THE BLOB ISSUE

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Abstract

The Blob Issue represents the convoluted, treacherous route of a public project. Winning an architectural competition is not synonymous with realization and implementation of the project.

The renowned Czech architect, Jan Kaplický, won an international architectural competition for a new National Library in Prague with a concept that has come to be known as the "Blob" or the "Octopus". For certain municipal and government representatives, however, other projects for the same location are more attractive. Insofar as former President Havel supports the "Blob" and current President Klaus opposes it, an architectural discussion has become a political dispute. A heated discussion has also arisen concerning whether the Blob project in fact won the competition fairly.

The authors designed the case for integrated undergraduate and graduate courses in Architecture, Management, Psychology and Ethics which focus on the implications of methods that relate to the assessment of factors that influence decision making processes and project implementation. Students have the opportunity to develop skills needed for data analysis and the identification of the roots of causes. Although the case involves certain elements specific to the Czech socioeconomic context, the general principles can be observed in other cultures as well.

KEY WORDS: Architecture, economic interests, ethics, decision-making, mass communications, political forces, public project

INTRODUCTION

On May 16, 2006, the National Library of the Czech Republic announced an international architectural competition for the design and construction of a new National Library building. The international jury was headed by the British architect Zaha Hadid. The competition was very successful. More than 700 authorized architects or designers participated [Czech national library competition has a great success, 2006]. The majority of projects submitted came from Europe, but there were also projects from Asia, America, Australia, and Africa. After an anonymous evaluation, the Library announced the winning project on March 2, 2007. Czech-born, British architect Jan Kaplicky's project was judged to best meet the requirements for the new library [The National Library entrusted to a world famous architect, 2007].

Kaplicky's project, which quickly became famous, radically differs from traditional buildings. The project was formally entitled "The Eye above the City", but it was soon nicknamed "The Blob" or "The Octopus" because of its design [Nová, Oppelt, 2007]. It is an organically shaped modern design, somewhat resembling a green-purple octopus or jellyfish, with a large observation area overlooking the city. As stipulated in the competition specifications, the architect designed the project for Letná Plain. The
area provides an excellent view of the city, including such famous Prague monuments as the Castle and Old Town Square. The winning project and others submitted were displayed in Prague's Klementinum Gallery from March 29th to May 31st, 2007.

The announcement of the winning project immediately generated months of public debate, newspaper articles, TV discussions, and so forth, and it seems almost everyone had an opinion. The Blob divided Czech public into two camps. One group believed that new building will destroy the esthetic view of Prague's historic district, while the other group praises the design, arguing that the city needs contemporary architecture as well.

WINNING BUILDING ILLUSTRATION AS SUBMITTED FOR THE COMPETITION

Prague Mayor Pavel Bém initially supported the Blob. Later he changed his position, claiming that the project would not be suitable for Letná Plain. Czech President Klaus did not at all agree with the construction of the Blob. Mayor Bém and President Klaus have in fact become perhaps the most vociferous opponents of the winning project. Former President Havel was initially pleased, but he has since remarked that this was perhaps premature. The discussions have dragged on and difficulties keep appearing. Mayor Bém has drawn attention to supposed problems with the city's development plan for the area, and although Prague City Hall had promised to reserve land for the new National Library, certain issues of a dubious nature have arisen concerning the suitability of the location. In addition, various legal experts and architects have called into question whether the jury reached its decision according to regulations. The Blob has evoked many questions, including whether the modern design should be allowed to compete Prague Castle.

A special committee was appointed with the charge to determine if the competition was fair and whether the winning project met urban and architectural requirements and norms. The committed did not meet required reporting deadlines and simply postponed publishing its findings. In the meantime, public discussion continued, including organized happenings and various petitions.

Subsequently, two of three commissions created by the special committee confirmed the winning design. However, the legal commission claimed to have discovered new inconsistencies and requested that the anti-monopoly office determine whether the library tender met all necessary legal criteria. Kaplický, of course, was disappointed by this turn of the events. His response was "to threatened to sue the city of Prague in international court or abandon the project altogether if no decision is reached within a month" [Alda, 2008]. The positions of the main protagonists seemed to change almost daily. Then, in light of the large number of e-mails he had received expressing support in his "battle" over the National Library, Kaplický announced in a press release that he was prepared to wait longer. He also stated his hope that broad grassroots public support would help assure the construction of the new library [Kaplický, 2008a].
"Where is it written that buildings have to be boxes? People aren't boxes" [Paggetti, 2005]. This approach to design is the basis of Jan Kaplický's style as well as his radical ideas about the places in which we live and work. This is perhaps best expressed in his belief that buildings need not have corners.

Jan Kaplický, born in Prague on April 18, 1937, is a world-renowned British architect of Czech origin. He is the leading partner at 'Future Systems', one of the most innovative design offices in the world. Kaplický is perhaps best known for the futuristic Selfriges Building in Birmingham, England and the remarkable Media Centre at Lord's Cricket Ground, London. In February 2007, he won the international architectural competition for the new building of the National Library of the Czech Republic in Prague [Kaplický, 2008b].

Kaplický studied in Prague and received a Diploma in Architecture. He first arrived in London in September 1968 after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. He worked for the office of Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers with whom he developed the competition-winning design for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. In 1979, Kaplický established his own architectural practice, Future Systems, with David Nixon. Amanda Levete later joined the firm as a partner.

Kaplický was a finalist for the ‘Prince Philip Prize for Designer of the Year’ in 1991. In 1994, his company was commissioned to build the new media center at Lord's Cricket Ground, which in 1999 won the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Stirling Prize – considered the most prestigious architecture award in the UK – and the World Architecture Awards in 2001. Future Systems' next major project, the Selfridges Building in the Bull Ring in Birmingham, won seven awards, including the 2004 RIBA Award for Architecture.

Apart from his design work, Kaplický taught from 1982 to 1988 at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, the oldest independent architectural school in the UK. He also has taught at the School of Architecture in Bordeaux in 1992 and at the Design Workshop of the Technische Universität Berlin. Kaplický was also an external examiner for the Architectural Association between 1995 and 1998, and was an assessor for the Domus Awards of the B.B.J. Competition in Milan in 2000. He was made an Honourable Fellow of RIBA in 2000 [Kaplický, 2008c].

Kaplický has said that "The world is full of beautiful things, and you have to be observant as an architect.... Creativity is everywhere". He added that "The biggest mistake is underestimating the small product" [Mikhail, 2002]

THE SELFRIDGES BUILDING

THE PLAN AND TIMETABLE FOR A NEW NATIONAL LIBRARY

Most libraries, sooner or later run out of space to house their collections. Planning for an addition or a new library building is an arduous, lengthy process. In 2005, the Director of the Czech National Library in Prague announced that the construction of a new building was the only possible solution for properly caring for and storing the national collections and end the chronic lack of space that had plagued the Library for years.

The timeline for the new National Library project was as follows [Semafor služeb v nové budově národní knihovny ČR, 2007]:
2000
- A study determined that the National Library would lack further capacity by 2010

2004
- The management of the National Library unanimously agrees to construct a new library
- First meeting of representatives from Prague City Hall and the National Library
- The Ministry of Culture signs a cooperation agreement regarding the project for a new National Library on Letná Plain

2005
- The Parliament of the Czech Republic approves financial support for the project
- The Ministry of Culture announces an international architectural competition for a new National Library in the development program for state cultural institutions

2006
- The Governing Body of the City of Prague approves the transfer of a parcel of land to the National Library for a new building on Letná Plain
- The competition for the New Building of the National Library of the Czech Republic in Prague is announced – the first architectural competition in the Czech Republic held in accordance with international regulations
- 735 architects / teams register for the competition
- 354 designs are officially submitted
- The jury selects eight designs for stage II of the competition

2007
- The jury announces the winning project on March 2, 2007
- All designs are presented at the Klementinum gallery
- Selection procedures for the building contractors are announced

2008 – 2011
- Processing of the building documentation, construction of the winning project

THE INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITION

The National Library indicated that the winning project would be chosen in compliance with all relevant professional and legal regulations:

“The National Library of the Czech Republic, in cooperation with the ‘Union internationale des Architectes’ [UIA], in compliance with UNESCO Standard Recommendations for International Architectural, Urban-Planning Competitions and UIA Instructions for International Competitions and Urban Planning, in compliance with the Act on Public Procurement, in compliance with laws valid in the Czech Republic…” announces “…the International Architectural Design Competition for the architectural design and selection of an architect for the project documents of the New Building for the National Library of the Czech Republic in Prague”

[International Architectural Competition, 2006].

The competition was an open, international, public, anonymous, two-stage competition for architects and teams of architects. The same jury, consisting of eight members and four deputies, would adjudicate both stages of the competition [ibid].

Jury members:
- Ms. Zaha Hadid, Architect, Great Britain
- Mr. Dominic Perrault, Architect, UIA representative, France
- Ms. Irene Wiese-von Ofen, Architect, UNESCO representative, Germany
- Ms. Eva Jiřičná, Architect, Great Britain
Mr. José Grinberg, Architect, Mexico
Mr. Petr Bílek, Architect, Czech Republic
Mr. Pavel Bém, Lord-Mayor of the Capital Prague, Czech Republic
Mr. Vlastimil Ježek, Director-General of the National Library, Czech Republic

Deputy jury members:
Mr. John Eisler, Architect, United States
Mr. Tony McLauglin, Architect, Great Britain
Mr. Jan Kněžínek, Director of the Heritage Department, Municipality of the Capital of Prague, Czech Republic
Ms. Bohdana Stoklasová, Director of Library Collections and Services, The National Library of the Czech Republic, Czech Republic

The subject of the architectural competition was the design of the urban, architectural, technical, and operational solutions for the new building of the National Library of the Czech Republic in Prague. The purpose of the architectural competition was to select, on the basis of a comparison of designs submitted, the best entry capable of creating the most suitable design in fulfillment of the promoter's requirements as laid down in the terms, conditions, and relevant documents. The criteria for the evaluation of the competition designs were as follows:

- Quality of the overall design with regard to the location of the building in the designated area
- Comprehensive architectural quality of the design, including design of interior spaces
- Quality of functional, layout, and operational designs
- Extent of compliance with program requirements
- Economic and operational feasibility

**THE WINNING PROJECT**

"The New National Library of the Czech Republic is situated within a large green site on the Letná plateau in Prague. The 40,000 sqm building is placed on a white unpolished marble platform, with mirror finished stainless steel wings lifted up at the perimeter edges to reflect the building from different angles. The architecture of the proposed building is a three dimensional object shaped to minimize the volume and to extend the views over the surrounding tree level. Its unique form and curvature is a reference to baroque buildings in Prague.

The skin is covered with champagne colored anodized aluminum tiles fading from dark at the bottom to light at the top. Generous levels of natural light in all public spaces are provided by circular areas of glazing distributed over the external skin. Special features inside the building include the top level viewing platform and café with spectacular vistas over Prague, comfortable and colorful reading rooms, the first level 'street' which continues the public realm through ramps and stairs from the street and park inside the building, and the educational viewing well to the automated book storage. The estimated volume of 10 million books stored underground are distributed by an Automated Storage and Retrieval System and reach the reader in less than 5 minutes. On the day of its completion in 2011, the New National Library of the Czech Republic will be one of the most modern Libraries in the world" [Future Systems, 2007].
ILLUSTRATION OF WINNING PROJECT AND PRAGUE CASTLE
SUBMITTED FOR THE COMPETITION

THE VIEW FROM ST. VITUS CATHEDRAL IN PRAGUE CASTLE
SUBMITTED FOR THE COMPETITION
THE PRESIDENT'S REACTION

As President of the Czech Republic, Václav Klaus exerts an influence not only on public opinion, but in particular on the opinion of members and representatives of the 'Civic Democratic Party' insofar as he is its former leader. He typically makes pointed statements on various topics and has taken part in the debate surrounding the Blob project as well. His attitude toward the Blob may be summarized by one of his statements: "In the fashion of eco-activists, I am ready to use my body as a shield on the very spot to prevent its construction" [Modern Design of New National Library Denied by the President, 2007, Lidové noviny, 4.5.2007].

President Klaus also rejects comparisons between The Blob and the Dancing House in Prague.

THE DANCING HOUSE

The latter project also initially evoked a great wave of criticism and public debate. Some called for its "immediate demolition and replacement by something more "decent" [Modern Design of New National Library Denied by the President, 2007]. The Dancing House, a project of Frank Gehry and Vlado Milunić, was built in 1992-1996. Although it strongly contrasts with Prague's historic buildings, it has become famous world-wide and is now included in printed guides to the city as well as in such e-guides as the Prague Experience [Prague Experience]. It has come to be an attraction for foreign tourists and locals alike. The Czech National Bank has even issued a gold coin with a Dancing House motif as the final coin in its collector series "10 Centuries of Architecture" [Dancing House, 2006].

A recent observation by Frank Gehry is very fitting within the context of the Blob Issue: "The problem of our age is that people accept trivial buildings as something inevitable, but if somebody tries to do something more respectable, it is questioned" [Modern Design of New National Library Denied by the President, 2007].

Václav Klaus denies that there are similarities between the Blob Issue and the Dancing House insofar as the latter was a question of a single building on a single street. He has stated, moreover, that the Blob Issue disturbs the very foundations of Czech democracy in that it involves decisions that concern public matters and public property. President Klaus claims that since the National Library building is a public construction financed by public funds, leaving decisions about the project to a committee of professionals cannot be justified. His negative attitude toward Kaplický's projects in general is expressed by his assertion that, "if he is not mistaken, a private architect has never been involved in public decision making, as is proposed in the Blob Issue" [Klaus' essay on the Kaplický Blob library, 2007].

THE FORMER PRESIDENT'S POSITION

Former President Václav Havel has also taken part in the debate concerning the Blob Issue, which in his opinion concerns the entire Czech Republic and not only the citizens of Prague. He explains why he has done so in an interview and article in Lidové noviny [Dolanský, 2007; Havel, 2007]. Havel remarks that he was at first pleased that the petty bourgeois tastes of the Prague leadership, who are influenced by and traditionally involved in various lobby interests, finally made a decision that would be remarkable in the architectural history of Prague. Later he sadly realized that his happiness was premature, "for banality and mediocrity appear to have triumphed again." Havel expresses his disappointment at the behavior of Czech politicians. He considers the "rhetorical pirouettes" of the debonair Prague Mayor Pavel Bém as a blemish on Prague and the Czech Republic.
The Blob irritates certain people by its design and by what they consider to be the randomness or inappropriateness of its placement. It is true that this remarkable project radically differs from the grey and rather undefined neighborhood surrounding it. Havel points out, although Letná Plain is situated almost in the center of the city, the Prague City Administration has no urban plan for it, regardless of statements to the contrary. He says that “Letná Plain is an example of the consequences when everything is left to the ‘invisible hand of the market’.”

Havel argues that the city should have a view what Letná Plain will be used for in the future [Havel, 2007]. With no other existing plans, one cannot say that – whatever is project for the site is, good or bad, would be inappropriate. A comprehensive urban plan including Letná Plain would allow to determine what is suitable use of the area and what is not.

**PRAGUE CITY HALL**

Initially, the project for a new National Library proceeded according to plan with the support of the local government. For example, The Town Council granted favorable conditions for the sale of land on Letná Plain in January of 2006 [Herklová, 2007]. Although the sale had been approved, it has not been completed. The proposed location of the project, near the Hradčanská metro station, seemed to be ideal because it is readily accessible, both from Prague Castle and the center of the city. It is also no more than a few minutes walking distance from several Universities. But the sale has not yet been completed.

Prague Mayor Pavel Bém served as a member of the competition jury. When the winning project was announced, he expressed his satisfaction. In other words, in the Spring of 2007 he was a supporter of the Blob. His view began to change after his return from climbing Mount Everest. He reached the summit on May 18th, 2007.

One may speculate that this change was influenced by President Klaus’ negative attitude towards the Blob, not least of all because Bém has been mentioned as a possible future leader of the Civic Democratic Party. The majority of Prague deputies is against the construction of the new National Library on Letná Plain. The deputies claim that the location is too close to the Castle, and that it would be better for the Blob to be situated somewhere in the Prague suburbs. Kaplický rejects such ideas. This leaves the fate of the Blob in limbo. The support of Prague City Hall, the majority of deputies belongs to the Civic Democratic Party, will be crucial for the outcome [Pavlík, 2007].

**LETNÁ PLAIN**

Although the local government has not made public an official urban plan for the use of Letná Plain, several new projects that would radically change the area, have emerged. Examples include underground parking facilities, a shark aquarium, a large national stadium, a city beltway, and even a future Olympic site. If Letná Plain is not a suitable location for the Blob, which legally won an international competition and would stimulate urban and educational development, how can any of the emerging projects be acceptable? Did those projects win an international architectural competition? Would they be financed by the private sector? And who would benefit from these projects?

At this point, it is not at all clear what might happen to Letná Plain. Representatives of the local government, including the Mayor, have even suggested that the new library building be located on currently undeveloped land to keep alternative uses of Letná Plain alive. The architectural competition, however, explicitly specified a library building on Letná Plain.

The site of the former Stalin statue is being considered for a shark aquarium. However, the location is one of the few places in Prague where charge free skating is permitted. As expected, some fifty skaters, supported by the Green Party, demonstrated against the aquarium in October 2007. The Green Party is opposed to all large projects on Letná Plain, including the new national library because it represents one of the few large areas with grass and trees left in central Prague [Battles of Prague Letná Constructions, 2007].

Building a new national football stadium is being discussed in conjunction with the idea of applying to host the 2016 Summer Olympics in Prague. The Mayor and various groups have voiced strong support for this concept despite the fact that Sparta Stadium would have to be razed after having been renovated during the 1990s with the help of Klaus’ Civic Democratic Party. Havel points out that although large stadiums are usually built in city suburbs today, proponents of the new stadium maintain that for some
reason it must be located in the center of town. Havel also notes that Strahov Stadium, the largest in Europe, would probably have to be abandoned for the sake of a new national stadium because green field construction is less complicated [Havel, 2007].

Havel observes [ibid] that both the aquarium and stadium projects are apparently supposed to be some type of decoration for the proposed huge beltway interchange on Letná Plain. Unfortunately, they might instead sound the death knell for Prague castle, an entire city neighborhood, and Jelení Street. Development of the beltway interchange and the accompanying network of tunnels have in fact already begun. Even though this project has also provoked public discussion and significant controversy, the construction work is well underway and is proceeding as planned. This is in sharp contrast to the project for the new National Library building.  

**COMMISSIONS**

The original design of the new building of the National Library has provoked broad discussion concerning the architecture design itself, the suitability of the Letná location for the library, whether there is in fact a need for a new library building, as well as the character of the architectural competition. Not only have architects and politicians been involved, but also the mass media and the general public. Perhaps the reason why the Blob Issue has become so complicated is that it is quite difficult to identify the core problems insofar as none of the main players other than Klaus has wished to declare officially either that they are against the project, or that they will accept the responsibility to implement the winning design selected by the competition committee. The manner in which the discussion quickly became highly politicized has clearly hampered all efforts to construct the new Library building.

To resolve any remaining problems concerning the proposed new building, a compromise agreement was reached between the Prague Mayor, the Director of the National Library and Jan Kaplický in forming a committee to address the issues. The committee was composed of the following members:

- Pavel Bém – Prague Mayor
- Vlastimil Ježek – Director of the National Library
- Jan Kaplický – Creator of the Blob project
- Bohoček Votava – Manager of Prague City Development Division
- Jan Kněžínek – Director of Prague Heritage Department
- Bohdana Stoklasová – National Library

The committee then appointed three expert commissions comprised of specialists representing all institutions involved, that is, architects, heritage specialists, and lawyers. These commissions were supposed to have the authority to make binding decisions. In addition, the decisions themselves would be enforced by the relevant public agencies. But the guidelines given to the committee by the parties to the compromise apparently relied on the good faith of those involved, and since the Blob Issue had already become politicized by the actions and statements of Klaus, Havel, and Bém, as well as those eager to develop Letná Plain for commercial purposes, the work of the commissions was subject to outside pressure and manipulation and did not go well. It was reported that “According to Mayor Bém the groups should work for two, three or four months” [New "National library team" committee should decide the fate of national library in Prague, 2007], but several months elapsed before the commissions were even prepared to identify the questions that needed to be addressed. The Czech newspaper Lidové noviny [2007] described the resulting situation with the headline “Instead of the Blob…three commissions.”

The commissions began their work by requesting new computer-generated pictures of how the Blob would look from various locations in Prague. The aim was to determine whether the Blob would damage the Prague panorama [The Experts want new pictures of the Blob, 2007]. The architectural and heritage commissions eventually decided that the design and location of the Blob appeared to present no problems. In addition, the International Union of Architects [IUA] officially confirmed the decision of the jury that the Blob had won the competition fairly. The IUA President, Gaétan Siew, informed Vlastimil Ježek, the Director of National Library in writing [Union of Architects: Blob won according to the law, 2008, International Union of Architects, 2008].

In November 2007, the expert legal commission declared that all pertinent laws and regulations had been observed in the selection of the winning project, but they then stated in January 2008 that certain legal problems might, nevertheless, still exist. The legal situation has thus not yet been resolved. It should
be noted that such contradictory legal interpretations by one and the same authority are not atypical in the Czech legal system, as if the spirit of Kafka was influencing the functioning of the judicial system.

The legal commission finally announced that it was necessary for the anti-monopoly office to declare whether the tender for the project was in accordance with pertinent regulations. The anti-monopoly office, in turn, must contact the European Commission. In addition, the question arose whether the winning project could be constructed by Future Systems, or if a new tender, satisfying existing, somewhat ambiguous Czech legislation, needed be announced. Months might pass before the anti-monopoly office and the European Commission will issue a ruling.

PETITIONS

Various petitions have appeared in connection with the Blob Issue. Although they express contradictory views, the majority of them support the Blob. One example is the petition of a group of Czech architects, designers, and directors who support Kaplický’s design. They state that “it is time to end the hysteria around the project and let experts, rather than politicians, do the talking.” This is a response to President Klaus, who said that he “would fight to prevent the construction of the building with his own body, in a similar fashion to Austrian opponents of the Czech Temelin nuclear power station” [Lazarová, 2007]. A number of Czech musical groups and singers organized a five hour musical happening entitled “Chci to na Letný” (I want it on Letná) in support of the Blob [Řehounek, 2008]. Approximately 12,000 people have signed a petition stating that the Blob should be built [Woollard, 2008]. Other petitions not only support the Blob, but do so on the basis of an appeal to democratic principles.

WHEN WILL THE END COME?

Who can anticipate the solution that the anti-monopoly office will announce, and when? What other type of project will be approved for Letná Plain? How influential is the soccer lobby? What weight is carried by the idea of an eventual Prague Olympics? What about political forces? Are their preferences changing?

Kaplický states that “It’s now a battle not for a library designed by Future Systems. It’s a battle for THE library, the National Library. It’s also a battle for the Czech book and culture in general. And I think that any political party associated with going against culture doesn’t sound very good to the public. And I must say the twelve thousand signatures, the support of the public, are amazing. On every corner, in every restaurant you go, people tell you they want the project. So are the political parties so unrelated to the public support? I am astonished. What a gap” [Frančková, 2008]. A March 3, 2008 press release of the National Library expresses the hope that the Blob will be built on Letná Plain by 2014 [Tisková zpráva, 2008].

ENDNOTES

1. Referenced at <www.bdonline.co.uk/Pictures/468xAny/c/x/o/Prague_library_south_ready.jpg>.

2. Havel discusses these issues in some detail in Lidové noviny [Dolanský, 2007; Havel, 2007]. They center upon the manner in which private interests working in concert with politicians would have much to gain from rapid commercial development.


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