

Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*. Translated and with an introduction by Eric Dluhosch. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002. 412 pages, \$59.95 (cloth).

This curious book, a work of Marxist architectural and urban theory, was originally published in 1932 by the leading spokesman of the interwar Czech avant-garde. The generous sampling of ground plans, schematic diagrams, and statistical tables may give the impression of a specialist work of interest only to historians of architecture and urban planning. But in fact the book is full of arguments with a broad resonance, and it will interest anyone concerned with modernist aesthetics, the cultural politics of the interwar avant-garde, or the history of twentieth-century Marxism.

Over the past few years there has been a hesitant discovery of Teige in English-language scholarship. Some of Teige's essays have appeared in translation, as has a sampling of the Czech scholarly discourse on his work. This is more than welcome: Teige was a major voice in interwar Czechoslovak culture and a significant figure in international avant-garde circles as well. But his Marxism was too unorthodox to be countenanced in the period from 1948-89, and too fervent to evoke sustained interest after 1989, with the result that scholarly reception of his work has been moving in fits and starts for over half a century. In the United States Teige has long been known almost exclusively for his scathing 1929 critique of Le Corbusier's Mundaneum project. Thus, while Teige wrote about an enormous range of avant-garde production – including literature, painting, sculpture, film, typography, and drama – it is still historians of architecture who have been most systematic in preserving and evaluating his legacy. The

present book, a translation of one of Teige's seminal architectural texts, continues that tradition.

Teige's account is sociological in approach. (Teige had in fact spent a year lecturing on the sociology of architecture at the Bauhaus shortly before writing this work.) He starts out from, and consistently refers back to, the brute fact that "masses of millions of those who are the tools of the current economic order [...] lack sufficient means and are forced to live on the lowest level of the so-called subsistence minimum, while our cities fail to offer them an opportunity for decent living" (1). His answer to this housing dilemma is to propagate the idea of the "minimum dwelling." Not simply a small apartment, this is rather a radically reconceived "live-in cell" for a single person within a "collective house" where the standard "economic functions" (such as laundry, larder, and especially the kitchen, for which Teige reserves particular antipathy) have been expurgated from the individual living units and collectivized. Teige situates this model at the endpoint of an engrossing historical account of the distributional shifts among architectural functions. (Teige's method here is reminiscent of Jan Mukařovský's diachronic analyses, providing insight into the cross-fertilization between the Czech avant-garde and early structuralism.)

As Teige makes clear, the term "minimum dwelling" was not his own: it was the subject of intense discussion among modernist architects at the time. Contrary to many of the eminent modernists, however, Teige insists that architecture *by itself* can never solve the housing crisis. (He heaps great scorn on Le Corbusier's famous alternative: architecture or revolution?) Thus Teige's minimum dwelling does not avert but rather presupposes revolutionary social change.

Many of Teige's statements in this regard remain revolutionary even today. Describing the social pre-requisites for women's emancipation, for example, Teige writes: "if women are to become completely equal with men, they cannot be expected to work simultaneously at two jobs: one in production and the other at home. [...]he must be completely liberated from the serfdom of domestic work: she must be liberated not only from the chores of housecleaning, kitchen work, sewing and mending clothes, and washing the laundry but also from the job of rearing her children" (173). The minimum dwelling, presupposing even communalized child rearing, thus negates the "bourgeois family" as such. This also perhaps suggests how the minimum dwelling – which to contemporary ears may sound like a frugal measure, an act of architectural desperation – for Teige expressed a liberating egalitarianism: a modest but functional space for each individual in which she or he could "dwell" in the strongest sense of the term.

The English edition does an admirable job of communicating the fascinating quirkiness of this book: its combination of elated avant-garde utopianism, pouting Marxist orthodoxy, and pedantic technical precision. Crucial in this respect was the decision to produce the book as a facsimile of the 1932 edition. This was not simply an antiquarian impulse, for Teige himself designed the layout, typography, and even the collage serving as cover illustration to the original edition. Considering the importance Teige attributed to innovative book design, these elements must be deemed an intrinsic part of his text, and Dluhosch is to be commended for reproducing them so faithfully. Indeed, the MIT edition even reproduces the advertisements (for other books on modernist architecture) contained in the original edition, imparting a true "period feel" to the book.

An informative introduction by Dluhosch to the Czech architectural avant-garde and its post-war fate precedes the main text. Despite a few minor discrepancies in dates (e.g., Teige's first trip to Paris occurred in 1922, not 1921 [cf. xvii]), the introduction is noteworthy for clearly distancing Teige's architectural theory from the pre-fabricated monstrosities touted as "functionalist housing" in the post-war period. The translation of Teige's text itself is both reliable and readable. (Although the frequent term "live-in cell," unlike the Czech "obytná bunka," has unfortunate connotations of prison housing.)

For historians of modern architecture and urban theory, this book is essential. Considering its worth as a document of aesthetic and intellectual history, however, it deserves a wider audience.

Peter Zusi

Harvard University