

## CONFERENCE, 2010 Brno, Czech Republic

### National - International. Art and politics in houses and interiors of the 20th century

#### Review

Hetty Berens, Board Member of DEMHIST  
(comments, responds to [hberens@nai.nl](mailto:hberens@nai.nl))

'National-International: Art and politics in houses and interiors of the 20th century' was the title of an inspiring conference held by the Moravian Gallery in Brno. It was organised in cooperation with DemHist and ICDAD (International Committee for Decorative Arts), from 21-24 April. This was the first DemHist conference for 2010; the second takes place at the ICOM General Conference in Shanghai in November.

To be honest, titles for DEMHIST conferences are always formulated very generally. Typical examples are: 'Historic House Museums as a Bridge between the Individual and the Community' (Bogota 2008) and 'Historic House Museums as Witnesses of National and Local Identities' (Amsterdam 2002). Being a Board member since 2005 I know why: we hope to attract as many as possible people to sign up! Behind the scenes, the Board always tries to make the theme as broad as possible, for international interest and relevance.

The Czech Republic became an independent nation in 1993, a political move that created huge opportunities for house museums. Significant houses were returned to their former owners or heirs. But not everyone could afford to keep and maintain their renewed possessions, so sometimes the houses were offered back to the new state. That confronted the government with many possibilities, because 1993 introduced a new search for Czech national identity. National heroes are being sought and found. Important historical periods and events in national arts and architecture are being brought back to life. For me personally, this was the most stunning experience of the week I spent in the Czech Republic.

As a Board member, I'm responsible for the DEMHIST categorisation project, and I saw beautiful and interesting new examples of all the categories in the Czech Republic. First the conference itself. Like previous conferences, the first two days were filled with talks about the general theme as well about individual cases. If you had never heard of architects like Wiesner, Plecnik or Jurkovic, you became a fan of them in Brno, no matter how much you love the Tugendhat house. Houses by these designers are beautiful storytelling objects of the history of the country, combining elements of British and Viennese modernist architecture with forms adopted from Czech folklore. As Martina Straková said about Jurkovic's own house in Brno, the Czech people were acquainted with the latest trends in European architectural design.

The Czech Republic, in the middle of Europe, is much more internationally connected than you might think. It is also the case the other way around: other nationalities have been inspired by Czech designers. The people in this country are proud of their great artists and they want to show it! For example, the conference excursions visited Josef Hoffman's birthplace in Brtnice, and a wonderful Cubist house in the tiny village of Libodrice, with an even more beautiful Cubist design collection inside. A highlight was the Villa Müller in Prague: a well-kept house with interesting floorplans, an overwhelmingly beautiful interior and a poignant history. It was confiscated by the Communist government and became the office for eight companies; the former lady of the house was only allowed to live upstairs. Now the house is open all year around, as are all the others we visited.

On our way back to Brno, I had an interesting discussion whether a Cubist collection should be transferred from Prague to the Libodrice house in the country. I also had a long talk with Alfred Hagemann, who had given a paper about the Schoenhausen Palace in Berlin on the first day of the conference. We discussed the need for a house museum in Zlín, where we had visited the former Bata shoe factory, with a modernist garden suburb for the workers. Could that be the next step for the Czech Republic, keeping in mind its first step with the development of beautiful collection houses and personality houses? Talking to colleagues in the field is one of the aims and pleasures of these conferences, and it always works very well.

DEMHIST conferences in my opinion are a must for everyone who is involved professionally in house museums. I ignore the title of the conference, and sign up for it every year, because it is an inspirational experience. Each time, I get new ideas for my work at the Sonneveld House in Rotterdam; I sharpen the concept of the house, and I have ideas for new activities. I hope to see YOU next year in Antwerp!