

From Biography to a Net of Interpretations: The Plurality of Approaches to Vladimír Karfík's work¹

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The aim of this study is to justify a partial shift from the biographical approach in the author's ongoing research into the work of architect Vladimír Karfík's, especially if that research is directed towards raising present-day appreciation of his output. The inspiration comes from pragmatic aesthetics, as understood by philosopher Richard Shusterman, which considers the possibility of appreciating a work of art and architecture without the premise of one universal truth. The "net of interpretations" metaphor suggests that different interpretative lines can be perceived as equivalent in all their diversity, and there is no single "true" image of the work that lies underneath. The proposition of the study is argued both on a theoretical level and through the analysis of existing publications devoted to Karfík's work and personality.

Keywords: interpretation, Vladimír Karfík, biography, cultural turn, architectural historical research

Introduction

The need for this study arose from doubts concerning the analysis of a biography as a prevailing method in ongoing research into the work of leading twentieth-century Czech and Slovak architect Vladimír Karfík – research which is expected to culminate in a monograph. While the choice of biographical method may seem rational in Karfík's case, it is questionable to what extent the biographical approach can elevate understanding and appreciation of the architect's work. Karfík's significance has to date been largely centred on the fact that he was a part of the interwar Czechoslovak architectural avant-garde – though not its initiator – and that it was the experience gained by working for Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright that secured him a place at Baťa's company in the Czech town of Zlín, visions of which he has seemingly fully identified with. After the Second World War, Karfík became one of the founders of Slovak architectural education while continuing to work as a practicing architect in Bratislava, and at a later age his reputation as a respected pedagogue brought him an unexpected four-year teaching opportunity at the University of Malta. All of this – along with the recognition and a number of awards accorded to Karfík in the Czech and Slovak environments, and his

¹ The text was created within the project KEGA 022STU-4/2021 "The Discourse on modernity in the shadow of an era: architects A. Píffl – V. Karfík – J. E. Koula and their founding work" realised at the Faculty of Architecture and Design STU in Bratislava.

honorary membership of the American Institute of Architects, which he was awarded as the only Czech or Slovak architect – could suffice to defend the choice of the biographical method in the approach to his work, as his life has many interesting moments in possible relation to it.

The reasons this study questions the prevailing use of the biographical method stem not only from the fact that Karfík already published an autobiography himself,² but also from the observation that, to date, too much emphasis has been placed on Karfík's personality – as a man, an architect or a pedagogue – without subjecting similar attention to analysing his work and his architectural thinking. This is perhaps one of the reasons why architecture historian Matúš Dulla assumes that “Karfík's central legacy is not directly in the realm of its architecture”³ – because that is how his story has been structured and narrated. My ongoing research does not aim to confirm or refute the “myth” of Karfík as an important figure of modern international architecture, but to explore his work and architectural thinking more thoroughly, and to present a range of possible interpretations of his work to enhance its value and appreciation, and to possibly identify ways in which it can be beneficial to the contemporary architectural discourse.

This effort is inspired by the primary goal of contemporary pragmatist aesthetic theory, as formulated by the philosopher Richard Shusterman, according to which the task “is not to capture the truth of our current understanding of art, but rather to reconceive art so as to enhance its role and appreciation”.⁴ This approach just as applicable to architecture as to art. The reference to the philosophy of pragmatism – to Shusterman but also Richard Rorty – in no way tries to support those views with ones that connect Karfík with pragmatism in the line of his life; similarly, the notion of aesthetics does not indicate that the aesthetic aspects of Karfík's project should be particularly considered. It is based on an assumption that the philosophy of pragmatism is relevant in the contemporary realm of thinking about architecture for as it offers a plurality of interpretations.

Subsequently, in the case of Karfík, it is possible to recognize the issue of understanding art, aesthetics and their values in the context of societal and social action – and it is the identification of suitable ways of interpreting his work that can broaden its perception, and can also help to change its current comprehension and lead to a new appreciation. This research goal is further supported by the assumption expressed by the not particularly pragmatic but conservative philosopher Roger Scruton: that aesthetic architectural experience is dependent on one's ability to “imaginatively” perceive and conceptualise a perceived object, and not on a separation between thought/conception and ordinary perception.⁵ Therefore, it is expected that a plurality of interpretations of Karfík's work can also enhance the experience of it. The proposition of this study – that a net of interpretations should be preferred to a predominantly biographical approach when the main research goal is strengthening the understanding of Karfík's work, its values and its appreciation – is argued both on a theoretical level (through the research turn of recent decades and reservations towards the biographical method) and also by analysing already published writings devoted to the personality and work of Vladimír Karfík.

² KARFÍK, Vladimír. *Architekt si spomína*. Bratislava: Spolok architektov Slovenska, 1993.

³ DULLA, Matúš. Vladimír Karfík – iný pragmatizmus. In: *Architektúra & urbanizmus*, 35(3–4), 2001, p. 62.

⁴ SHUSTERMAN, Richard. On Pragmatist Aesthetics. In: OCKMAN, Joan (ed.) *The Pragmatist Imagination: Thinking About Things in the Making*. New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002, p. 118.

⁵ SCRUTON, Roger. *The Aesthetics of Architecture*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 68–69.

Research turn and reservations towards biography

The twentieth century brought acceptance of the fact that research does not reveal the “truth”, but represents various models of reality through individual theories, which appear to be most beneficial for thinking and understanding the studied subject according to a particular scientist. If this premise is accepted within natural sciences today, it is all the truer for the historical sciences – as a separate category between the humanities and social sciences – which tend to be underestimated by the representatives of the natural sciences as inexact. One of the bolder critics of the privileged position of science, the philosopher and historian of science Paul Feyerabend, was convinced that “rationalists and scientists cannot rationally (scientifically) argue for the unique position of their favourite ideology”.⁶ It is also important to stress that the researcher is never disinterested or impartial. As the political philosopher Hannah Arendt concluded, the issue of “objectivity” created confusion that “there could be answers without questions and results independent of a question-asking being.”⁷

Similarly, the cultural society equally perceives the limits of science and its “monopoly” on knowledge and its exactness. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because historical interpretation – including the history of architecture – is not based on quantifiable experiments and predictions, historical research still largely relies on the positivist approach of the nineteenth century, giving the impression that the historian presents the only true picture of the past that “results” from historical facts. However, this hesitation to turn away from positivist models of interpretation on the part of many historians is being gradually overcome, and in recent decades it has become more common for researchers – including historians or architectural theorists – to reveal their theoretical framework or “schools of thought”.⁸ This tendency emerged as a consequence of the so-called “cultural turn” around the 1980s.

Though one might question the importance of the cultural turn in architectural historical research – since, as stated by the cultural historian Peter Burke, cultural historians devote “less attention to material culture than to ideas”⁹ – some of its aspects are also important to reflect upon in the context of architectural research, such as the notion of the “schools of thought”, as they influence the choice of research approach and will determine its results. For this reason, it is quite appropriate to acknowledge that the bases for the current research are influenced by the philosophy of pragmatism, since there is no interest in whether a certain hypothesis concerning Karfik or his work is true or false, but rather in the question that Rorty asks: “For what purposes would it be useful to hold that belief?”¹⁰ This makes the quest for one “true” narrative irrelevant and rather encourages a net of interpretations as a way to support the aim to value and appreciate Karfik’s work more. It is also worth mentioning that a theorising historical approach – i.e., qualitative research – does not need to be considered as less exact than quantitative research, because the philosophy of pragmatism does not see a fundamental difference between social and natural sciences: it includes theory as practice.¹¹

Certainly, the inclination to the school of thought of pragmatism does not need to entail a complete rejection of the biographical method. Given that architecture itself contains “biographical traces in its spaces, taxonomies and histories” that steer to the use of the

⁶ FEYERABEND, Paul Karl. *Science in a Free Society*. London: NLB, 1978, p. 79.

⁷ ARENDT, Hannah. The Modern Concept of History. In: *The Review of Politics* 20(4), 1958, p. 577.

⁸ GROAT, Linda N., WANG, David. *Architectural Research Methods*. Amsterdam; Boston: Wiley, 2013, pp. 174–175.

⁹ BURKE, Peter. *What is Cultural History?* Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008, p. 69.

¹⁰ RORTY, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, 1999, p. xxiv.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. xxix.

biographical genre,¹² it has a staple place in architectural research, and biographical monographs continue to be a choice of many architectural historians. In the twentieth century, a more comprehensive image of a researched personality is strengthened by its psychologisation, under the influence of Freud's psychoanalytic theories, but also by connecting the individual's life and work with a social context, for example, in response to Marx.¹³ Biographical research – which considers the life and personality of an architect as crucial for understanding their work, but also general architectural tendencies – is not only well established, but current science accepts biography itself as a method, without the need to specify other methods.¹⁴

In spite of the overall popularity of the biographic genre, opposition towards it is growing. One of the most prominent critics was clearly the sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, who showed, in his well-known text *L'illusion biographique* (1986), that “life history” presumes that “life is a history” and a narrative of this history.¹⁵ Life is understood as a road, a route, a track with junctions (Hercules), traps and ambushes leading to a certain goal. Inconsistent individual historical events are then unified with a historical narrative. Such a narrative – especially in case of biography or autobiography – is not substantially different from the narrative of a traditional novelist. The life is in it understood as a “unity”, ordered as a line of history: chronologically with a beginning (starting point) and an end (goal). The meaning of life (and work) is postulated in such a “singleness”. But this, according to Bourdieu, is a “rhetorical illusion”.¹⁶ Neither do all historical or modern novels work with it, many of them pointing rather to the discontinuous, haphazard and unpredictable character of life and reality. In addition, Bourdieu points to the plurality of social and societal roles and forces involved in the co-constitution of the subject, her life and work. But biographical trajectories have a tendency refer to a single consistent and constant subject. That is why a large proportion of the current academic community considers the biographical genre to be a dead end.¹⁷

We could argue that more attention is nevertheless given to the author's work in architectural research, which is seemingly interpreted a little more independently of the architect's personality and life than biographies of writers or artists, if only for the reason that an architect has to take the social, sociological aspects and needs of each individual client into account; but even here the life story of the creator becomes the central rationale. Within my ongoing research, there are two aspects that question this approach's suitability in relation to Vladimír Karfík as a basis. The first is that an effort to create one predominant interpretation of “life and work” largely eliminates other interpretations, which can reduce the potential for full appreciation of Karfík's relatively heterogeneous work (Figure 1), precisely because some of its characteristics might be ignored on account of not being suitable for the chosen biographical narrative. The second is that biographical writing on artists can be seen as an instrument for promoting their position and influencing the social consciousness.¹⁸ With Karfík, the significance attached to

¹² ARNOLD, Dana, SOFAER, Joanna (eds). *Biographies & Space: Placing the Subject in Art and Architecture*. London: Routledge, 2008, p. 1.

¹³ GITTINGS, Robert. *The Nature of Biography*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1978, p. 54.

¹⁴ RENDERS, Hans. The Biographical Method. In: RENDERS, Hans, DE HAAN, Binne (eds) *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*. Leiden: Brill, 2014, p. 223.

¹⁵ BOURDIEU, Pierre. The Biographical Illusion (1986). In: HEMECKER, Wilhelm, SAUNDERS, Edward (eds) *Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017, p. 210.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 210–211.

¹⁷ SKILLEÅS, Ole Martin. *Philosophy and Literature: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001, p. 75.

¹⁸ BAKOŠ, Ján. O monografií. In: *Romboid: časopis pre literatúru a umeleckú komunikáciu*, 16(12), 1981, p. 68.

his personality is already quite considerable; this, on the other hand, supersedes a deeper, more thorough awareness of his work, as well as of the awareness of his way of thinking about architecture.



Figure 1: Selection of projects by Vladimír Karfík that show a certain heterogeneity which cannot be unified or subordinated to a single justification based on some prevailing period, chronological or stylistic sequence. From the top left: Baťa department store in Liberec, 1931; Administrative Building No. 21 in Zlín, 1937–1938; Baťa department store in Amsterdam, 1938; church in Partizánske (with F. Fackenberg and K. Auermüller), 1943; Josef Hlavnička Villa in Zlín 1939–1941; competition proposal for a Roman Catholic church with a memorial to Tomáš Baťa in Baťov, 1940; housing colony Biely Križ in Bratislava, 1948; University of Economics and Faculty of Pharmacy in Bratislava (with A. Rokošný), 1953–1955; Institute of Applied Cybernetics in Bratislava (with J. Komrska), 1971–1978; Extension of the Museum of Fine Arts, La Valleta, 1981. Images source: Brno City Museum, History of Architecture and Town Planning unit (personal fund of the architect Vladimír Karfík).

Analysis of published texts

An analysis of published texts focused on the personality and/or work of Vladimír Karfík was carried out, with the intention to determine more clearly what has already been said and how it was researched and presented. The texts were evaluated with regard to supporting the research aim, i.e., to raise awareness of the value and increase appreciation of Karfík's work. The author's own experience with a biographically set chapter dedicated to Karfík led to the decision to subject the published texts to a more thorough analysis,¹⁹ as there was an

¹⁹ BARTOŠOVÁ, Nina. Architekt dvadsiateho storočia Vladimír Karfík. In: DULLA, Matúš et al. (eds) *Zapomenutá generace: čeští architekti na Slovensku*. Praha: České vysoké učení technické v Praze, 2019, pp. 216–257.

assumption that the biographical method, as a main research method, would lead primarily to the correction and supplementation of existing knowledge, and would offer less opportunity for a more inspiring view on Karfík's work. Due to the fact that the indicated analysis was also concerned with distinguishing possibilities for lines of interpretation of Karfík's work, it was desirable to include texts that offered different views. The choice of specific parameters for assessing the texts arose from several attempts, as not all approaches demonstrably proved or refuted the research aim.

For example, the initial effort aimed to find out whether the authors specified their starting point and formulated motives or procedures, but in most cases these facts were presented implicitly rather than explicitly, if at all. Therefore, this did not serve as a suitable parameter for assessing the writings and selecting those worth studying further. Similarly, sorting the texts into specific categories did not directly convey knowledge of whether a given text would relate to the current research aim, although it was still a useful step in assessing the proportion and nature of existing writings and selecting texts for further scrutiny. Therefore, in the first phase, all of the 29 texts identified were analysed and sorted into following five categories: scientific study/conference papers; final academic theses; chapters in monographs; interviews with Karfík; and brief informative contributions, such as popularisation texts, portraits, memories of Karfík and so on (Figure 2). The majority of texts (up to 45%) fall under the category of brief informative contributions that convey already-known facts. The remaining categories – scientific study/conference papers (28%), academic theses (10%), chapters in monographs (10%), and two interviews with Karfík (7%) – had the potential to bring new perspectives and increase knowledge of Karfík's work and his architectural thinking, therefore the 16 texts that fell into these four latter categories were subjected to the next phase of analysis.

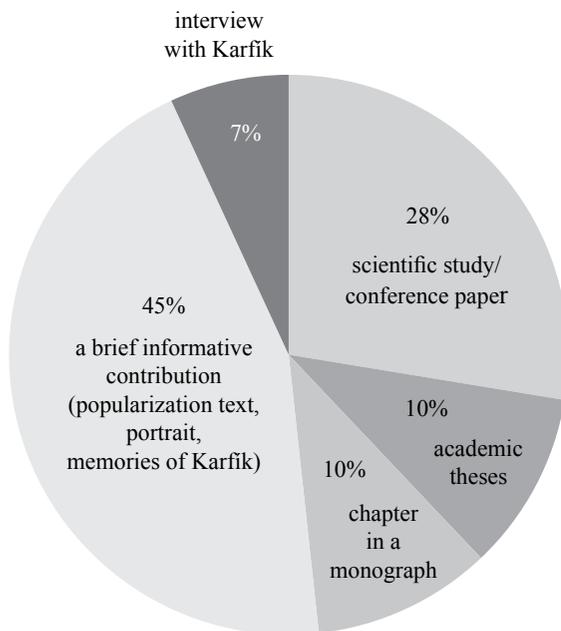


Figure 2: *Categorisation of the 29 of published texts devoted to work and/or personality of Vladimír Karfík.*

In this phase, two pairs of criteria were decisive in a relation of the study aim: i) whether a particular text paid more attention to Karfík's work and his way of architectural thinking, or rather dealt with his life, personality, and historical context, and ii) whether the text offered new levels of interpretation or, on the contrary, presented more traditional architectural–historical or biographical research (Figure 3). Also, it was assumed that if the publication focused on biographical aspects and historical context, it would likely use the methods of traditional architectural–historical research or the method of biography, while research

focused on his works and architectural thinking would lead to a more open choice of methods (Figure 4). As the intention was to focus mainly on publications that dealt with Karfík's work

and his way of architectural thinking and, at the same time, those that offered new levels of interpretation and subject them to a deeper content analysis, these aspects were higher rated, as depicted in Figure 5. This method enabled the selection of four texts that met both criteria sufficiently. It was found that all of them were published in *Architektúra & urbanizmus* journal.²⁰

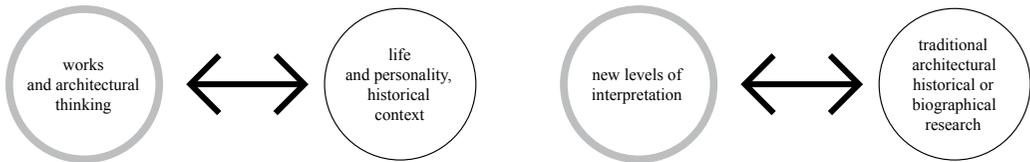


Figure 3: Pairs of criteria for further analysis of texts.

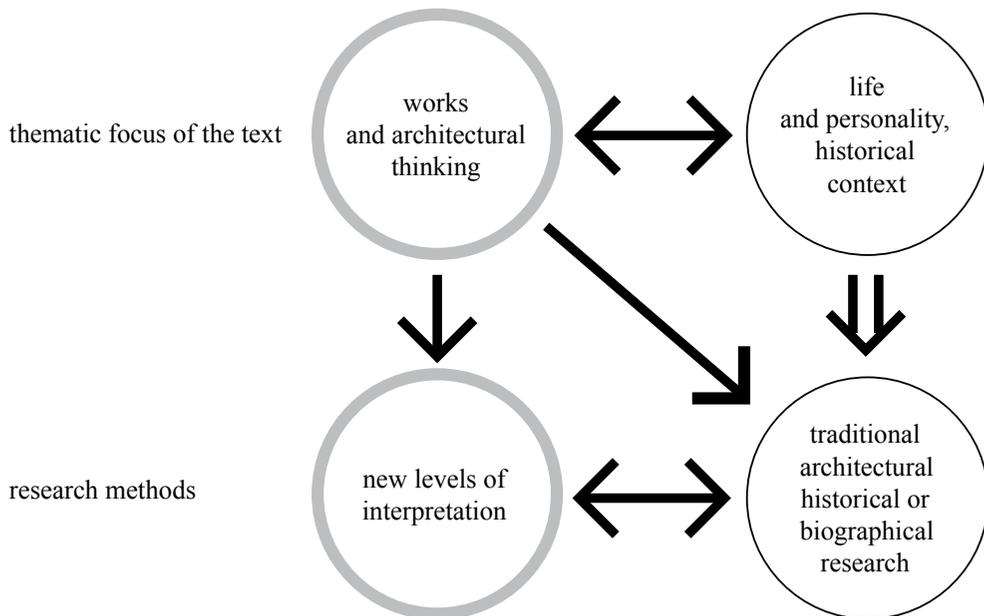


Figure 4: Diagram representing the assumption that a focus on works and architectural thinking leads to a more open choice of methods than a focus on biographical aspects and historical context.

²⁰ BENCOVÁ, Jarmila. Vladimír Karfík & mrakodrapy [Vladimír Karfík & Skyscrapers]. In: *Architektúra & urbanizmus*, 35(3–4), 2001, pp. 76–93.; MITÁŠOVÁ, Monika. Čítanie prvého denníka a posledného rodinného domu Vladimíra Karfíka [Reading of Vladimír Karfík's First Diary and The Last Family House of His Own]. In: *Architektúra & urbanizmus*, 35(3–4), 2001, pp. 94–108.; ZERVAN, Marián. Model architektúry v Karfíkových textoch a rozhovoroch [The Model of Architecture in Karfík's Texts and Interviews]. In: *Architektúra & urbanizmus*, 35(3–4), 2001, pp. 109–118.; BENCOVÁ, Jarmila. Interpretačné nánosy architektúry a Dom služby Baťa v Bratislave [Interpretive residues in architecture and the Baťa House of Services in Bratislava]. In: *Architektúra & urbanizmus*, 49(1–2), 2015, pp. 65–81.

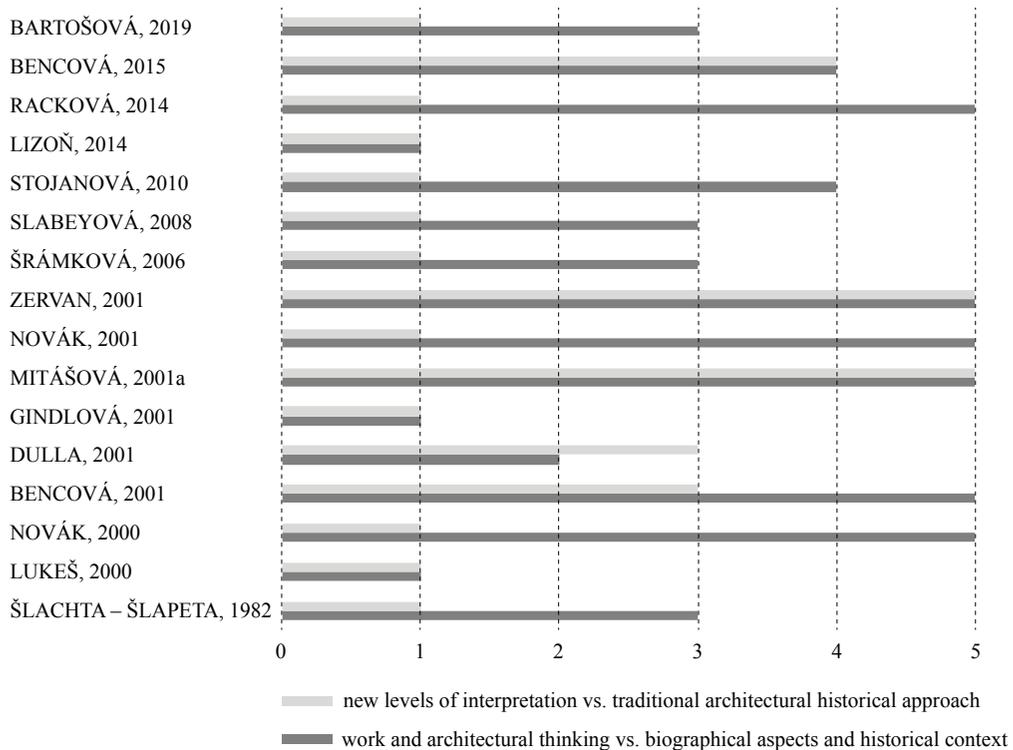


Figure 5: Bar graph representing the narrowed selection of 16 texts that was analysed in order to specify a) the predominant method, i.e., to what extent did the authors follow traditional architectural historical approach or pursue new levels of interpretation (light grey bar), and b) their thematic orientation, i.e., whether the authors focused on biographical aspects and historical context or created a more autonomous approach with new levels of interpretation (dark grey bar). The highest value (5 points) is represented by preferred aspects and the lowest (1 point) by biographical aspects and historical context through traditional architectural–historical research or the method of biography.

Two of the texts – by art and architecture theorist Jarmila Bencová (2001) and architectural theorist Marian Zervan (2001) – tried to capture characteristic features of Karfík's work, aiming to highlight some unifying aspect, something that describes the architect, although each did so at a different level of generality. While the former dealt with Karfík's project work in the context of the specific theme of high-rise buildings in the “new world”, the latter focused on Karfík's texts with the intention of reconstructing a paradigm of architecture. Bencová's text raises at least two sets of questions that may be useful to focus on in the future: i) is it possible when researching an architect to talk about their inclination towards a certain type of architecture? Can we consider the inclination to a certain type to be something on which the architect's unique style is based, as Bencová thinks? If not, how could that style be better identified? ii) is it really possible to talk about the inclination towards skyscrapers in Karfík's case? Did he favour them more than other types of buildings? Or is it precisely because the inclination towards skyscrapers in Slovakia – at time the study was written – was particularly “exotic” that it was attractive for a historian or architectural theorist to highlight this aspect in the context of Karfík's period living and working in the USA?

Zervan's study provides the most comprehensive grasp of Karfík's thinking so far, and he was the first to subject this topic to more thorough research. By focusing exclusively on Karfík's

published texts, Zervan tried to answer the question of whether Karfík himself formulated a paradigm of architecture. It is not necessary, in the context of my research, to fully identify with the paradigm established by Zervan under the term “anti-architecture”, which was used by Karfík in one of his first published texts, an article with Frank Lloyd Wright for *Styl* magazine.²¹ Neither it is necessary to completely separate Karfík’s architectural designs from his texts, as Zervan did in his study, as he was interested in Karfík’s reasoning. But it is worth testing Karfík’s ideas as they evolved over time – Zervan points out many of them – and confront them with the architect’s designed and built work in order to look for connections, but also for possible contradictions that may have occurred.

In her study, architecture theorist Monika Mitášová was inspired by philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s book, *The Poetics of Space*. She bases her interpretation on a pair of “sources”: Karfík’s first diary, which he kept while at secondary school, and the last house he inhabited (which he designed himself), on Barvičova Street in Brno. Mitášová clearly states that her “Bachelardian” reading of Karfík’s house and diary does not indicate that Karfík himself was a phenomenologist, and precisely because she explicitly expresses the intention of his “etude” it allows the reader to open up to the presented ideas without prejudice. The reader is encouraged to pay attention to certain contexts in Karfík’s work. As Bachelard himself writes in the introduction to his book, “the poetic image is independent of causality” (Bachelard, 1994, p. xvii). Diary entries, without being directly attributed to the architect’s thinking at a later stage in the design of the house, bring Karfík’s dream and thinking of the home closer to literary and poetic associations. Mitášová’s contribution created a contrast to Karfík’s scientific and technical approach in design which is usually highlighted, without appropriating a more universal validity in grasping his work. At the same time, however, she highlights the relatively neglected features of his approach to architecture, i.e., his “confidential relationship to housing architecture”,²² and enables the reader to perceive emotional nuances of experiencing architecture, aspects that have no place in the usual architectural–historical description.

This “Bachelardian” reading amplifies these aspects and supports them through a vivid selection of pictorial material, including several of the author’s own drawings, which deepen the experience with architecture and stimulate the reader’s imagination. The significance of Mitášová’s text is precisely that it does not seek direct causality in the diary–house pair, but supports the ability to perceive and experience architecture more fully, paying attention to details such as window openings and their composition, or the way in which Karfík designed a meandering path through the garden – in the house on Barvičova Street, the path approaches then veers away again from the house, rather than the utilitarian approach of offering the shortest and most direct possible access to the house’s garage. It could be said that it dynamises Karfík’s architecture, which is usually perceived as static.

Bencová’s second study (2015) deals specifically with the concept of interpretation. She points towards the idea of the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer – namely, that the architectural work, as an aspect of art, “imposes its own temporality upon us [...] When considering the static arts, we should remember that we also construct and read pictures, that we also have to enter into and explore the forms of architecture.”²³ Although she does not build her study around this

²¹ KARFÍK, Vladimír. S Frank Lloyd Wrightem [I.]. In: *Styl. Časopis pro architekturu, stavbu měst a umělecký průmysl*, 10(15), No. 1, 1929, p. 11.

²² MITÁŠOVÁ, Čítanie..., p. 107.

²³ GADAMER, Hans-Georg. *The relevance of the beautiful and other essays*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986. p. 45

core idea, it may be a stimulus for further research into Karfík's work. As Gadamer writes, "We have to go up to the building and wander around it, both inside and out. Only in this way can we acquire a sense of what the work holds in store for us and allow it to enhance our feeling for life." According to Gadamer "we must learn to dwell upon the work in a specific way. When we dwell upon the work, there is no tedium involved, for the longer we allow ourselves, the more it displays its manifold riches to us."²⁴ In connection to current research, we do not have to limit ourselves to the experience of physically realised constructions only: models, drawings and other visual interpretation can be used to enhance the architectural experience and thus deepen our ability to conceptualise it.

Further interpretation of Karfík's work can also be inspired by the interpretation model *intentio operis* – interpretation by the work itself – proposed by the art theorist and semiotician Umberto Eco, to whom Bencová also refers.²⁵ Again, it does not need to follow the way presented in the analysed text. It can be accepted that the *intentio operis* model can also bring other possibilities than to hear the building and its original realities, especially contemporary projects, revealing other ideological statements than those attributed to them in the past by historiography.²⁶

The fact that Bencová's text tries in several places to figure out what Karfík himself thought is not exclusively about applying the *intentio operis* model because, according to Eco, "it is not necessary to know the intention of the empirical author" while justifying the search for author's intention only if we try to understand the creative process itself.²⁷

Upon considering the character all the four texts that were analysed in the last step, it became clear that none of them were significantly based on the biographic method in its aim to offer new understanding, although, in a different way, each of them succeeded in pointing out a different perspective on Karfík's work that could be further developed or serve as an inspiration. The pursuit of a shift of focus from the biographical method to other interpretive models does not mean that the interest in the creator and the possible connection of his work with life events should be completely eliminated. By no means is this an absolute rejection of the approach chosen by the most important architectural historians in monographs published in Slovakia with the aim of "removing the vast white spaces of our factual knowledge", as Dulla writes. What it does mean is an alignment of the research method with its aim, and rather than following the most-trodden path.²⁸

Nets of interpretations

The reason behind the several important biographies of architects created in the past 15 years – many of which refer to two studies by Matúš Dulla (2008, 2015) – has to do with the change in atmosphere after 1989 that made it possible to interpret architectural figures in a more diverse context, without the authoritarian narrative that had to submit to an undemocratic regime until then. While Dulla repeatedly – and rightfully – stresses the importance of

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 45.

²⁵ BENCOVÁ, Interpretáčn... , p. 69.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ ECO, Umberto. Medzi autorom a textom. In: COLLINI, Stefan (ed). *Interpretácia a nadinterpretácia*. Bratislava: Archa, 1995, pp. 69–88.

²⁸ DULLA, Matúš. Interpretácia monografiou: Biografický žáner v nových veľkých publikáciách o významných slovenských architektoch [Interpretation by monograph: The Biographical Genre in New Scholarly Publications on Important Slovak Architects]. In: *Architektúra & urbanizmus*. 49(1–2), 2015, p. 54.

biographical writings, he understates other possibilities for monographic writing on architects and their work, and considers the tendencies coming mostly from literary theory around the last third of the twentieth century that question the weight of the author's intention or the author's life for interpretation of her work – also as a reaction to the essay *The Death of the author* (1967) by Roland Barthes and others – as less significant. He holds a similar stance to less traditional approaches to the interpretation of architects and considers them to be overinterpretations, as a reference to Eco. Though he acknowledges the plurality of interpretations, those he highlights are still developed around a biographic structure, as with the monograph on Friedrich Weinwurm by architectural historian Henrieta Moravčíková, where a visual interpretation captured via contemporary photographs by Olja Triaška Stefanović complements the biographic line.²⁹

At the time when Dulla wrote his studies, a pair of books dedicated to the architect Vladimír Dedeček had not yet been published.³⁰ In particular, the second, more extensive book of interpretations points to the non-traditional possibilities of a monograph. Its authors consciously transform the “genre of the monograph into a book of interpretations”, deliberately deviating from the way the history of architecture is written, i.e., “biographies against socio-political events styles, partly based on research in the archives, partly a heroic storytelling, a mythicization”.³¹ The character of their interpretations reflects the goal of highlighting Dedeček's autonomous way of thinking and creating, pursued independently of the totalitarian regime – something that may not be obvious to many, as he participated in several significant government contracts. Again, ongoing research on Karfik does need to thoroughly follow the structure and content of Dedeček's monograph, but the individual ways of interpretation – through text, architecturally through diagrams of objects, or through photographs – can serve as a useful model alongside the openness of interpretation that the book offers, which can be understood as the knowledge that “every interpretation depends on a certain context”.³²

Digital models and graphic representations emphasising certain aspects of formal analysis or the analysis of possible architectural decisions can be complemented by the creation of physical models, not necessarily only by modelling the objects as seen from the exterior, but possibly through their interpretation. This is similar to the way in which the architects Yvonne Farrel and Shelley McNamara – as the curators of the Biennale Architettura 2018 exhibition *Close encounter: meetings with remarkable buildings* – invited the 16 presenting authors “to ‘take’ the work of another architect and help it to be remembered, understood, re-valued and appreciated for its own inherent worth”, as explained on the exhibition's introductory panel.

The possibility of several parallel interpretations is also supported by a more detailed look at Karfik's designs, which suggest that Karfik was not the type of architect who is primarily interested in the artistic side of design or buildings or their architectural expression, or a certain style – that is, those aspects on which architectural–historical research has thus far primarily

²⁹ DULLA, Interpretácia..., p. 56. MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. *Friedrich Weinwurm Architekt / Architect*. Bratislava: Slovart, 2014.

³⁰ MITÁŠOVÁ, Monika. *Vladimír Dedeček. Stávanie sa architektom*. Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 2017; MITÁŠOVÁ, Monika (ed). *Vladimír Dedeček: Interpretácie architektonického diela*. Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 2017 (English language edition: MITÁŠOVÁ, Monika (ed). *Vladimír Dedeček – Interpretations of his Architecture: The Work of a Post War Slovak Architect*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2018)

³¹ MITÁŠOVÁ, Monika, ZERVAN, Marián. O interpretaci architektury doby minulé i současné. Rozhovor Šárky Svobodové a Jaroslava Sedláka. In: *ER421*, 17(3), 2017, p. 22.

³² MICHALOVIČ, Peter. Fenomén Vladimír Dedeček [The Phenomenon of Vladimír Dedeček] [recenzia]. In: *Architektúra & urbanizmus*, 51(3–4), 2017, p. 230.

focused. Karfík himself emphasised that although he eventually acknowledged the importance of the artistic component of architecture, it did not become paramount in his work. He always based his design first on “functional–technical considerations” and only then devoted himself to artistic design.³³ Such an approach still resonates with many architects, for example, Pritzker laureates Lacaton and Vasall believe that “a house is not only a form that should be somehow filled in”, but should come out of the logic of the internal space.³⁴

Precisely because Karfík's reflections have not yet been subjected to a more thorough analysis in connection with his work, it is important to focus primarily on those of his works in which several types of interpretation are more prominently offered – works for which we can find, among other things, related statements by the architect which represent the context of the time, or tendencies in his architectural approach to the problem. The preference for several interpretations of a particular project presupposes that Karfík's work will also not be conceived exhaustively – such was the case with Dedeček, where the interpretation was limited to four of his most controversial works – but only assessed through a fraction of the works subject to certain selection criteria, which will strengthen the potential to intellectually conceptualise them.

Conclusion

The works and personality of architect Vladimír Karfík do not lead unequivocally to a specific choice of research method, as one might presume. The biographical method, preferred by many architectural historians, is not only questioned for the reason that Karfík has already written an autobiography, but also because it may not be the most appropriate genre to appreciate many aspects and many facets of his work. This belief has been strengthened by this author's previous experience, albeit only in the context of writing a book chapter dedicated to the architect. Only after the question of how Karfík's work should be approached in order to enhance its appreciation – and after abandoning the idea that seemingly “neutrally” pursued research is sufficient to contribute to deepening of a general knowledge – have new possible approaches to the ongoing research begun to emerge.

Nonetheless, the decision to shift the focus from the biographical method came mostly from the analysis of existing publications devoted to Karfík, many of which were also based on biographical aspects. To a large extent, their authors succeeded in consolidating the myth of the personality of Vladimír Karfík as an expert on the international environment, as a “Bat'a” architect and as professor of architecture, but without paying equal attention to his designs and the way of thinking that is echoed in them. The analysis of the texts revealed that their focus has an impact on the fact that – with all the recognition and extraordinary respect shown to Karfík, especially in Slovakia, where he spent almost 30 years of his life – several of his buildings remain almost unnoticed, mostly those from the second half of the twentieth century. Even if it can be argued laconically that his later work does not reach the quality of the interwar “Bat'a” period, such an evaluation is not entirely appropriate without a more detailed analysis of his work.

The study is based on the assumption that the ability to appreciate architecture is based on a plurality of interpretations, including aesthetic experience, and despite the many

³³ KARFÍK, Vladimír. *Vzpomínky*. Luhačovice: Nakladatelství Atelier IM, 2017, p. 215.

³⁴ LACATON, Anne. Lacaton & Vassal. Udržet si svobodu a úsudek. In: STEINBACHOVÁ, Marcela, MALOŠIKOVÁ, Šárka. *Kruh: texty o architektuře 2010–2013*. Praha: Kruh, 2014, p. 107.

utilitarian aspects of architecture, one can agree with the historian of architecture Geoffrey Scott that architecture “communicates its value [predominantly] as an art”.³⁵ As mentioned in the introduction, with reference to Scruton, aesthetic experience also lies in the ability to intellectually conceptualise the perceived object. Since the aim of the research discussed in this study is to appreciate the work of architect Vladimír Karfík, it is necessary to examine the plurality of interpretive possibilities and to support the intellectual conceptualisation of the pluralistic nature of the researched works.

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³⁵ SCOTT, Geoffrey. *The Architecture of Humanism. A Study in the History of Taste*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965, p. 156.

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