

Dear friends,

Few Czech structures outside the country have aroused such controversy, such discussion among experts and the public alike, and at the same time inspired so much passion, as the building of the Czechoslovak and later the Czech Embassy in London. Just as all extraordinary things are both loved and hated, as soon as the structure was completed in 1970, debates and controversies swirled around it, and the building became the topic of notable articles and critical essays. Those behind the design, the architects Jan Šrámek, Jan Bočan and Karel Štěpánský, certainly did not lack courage. They were proponents of the avant-garde brutalist style of the time, and it that spirit they shattered contemporary conventions in London. They allowed the beauty of purity and unrefined materials to take precedence, and at the same time perfectly mastered proportions and created a sense of balance and harmony with the surrounding environment. Co-operation with British architect Robert Matthew certainly contributed to the overall effect. It's no surprise that the building was awarded a prestigious RIBA award from the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1971.

After the split of the Czechoslovak Federation in 1993, the whole complex also was divided. Slovakia got the embassy building itself, and the Czech Republic gained the building that had originally had residential quarters and housed the trade and consular sections. The need to redefine the space and adjust it for new purposes has reawakened debates. Questions arose about whether to stay or leave, to sell or renovate. For critics, it presented a fresh opportunity to settle accounts with old adversaries. Fortunately, the voices supporting the tradition of the Czech architectural school eventually won. The Czech government decided to invest in the building, to modernize it and adapt it to the needs of the 21st-century Czech foreign service. The result of the reconstruction, which lasted almost two years, is a rejuvenated embassy building in which the details can shine. It has an astonishing purity of line, feeling of lightness and brightness – as if streams of light were entering the space not only through the large glass windows but penetrating right through the concrete walls. The heavy construction is lightened by the unique unbridled wave created by the sculptor Stanislav Kolibal.

In my experience, I think that a place where ideas are born, where initiatives originate and are brought to fruition, leaves its imprint on them to a considerable extent. I will not hesitate to claim, therefore, that since we now have an embassy building that is renewed, optimistic, elegant, and leaving a very positive mark on London, we can have great hope that Czech diplomacy in the British capital will make a similar impact. The embassy building is not only an instrument for asserting Czech foreign-policy interests, it is also a statement. A statement about form and a statement about substance. I firmly believe that the goodwill and harmony between London and the iconic building of the Czech Embassy will continue in the future to resist the pitfalls of restless times and will keep blossoming, just like the goodwill and harmony between our nations.

Libor Sečka  
*Ambassador of the Czech Republic to the Court of St. James' s*  
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