

VILLA BENIES
by EMIL KRALICEK
Lysa nad Labem, Czech Republic

Summary

Lysa nad Labem is a town with population of 9,000 located about 30 km North-east of Prague. The Cubist Villa Benies stands on the grounds of a former sugar refinery founded in Lysa nad Labem in 1871. The refinery was in the ownership of the Benies family from 1887 until the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938, at the outbreak of the Second World War.

Villa Benies was built for the daughter of Michael Benies, the owner of the refinery, and was mostly used as the family's retreat house and also for representation of the company. Unfortunately, the property of the Benies family was confiscated during the German occupation and so was the refinery with all surrounding buildings.

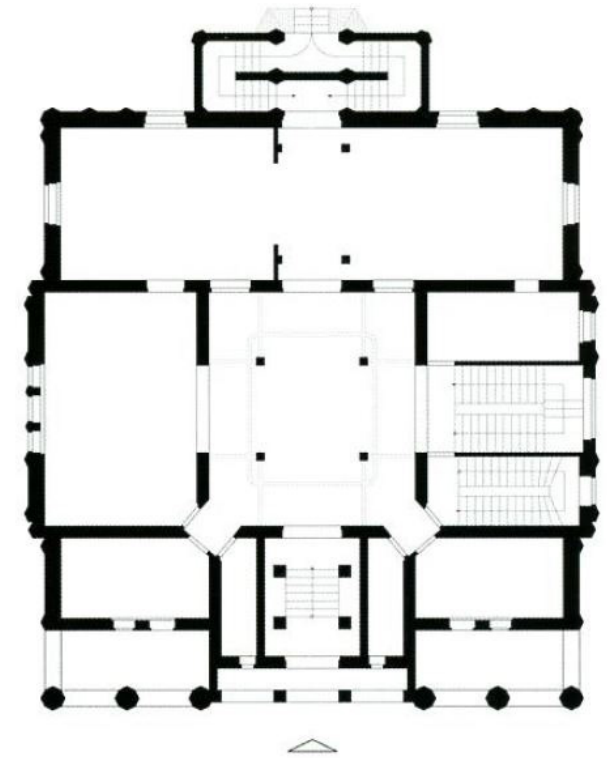
The ground floor and basement of this precious cubist structure were then altered to accommodate administration, whilst the first floor was converted into staff accommodation. Villa Benies then served as an administrative centre of the refinery until 1990, when the factory closed down as a result of an unsuccessful privatisation following the Velvet Revolution.

The current owner of Villa Benies, a German haulage company správně ARS Altmann Praha spol. s r. o, bought the Villa together with the grounds of the sugar refinery in 1997.

In 1999, the remains of the historic factory buildings were demolished together with the majority of an exquisite garden surrounding the Villa, to provide space for new parking facilities as the company's trade was expanded before the financial crisis in 2008.



- /F1 Balcony over the northern entrance and plan of the ground floor.
- /F2 View over the entrance hall on the first floor of the villa.



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Significance

Villa Benies is a work of the Czech architect Emil Kralicek, who was one of the leading characters of Czech architectural Cubism, a unique architectural style characteristic for central Europe, with the highest density of buildings in this style in Prague. Kralicek's other purely cubist building - Dům Diamant, is one of the finest examples of the Cubist Architectural style and one of the most popular structures in Prague among Architecture enthusiasts.

Another Kralicek's famous structure is a cubist lantern in the Jungmann Square – an icon of the whole Cubist architectural style, which was saved from demolition and restored following appeals from another famous Czech architect, Jan Kaplický. Villa Benies is primarily unique for its flat roof structure and a rooftop garden. In 1912, only three flat-roofed buildings existed in the country - all of them in Prague, however, the idea to plant a garden at the top was entirely unique.

Moreover, the organic décor of the Villa, most significant on structural features of the building in both interior and exterior, was inspired by the structure of sugar crystals when viewed under a microscope. This not only referred to the heritage of the Benies family and their relations to the sugar



/F3 View over the entrance hall on the first floor of the Villa.

/F4 Cubist lantern by Emil Králíček at Jungmann Square, Prague.

/F5 Terrace and balcony in the North.

industry but it also reflected the spirit of the early 20th century, celebrating science and new discoveries.

Villa Benies had been out of the sight of architecture historians due to its location outside Prague and a general custom of the era it was built in, when recognition for buildings was often given to the building company rather than to the architect. Only at the beginning of the 21st century, the villa was finally proclaimed a work of Emil Kralicek and introduced to the world in a travelling exhibition about Czech Cubist architecture, which marked the occasion of Czech Presidency to the EU in 2009.



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Present

Following the recognition as a work of Kralicek's, Villa Benies was listed as a national landmark in 2004. It has undergone a series of minor refurbishment works since its listing with financial help of the NPU (The National Heritage Institute) to prevent further damage to its fabric. In 2015 the villa was put on a list of monuments at risk (Program záchrany architektonického dědictví), allowing further public financial support. In a project jointly funded by the owner and the National Heritage Institute, a complete roof refurbishment was finished in late autumn 2016, making the structure watertight. Throughout the times, Villa Benies lost its original furnishings, however, the original floorplan, wooden interior cladding as well as some fittings stayed mostly intact. Even though Villa Benies is not currently accessible to public, it continuously attracts attention and interest of local people. There is an active local Friends group, associating individuals concerned about the villa's future. Irregular lectures and exhibitions organised by the Friends group and a local architectural historian



introducing the history of the refinery and Villa Benies keep attracting high visitor numbers.

Future!?

Despite the recent building works and the interest from the public, there is no clear vision about the Villa's future. The NPU (The National Heritage Institute) and the local Friends group would like to see this important piece of Czech Architectural heritage restored to its former glory and serving a meaningful purpose with public access, however, this cannot be done without a cooperation of its owner. Currently, there seems to be a lack of dialogue and negotiation on all levels. As there is a general lack of experience in heritage advocacy in the Czech Republic, a UK based charitable organisation The Friends of Czech Heritage would like to offer help to the local Friends group

through the provision of UK knowledge and expertise to support their aims to safeguard this important piece of Czech Architectural Heritage for future generations and find a sympathetic sustainable use, acceptable to the current owners.

/F6 Aerial photo from the North west.

/F7 Western view of the Villa from the surrounding car park.

/F8 Southern frontage.



/F6



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History timeline:

- 1872 – Sugar refinery in Lysa nad Labem is founded
- 1887 - 8. December – the Benies Brothers buy a sugar refinery in Lysa nad Labem
- 1912 – Villa Benies is built by Michael Benies (1854 – 1924)
- 1939 – Sugar refinery in Lysa nad Labem and Villa Benies are seized in German occupation of Czechoslovakia
- 1990 – Sugar refinery in Lysa nad Labem closes its operation
- 1997 – German haulage company Ars Altmann s.r.o buys the closed sugar refinery in Lysa nad Labem and Villa Benies
- 1999 – Historic buildings of the sugar refinery are demolished
- 2001 – 2003 – A forgotten cubist villa in Lysa nad Labem is brought to attention of Czech architectural historians to be later identified as a unique work of the famous architect Emil Kralicek.
- 2004 - 28. April – Villa Benies declared a National Monument
- 2004 - December – Villa Benies featured in a solo exhibition of Emil Kralicek's work at The Fragner Gallery, Prague
- 2005 - 17. September – Villa Benies opened to the public for the very first time as a part of European Heritage Days celebration
- 2009 – Local Friends Group "Za záchranu kubistické vily architekta Emila Králíčka v Litoli" formed
- 2009 – Villa Benies featured in a world-touring exhibition about Czech Cubist Architecture marking the occasion of the Czech Presidency to the EU
- 2015 – Villa Benies put on a Heritage at risk list for priority funding by the NPU
- 2016 – Total roof refurbishment is completed

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- /F2 Entrance hall with hexagonal skylight and crystallic columns. Green paint is not original and was added when the villa was used as a filming location. Photo archive Czech Television <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/ct24/kultura/1376212-unikatni-chranena-kubisticka-vila-chatra-vlastnik-popira>
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- /F10 North east corner of the vila with balcony and terrace. Image courtesy of Stanislav Svoboda
- /F11 Detail of crystallic facade decoration. Image courtesy of Stanislav Svoboda

Cover page photographs:

Details of the building: courtesy of Stanislav Svoboda.

Front view of the Villa: picture from the book "Czech Architectural Cubism" by Zdenek Lukes, Images by Ester Havlová. Photo available at: <http://jarmik.pise.cz/625-cesky-architektonicky-kubismus.html>

"Special thanks to The Friends of Czech Heritage and Občanské sdružení Za záchranu kubistické vily architekta Emila Králíčka v Litoli."



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