

CZECH REPUBLIC

The Freight Station at Žižkov

Situated today almost in the centre of Prague is a unique transport area, the Freight Station Prague Žižkov, which was built in the 1930s. In an effort to relieve the centre of Prague from freight transport a new rational concept of railway freight transport was developed at the beginning of the 20th century. In the long term the overloaded and dispersed freight transport in the centre of the city called for a change. The concept of a new central railway node in Prague with stress laid on the separation of freight transport was elaborated by railway engineer Miroslav Chlumecký. The construction of this freight station was begun in 1927.

Charged with the elaboration of the new area were architects Karel Caivas and Vladimír Weis, for whom this task became a life mission. At the time of its construction the area of Freight Station Žižkov represented one of the top European projects of railway logistics. The intention itself to build a railway of this type ensued from the necessary needs of the developing city. The amenities of the buildings – administration and storehouses – were at the highest technical level at that time from cooling plants, facilities for handling transported goods, lifts, sliding carriages to various supplementary technical equipments.

The freight station was erected at a place that at that time provided far-reaching possibilities of potential development of both the railway station and its wider surroundings. At that time it was an extraordinary investment that required very wide coordination and a number of town-planning and regulatory preconditions, from the design of connecting the existing railway network to the conceptual and functional arrangement of the area itself. The project that proved to be on a high level of organisational conceptual thinking had no match in Europe. Its greatest value was the functionality and high organisational unity of the whole, which was supported by the architectural quality of the buildings designed in a functionalist manner with unambiguous stress laid on the purpose for which they were built. Quite self-evident in this case was also the high technical standard of the buildings that complied with the demanding standards of the period.

The ground plan of the area is made up of two parallel reinforced concrete warehouses of a length of up to 400 m, enclosing a yard that is also framed by an administrative building situated in Olšanská Street. The construction took place between 1934 and 1937 and involved the significant Czech building firms of Karel

Skorkovský, Bohumil Belada and František Strnad. The machinery was mostly delivered by ČKD, the lifts then by the company Josef Prokopec. The regular operation of freight transportation started as early as in 1936. The warehouse buildings of reinforced concrete, largely unaltered to this day, are very stable from the structural point of view and the interior layout can be easily adapted to whatever purpose necessary.

In the 1990s production slowed down, resulting in a lower demand for transportation of freight to the centre of Prague. Gradually, the area lost its purpose and now minimum use is made of it. While its architectural and technical values are indisputable, the current developers are much more interested in the premises that are situated almost in the centre of Prague. The plan is to demolish the railway station and make use of the ground for new housing construction. There is also a new territorial plan to remove the administrative building, so that Olšanská Street could be used as a new boulevard. However, it is evident that the introduction of car traffic would stand in contrast to the ideas of living in a quiet surrounding.

Probably, many people are not aware of the value of this unique construction, but the position offers far more possibilities, for instance the use of the almost completely abandoned area as a cultural, social and shopping centre. The centre of the area itself could become a new unconventional space with an impressive industrial atmosphere. A new function for the original buildings does not exclude new construction in their vicinity; on the contrary, that area could become an attractive new quarter that would be much sought after thanks to the unusual mixture of new and old.

The freight station is an outstanding example of engineering of the 1930s that is hard to overlook and conditioned the further development of this part of the city in a significant way. Without exaggeration, it is possible to say that the area has become the largest functionalist industrial construction in Prague and, theoretically, it has the potential to enliven that locality again with a modern approach.

At present, a proposal has been made for protection of the monument and the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic has initiated the procedure of declaring the site a cultural monument. It is not quite clear how this case will turn out. Therefore, it is to be hoped that this functionalist industrial jewel will be saved for the future and used sensibly.

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