěra 150*, as the title suggests, was created on the one-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the architect's birth in 1871. Furthermore, it has been two decades since the last extensive monograph on him was published by an authorial team led by Vladimír Šlapeta.<sup>1</sup> The anniversary of Kotěra's birth offers an excellent opportunity for a new interpretation of his role in the history of modern Czech architecture. In addition, this anniversary provides sufficient distance to assess the position of this important figure in the historiography of Czech modern architecture and to address gaps in research. In the following review, I attempt to determine how the book's authors have handled this challenging task.

First, let's begin by recalling a few facts about Kotěra himself. He was one of the most influential figures shaping the development of modern architecture in the Czech lands. After completing his studies under Otto Wagner at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts between 1894 and 1897, and embarking on a promising career in Vienna, he returned to the Czech lands. He settled in Prague, a move warmly welcomed by the local professional community. Quickly, he assumed a leading position amongst Czech architects. He initially worked in the style of progressive Art Nouveau, influenced by his tutor Otto Wagner. Among his most famous works from this period are the Peterka House in Prague (1899-1900) and the National House in Prostějov (1905-1907). Over the following decades, he moved away from decorative elements and became more interested in structural rationality. Some of the most celebrated buildings from this era include the Municipal Museum in Hradec Králové (1906-1913), his own villa in the Prague suburb of Vinohrady (1908-1909), and the 'Laichter House' (1909), also in Vinohrady.

In addition to designing buildings, he dedicated himself to other activities; he was involved in the art and architecture magazine *Volné směry* (Free Directions), for example, and, above all, was engaged in pedagogical work. Initially, he worked as a professor at the Prague School of Applied Arts (1898-1910) and later transferred to the newly established specialised architecture school at the Academy of Fine Arts (1910-1923). During the first two decades of the twentieth century, he educated several generations of Czech architects who would promote modernist architecture in interwar Czechoslovakia.

Even though Kotěra did not complete many buildings and had a shortage of larger commissions, especially in the later years of his life, his position within modern architecture was perceived in later literature as foundational. The first monograph on Kotěra's work was pub-

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1) Vladimír Šlapeta and Daniela Karasová eds, *Jan Kotěra: 1871–1923, zakladatel moderní české architektury*, Prague: Kant, 2001. An English-language edition was also published the same year as *Jan Kotěra, 1871-1923: the Founder of Modern Czech Architecture*.

lished during his lifetime by the Prague-based scholar Karel B. Mádl in 1922.<sup>2</sup> Kotěra's early death in 1923 triggered a multitude of obituaries, followed by further articles assessing his pioneering role within modern architecture.<sup>3</sup> Additional pieces referred to his 'creative genius'.<sup>4</sup> These efforts reached their peak with a comprehensive publication of Kotěra by his student, the architect Otakar Novotný, which was released in 1958.<sup>5</sup> Later, the art historian Marie Benešová also explored Kotěra's legacy through the lens of historical materialism.<sup>6</sup> However, she arrived at identical conclusions as the earlier scholars. Another example of the reception of Kotěra's work during the times of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia was a book or, rather, a brochure presented by one of his students, Bohuslav Fuchs in 1972, issued on the commemoration of the centenary of Kotěra's birth.<sup>7</sup>

All these efforts culminated, much later after the revolution in 1989, in the publication mentioned above: *Jan Kotěra 1871-1923: The Founder of Modern Czech Architecture*. This volume is, to some extent, comprehensive in terms of content, but it still perpetuates the existing view of Kotěra veiled in a mythical aura of genius. In contrast, *Mýtus architekta: Jan Kotěra 150* challenges established conventions and demystifies Jan Kotěra's persona and work from various perspectives.

All this earlier literature more or less helped to construct and conserve the cult of Kotěra as the founder of Czech modern architecture. Kotěra was highly adept at creating his own media image, and as Ladislav Zikmund-Lender, one of the editors, observes in *Mýtus architekta* (p. 206), he imparted these skills to a number of his students and clients. Furthermore, his students, and later art historical literature, reinforced his status as a pioneer of architectural modernism in the Czech lands. His premature death in 1923 also contributed to this perception.

This type of heroization is a highly characteristic phenomenon of pivotal cultural periods, and the emergence of modernism is undoubtedly among them. A selected individual suddenly rises to prominence, characterized by unparalleled talent and genius that overshadows their individuality and any other contemporaries in the field. A mythical aura is created around the person, becoming an integral part of their identity, collectively shared by both experts and colleagues in the field. It is typical of the early years of modern architecture when other national 'pioneers' such as Le Corbusier in France, Mies van der Rohe in Germany (and later in the USA), or Adolf Loos in Central Europe, were glorified. In the Czech context, Jan Kotěra undoubtedly belonged to this group of personalities. These iconic figures often transcend their era, becoming symbols of architectural innovation. However, the uncritical glorification of the persons often leads to a distortion of their life and work and interfere with more nuanced understanding of their contributions. Let's consider how the authors of *Mýtus architekta* tackled this issue.

2) Karel Boromejský Mádl, *Jan Kotěra*, Prague: Jan Štenc, 1922.

3) František Žákavec, 'Jan Kotěra mrtev!' [Jan Kotěra is dead!], *Národní listy*, 17 April 1923, evening edition, 1, or Zdeněk Wirth, 'Jan Kotěra', *České slovo*, 18 April 1923, unpaginated.

4) For example Jaromír Krejcar, 'Jan Kotěra', *Stavba* 2, 1923-1924, 4-7.

5) Otakar Novotný, *Jan Kotěra a jeho doba* [Jan Kotěra and his times], Prague: Statní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění, 1958.

6) Marie Benešová, *Jan Kotěra*, Prague: Svaz architektů ČSR, 1972.

7) Bohuslav Fuchs, *In margine uměleckého odkazu Jana Kotěry* [In the margin of Jan Kotěra's artistic legacy], Brno: Dům umění, 1972.

In the introduction, the editors and principal authors, Ladislav Zikmund-Lender and Helena Čápková, set the following premise: if, until now, Jan Kotěra has been associated with his leadership role in the formative period of modern architecture, it is now necessary to point out the wide range of the architect's activities and to interpret his place as an individual in the context of social relations. For the authors, a new perspective on Kotěra is made possible by applying new methodological approaches that offer alternatives to existing analyses focused on individual and biographical approaches. Zikmund-Lender and Čápková go even further and mention the use of decolonisation theory, transnationalism, and even ecocriticism. Alongside such methodological innovations, the book points to new, unpublished, material and illuminates previously unnoticed issues in existing research.

The book consists of ten chapters by eight authors, each focusing on various aspects of Kotěra and his work. Most of the authors are younger art historians who define themselves in contrast to the older conception of Kotěra's work represented by Šlapeta's publication. The book also presents archival materials, many of them previously inaccessible. This choice is justified by the redundancy of presenting already-published materials, which have been repeatedly discussed. A further section of the book includes reprints of original texts by and about Kotěra, along with transcriptions of them.

The first chapter, by Jan Galeta, delves into Kotěra's relationship to the history of architecture. Galeta explores the architect's stance towards historicism, highlighting the fact that Kotěra drew directly from the architecture of historicism. This is despite the architect's programmatic statements in which he interpreted his work as innovative and opposed to the past.<sup>8</sup> Galeta supports this argument with lesser-known examples from Kotěra's early work, such as the neo-Gothic reconstruction of Červený Hrádek near Sedlčany, south of Prague (1895). Additionally, the author illustrates the architect's connections to architectural theory from the second half of the nineteenth century, mainly through excerpts from Kotěra's own writings on architecture. Another valuable insight into Kotěra's thinking is his archival correspondence with clients. It could be argued that at this early stage in his career, the emerging architect needed commissions, necessitating certain client compromises. Nevertheless, Galeta's chapter serves as a fresh and promising start to a book poised to challenge established perceptions of Kotěra.

Jana Sklenářová Teichmanová's chapter sheds light on another lesser-known phase of Kotěra's professional life: his work at the School of Applied Arts in Prague. The author delves into Kotěra's pedagogical beginnings and demonstrates how his architectural thinking influenced his approach to teaching. She logically connects Kotěra's pedagogical activities to his formative years at the Vienna Academy under Otto Wagner. Much like Wagner's other students, Kotěra formed a circle of emerging architects around him, who would go on to influence various parts of the Czech lands. The chapter thoroughly explains the roots of this well-known parallel, highlighting Kotěra's distinctive approach to respecting the stylistic expressions of his students. Furthermore, it explores Kotěra's significant role in representing the School of Arts and Crafts at World's Fairs, notably in Paris (1900) and, four years later, in St. Louis.

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8) See Jan Kotěra, 'O nové umění' [On New Art], *Volné Směry* [Free Directions], 4, 1900, 189-195.

Helena Čapková's chapter, titled 'Kotěra's Oriental Salon: a Polemic with Jan Letzel,' delves into Kotěra's engagement with 'oriental' cultures. Čapková considers whether Kotěra's architectural work possesses a transnational dimension. His interest in vernacular aesthetics and non-European architecture was in keeping with contemporary tendencies, and represented a portion of Kotěra's multifaceted portfolio which has never been previously explored. The chapter reconstructs Kotěra's engagement with Islamic and Asian cultures, based on examination of several design proposals he drafted as well as his correspondence with Jan Letzel, one of his pupils who worked as an architect in Japan. This chapter navigates the realm of speculation, offering insights into how Kotěra's work related to contemporary conceptions of the 'Orient'.

A further chapter by Zikmund-Lender explores Kotěra's sojourn in the USA during the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, and follows a similarly speculative approach. It focuses primarily on Kotěra's potential familiarity with the works of the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Additionally, the chapter presents intriguing – although sometimes unnecessary – information from archival sources, offering glimpses into the details of Kotěra's journey and the intricate processes involved in designing and realising the exhibition pavilion.

Miroslav Pavel analyses Kotěra alongside the Dutch architect H. P. Berlage in a chapter titled 'Jan Kotěra: Dutch Full Brick and Czechoslovak Empty Form'. Pavel explores the portrayal of new Czech architecture in Dutch architecture magazines, which, surprisingly, provided detailed coverage of developments in the Czech lands. He interprets Kotěra as a mediator between Czech architecture and modernism elsewhere, emphasising Kotěra's distinctive architectural language, which was characterised by the use of unplastered masonry and precise tectonic composition. In a second contribution to this volume, Zikmund-Lender examines Kotěra's role as an educator at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, using the school's infrastructure as a lens to discuss contemporary gender issues in education. The chapter highlights details such as the absence of women's bathroom facilities in the school's design and disparities in the staff salaries of men and women. However, it does not establish a direct connection between these issues and Kotěra personally.

Vendula Hnídková discusses Kotěra's relationship to the phenomenon of garden cities. She explores the pioneering efforts to create garden cities in the Czech lands. However, the description is somewhat incomplete, as it focuses primarily on Prague, and overlooks developments in other parts of Bohemia, Moravia and, after 1918, Czechoslovakia. Strangely, too, the chapter overlooks Kotěra's most significant achievement in this field, the housing colony in Louny.

Markéta Žáčková analyses Kotěra's involvement in urban development projects. In a number of his large-scale buildings, Kotěra grappled with the problem of integrating such structures into the cityscape. Yet although he was involved in urban planning, this was not, she points out, a significant aspect of his oeuvre and remained a relatively marginal aspect.

In his third chapter, Zikmund-Lender explores the reasons behind Kotěra's inability to successfully execute any of the designs he submitted to Tomáš G. Masaryk once the latter became President of Czechoslovakia in 1918. The authors consider whether Kotěra's failure was caused by his traditional approach to the interiors of Prague Castle,

characterised by an aristocratic touch. Masaryk's desire to transform Prague Castle into a democratic seat of the state favoured instead the austere yet timeless approach of architect Plečnik, who worked on the adaptation of the Prague Castle complex from 1920 onwards.

The final chapter, once again by Zikmund-Lender, analyses the construction of the Kotěra myth in Czech architectural historiography, its origins, and its present-day relevance. This section includes a critique of texts on Kotěra and assesses their contemporary significance. Since all the primary texts discussed in this final chapter are included in this volume, too, readers can reconstruct the evolution of the Kotěra myth and form their own opinions about it. Zikmund-Lender effectively uncovers its origins and attempts to decipher it by examining these key historic writings related to Kotěra and his work. The author traces the roots of this approach back to a newspaper article celebrating Kotěra's first major public project, the Municipal House in Hradec Králové, written by Kotěra's colleague from the School of Arts and Design, Karel Boromejský Mádl in 1905,<sup>9</sup> author, as noted above on the first monograph on Kotěra.<sup>10</sup> Zikmund-Lender then guides readers through all the important articles about Jan Kotěra and his personality until the publication of the comprehensive monograph twenty years ago, under the leadership of Vladimír Šlapeta.

Nearly all these historical sources use a similar rhetoric regarding the architect's myth and his pioneering mission: there are a few exceptions criticising work of Kotěra, primarily from the prominent Czech art critic and theorist Karel Teige.<sup>11</sup> Much of the literature about Kotěra was written by his students, friends, and colleagues, so a certain celebratory tone is to be expected, and this fact, in my opinion, should be emphasized. Surprisingly, Zikmund-Lender concludes this chapter by analyzing the materialistic articles by art historian Marie Benešová from the 1970s and 1980s, somewhat unexpectedly avoiding discussion of the situation after the revolution of 1989, when many texts appeared as a consequence of the newly established freedom of speech. This was some thirty years of turbulent transformations in discourse, regarding not only Jan Kotěra but also the entire field of art history. It is notable that he does not analyse critically the Šlapeta and Karasová publication of 2001. This is in spite of the fact that in their introduction Zikmund-Lender and Čápková regard it as representative of contemporary literature on the architect. Their reluctance may be interpreted, perhaps, as due to a certain respect for the previous generation of colleagues. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that the analysis of the historiography of Kotěra concludes with the 1980s.

It is also worth noting the unique design of the book by the duo of Jana Hrádková and Svatopluk Ruček. The minimalist concept is accentuated by a pastel colour palette, which complements the archival materials in ochre and beige tones. However, the choice of rather flimsy paper, which contrasts with the book's solid covers, is questionable. Such a choice of paper, especially for graphic pages and photographic reproductions, is hardly suitable and

9) Karel Boromejský Mádl, 'Z Hradce Králové' [From Hradec Králové], *Národní listy*, 22 October 1905, 13.

10) Mádl, *Jan Kotěra*, as in note 2.

11) Karel Teige, *M. S. A. 2: Moderní architektura v Československu* [Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia], Prague: Odeon, 1930, 50-60.

might not lead to a durable, high-quality book. Yet despite such shortcomings, the design is striking, especially the illustrations by Jan Šrámek, which are based on abstract patterns derived from Kotěra's buildings, and which appear to facilitate a fresh interpretation through this graphic representation. This is particularly refreshing for Czech readers, who are likely well-acquainted with Kotěra's architecture, as it offers a new perspective on familiar structures.

The photographic material accompanying the individual chapters is equally eye-catching. The details of Kotěra's buildings and their elements are well displayed. The focus on striking details underlines the researchers' intention to conduct a closer reading of Kotěra's work. In contrast, some of the archival material is shown on such a small scale that it is hardly readable. This aspect of the publication is probably the result of an attempt to cover as much material as possible but, unfortunately, this is at the expense of quality and practicality. This also applies to the original reprints included of period texts, which are, in places, barely readable and would certainly deserve a more suitable text size.

The individual chapters cover a wide range of the architect's activities. Some bring new impulses concerning Kotěra's architectural thought, such as the discussion of his relationship to historicism. Others describe his work in the context of his social interactions, such as the chapters on Kotěra's time at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague and his sojourn in the United States. Still others deal with issues that concerned Kotěra only marginally, but they have value inasmuch as they draw attention to the limits of his practice, to what Kotěra did and did not deal with. This fact might suggest an inevitable exhaustion of the subject, at least regarding new material and ideas. In this respect it is a pity that the authors did not offer new interpretations of now established accounts concerning the stylistic transformation of the architect's work, or present new interpretations of his best-known architectural achievements.

Despite such misgivings, however, the book has injected fresh perspectives into Czech art history. Its analysis of the socio-cultural background of Kotěra's work and of other, mainly pedagogical, circumstances of his life present a different picture of this important figure in Czech modern architecture. Together, the authors drew a more nuanced picture of his oeuvre. Zikmund Lender succeeded in analysing the origins of the heroisation of the personality. Yet, with a lack of criticism of more recent materials that continue to present Kotěra as the 'father' of modern architecture, the book is mainly concerned with the older literature, and analysis of contemporary literature is missing. Nevertheless, the attempt to demythologise the person of the great architect is more or less successfully. It is possible to imagine how other figures in Czech art and architecture could be subjected to a similar process. Even though there are no indications of Kotěra's personal attitudes and no direct connections to his practice, the discussion of gender imbalance in art education of the time, to which women had limited access, is important and pertinent. Also helpful and surprising was the comparison of Kotěra with Berlage, and Pavel's careful placing of Kotěra's work in the context of European architecture of the period. The critical analysis of the material on Kotěra by Zikmund-Leneder also offers an insightful assessment of his legacy. The rich pictorial appendix and the reprint of texts by and about Kotěra will surely be helpful for future readers and scholars. It cannot be said that the book brings



a single consistent set of new ideas and information about Kotěra, but that was not its aim. The earlier publication, *Jan Kotěra: The Founder of Modern Architecture*, had already offered a complete view of the architect but it still laboured under the shadow of the myth constructed around the architect. This new publication complements that older work, by offering a new appreciation of Kotěra's legacy and by considering previously unacknowledged aspects of the architect and his work.



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