

John Pawson and the Abbey of Our Lady of Nový Dvůr

by Ivan Margolius



I was reminded of my talk with London-based architect John Pawson, the practitioner of minimalism in architecture, about his Abbey design (1999-2014) by seeing this project listed as one of the finalists in the first Česká cena za architekturu (Czech Architecture Award) conferred by the Česká komora architektů in November 2016.

Pawson (b1949) comes from Halifax in West Yorkshire, a place of hilly landscapes, vast empty moorlands, grazing sheep and textile industries. His parents used to own a factory and shops making and selling ladies clothing and were devout Methodists.

Pawson attended the exclusive Eton College where in his rooms he slept in a white hammock. He wanted to study architecture but was told that his marks were not sufficiently good. Father took him on in the factory. However, the manufacture of ladies' dresses and their design was not to Pawson's liking. After six years, having been offered a first class ticket for a round the world trip he packed his rucksack and left.

In Japan Pawson had met architect and designer Shiro Kuramata who persuaded him to try to study architecture after all. On Pawson's return he managed to get a place at the private Architectural Association School in London.

Pawson is influenced by the austere Methodist stance of his parents and grandparents and his own reaction to his materialistic background. He is not interested in the possession of objects or money and tried to survive by having only the basic necessary things without any ties or attachments. He was the happiest when he had nothing.

The idea to ask Pawson to design the Cistercian abbey came about after one of the monks had seen a book with an illustration of Pawson's 1995 Calvin Klein shop in New York.

The abandoned Nový Dvůr Baroque manor house, designed by K I Dientzenhofer or his followers in 1760, was bought by the Cistercian order in 1999. The ruin started to be renovated by Jan Soukup, the Plzeň based architect but Pawson considered the meticulous Czech renovation attitude as old-fashioned because according to him the final

aim was to achieve the Abbey complex as a 'new radiating Baroque' design. Pawson sought to incorporate seamlessly the old buildings into the new design to harmonise them. For the new additions Pawson wanted to employ concrete but the local conditions dictated the use of rendered stone.

Pawson's design was greatly influenced by his visit to Le Thoronet Abbey in Provence. This abbey was built by Cistercian monks between 1160 and 1190. Le Thoronet design was based on the notion of simplicity. "There is no virtue more indispensable for us all... than humble simplicity," wrote St Bernard of Clairvaux, the 12th century monk and key figure in the development of Cistercian Order. The aim of the Order is for monks to live away from the material distractions of the world in self-sufficient communities.

Before the Nový Dvůr design Pawson researched the life of monks, spent several days with them and studied over a thousand of their movements during one daily cycle. The monks have to pray seven times a day, change their attire and wash. Forty monks have to hurry through the abbey to be able to fulfil the daily routine. The hardest problem was how to solve the smooth connection of the historical Baroque buildings with the new additions.

In the end the abbey garden in the centre of the composition with the glazed cloister helped to pull all the elements together as well as a horizontal continuous façade line of projecting moulding running along the old and new buildings. Pawson made scale models which included openings to verify his ideas. "Until you make many three-dimensional studies you cannot be certain what the design will look like... an imagined walk through the modelled spaces created the composition for the whole project."

In the abbey itself Pawson used screens in the wall openings that modulated light coming in through the slits on the sides of the abbey tower. Pawson is a master in the use of light in architecture which he employs as one of the most important elements for creating atmosphere and perception of architectonic spaces. His aim was to create complete harmony between the abbey and the monks community without visual and

decorative interference with minimal use of differing materials and details – polished concrete floors, rendered white walling, wooden furniture. He wanted to create a synthesis of poetry and function which would point toward the view of God, to the altar within the rounded apse, exactly the same as the Cistercian monks had demanded with their architectural tradition of austerity and luminosity.

The monks were happy to find an architect who had the same passion and comprehension for their way of life and who understood their specific need of equilibrium of beauty and utility.

Pawson also emphasised the symbolic link between the past – the existing buildings – and the future – the new buildings – with the secular life. It is not easy to achieve minimalist design. To gain the austere simplicity there is a need for clear thinking, great self-discipline, strong will and conformity of the vision.

After the completion of the main complex, additional works have been added such as the guesthouse, boiler building, workshops for the manufacture of hand cream and the packaging of mustard, the sale of which generates sufficient income to cover the abbey's day-to-day running costs. A new chapel is being planned. Pawson enjoys his site visits to the Czech Republic although he regrets his busy schedule never allows enough time to explore fully the existing modern architecture there.

● John Pawson worked in collaboration with Jan Soukup of Atelier Soukup Opl Svehla, Plzeň, Czech Republic.



Above workshop stair Top: abbey exterior view showing the south wing
Photos: Gilbert McCarragher



Above: church interior Below: cloister and abbey garden

Photos: Jens Weber

