

Jan Kaplicky – a Czech giant in Britain

By Milan Kocourek

Jan Kaplicky, born April 18, 1937, in Prague. Died aged 71, of heart failure, on January 14, 2009, in Prague

Jan Kaplicky was a giant among architects. “I think it is fascinating that two of our architects, living in Britain, Eva Jiricna and Jan Kaplicky, have become world famous” says Iva Kubeskova, a Czech architect in Prague.

According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, London was founded by Brutus of Troy who had to defeat a couple of incumbent giants, Mog and Magog. Jan Kaplicky resembled one of them, towering over his audience at most gatherings.

Eva Jiricna completes the pair, giant by intellect rather than build.

Kaplicky and Jiricna were partners in London for several years following the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia but later parted. By strange coincidence, five days before Jan Kaplicky’s death in a Prague street, hours after the birth of his daughter by his second wife Eliska Fuchsova, Czech television channel CT1 broadcast a documentary about Eva Jiricna, where he talked for the first time about his admiration for her:

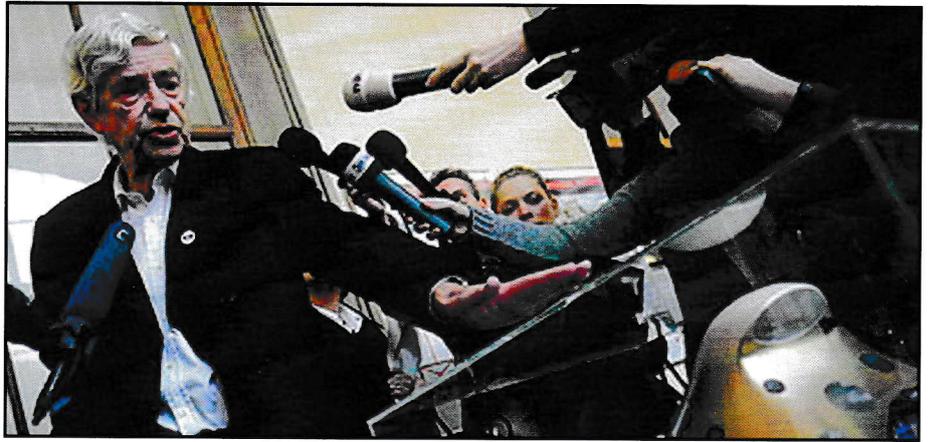
“There are not many architects like her in the world, and to maintain such a high standard as she does is like a miracle, a miracle for everybody.” He added: “She uses her femininity in a most elegant manner.”

Jan Kaplicky was born in Prague to a family of artists. His father was a sculptor, his mother a drawer.

Jan got his diploma in architecture from UMPRUM, the College of Applied Arts in the Czech capital. As a student he opened his own design studio where he worked until 1968 when London became his new home.

He could not stand the Soviet tanks in his beloved Prague and escaped with only \$100US and a few pairs of socks.

In London he started working for Denys Lasdun & Partners, later for Piano & Rogers. “We instantly became close friends, his ideas subsequently had an influence on the design



Jan Kaplicky, talking to journalists about the model of his controversial library in Prague

of the Pompidou Centre in the early 1970s,” said Lord Rogers speaking to the *Architects Journal*.

In 1979 Jan Kaplicky opened the studio Future Systems with David Nixon. Amanda Levete, who became his first wife, also joined them. According to Rogers, buildings designed by Future Systems ranked among most important in Britain, especially the Media Centre at Lord’s Cricket Ground (completed in 1999) and the Selfridges building in Birmingham (completed 2003).

Future Systems won the Stirling Prize and many others.

The practice has become renowned throughout the world. Jan Kaplicky popularised modern architecture in a masterly fashion in lectures delivered in more than 20 countries. He also wrote six books, including *Confessions*, published in 2002.

In an interview for Czech Radio (April 2004) he showed his profound concern for the restoration of historical buildings in his home country and criticised the authorities of the Moravian capital Brno for their decision to entrust the reconstruction of the Villa Tugendhat, a functionalist building of historic importance, to a company who did not have a single architect among their staff.

In my interview with him he also complained about the lack of commissions from the Czech Republic: “The Czechs who do not

live in the Czech Republic are not popular – this has been the case even before the second world war,” he said.

In 2007 Kaplicky’s futuristic design for a new national library in Prague came top in an international competition overseen by Eva Jiricna. However, the design failed to impress Czech politicians.

It is generally referred to as ‘octopus’ and some architects have voiced sharp criticism. Last year Kaplicky defended his design on Czech television, winning 70 per cent of the popular vote. Supporters of the design include the Czech Ambassador in London Jan Winkler, Kaplicky’s friend.

The opposition, however, is formidable. For instance, Czech architect Robert Voticky who works both in Prague and London argues that the existing national library Klementinum, in the Old Town of Prague, can be substantially extended and modernised – there is no need for a new national library in his view.

One thing is certain, however: Kaplicky has become something of a local hero in Prague. Future Systems has designed the Antonin Dvorak Congress and Concert Centre in Ceske Budejovice, South Bohemia.

This is only one of several Future Systems designs for Czech customers.

Jan Kaplicky is coming home, at last.