

*Beneš, Jan: Koldům Litvínov. Dům jako sociální zrcadlo [The Collective House Litvínov. The House as a social mirror].*

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In this copiously illustrated tribute to the iconic Collective House (Koldům) in Litvínov, local journalist Jan Beneš provides readers with a welcome reflection on the lived experiences of the people who have resided in this modern housing block since its completion in the late 1950s. Using oral history methods and his skills in

locating the artifacts of everyday life in the building, Beneš addresses questions that previous more technical and specialist histories of the building have not fully answered. He focuses on what he describes as how people “actually lived” in the Collective House with its shared spaces, its lofty aspirations of a modern, comfortable life, and the many challenges of sustaining the community ethics embraced by the communal housing movement.

The book has seven chapters along with an introduction and additional visual material included in the closing pages. Beneš is an enthusiastic chronicler of the Collective House’s construction and the significant events in its history. He spoke with long-time residents as well as a young anthropologist who wrote about the building in her diploma project. For researchers who are already familiar with the building’s history and its origin in the years between the end of World War II and the start of Communist Party rule in Czechoslovakia, much of the book is a thorough retelling of a story previously told in my own book, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1960* (2011, 2015 in Czech),<sup>1</sup> as well as in the excellent works by Hubert Guzik, *Čtyři cesty ke koldomu* (2014)<sup>2</sup> and the edited collection *Bydlet spolu* (2017)<sup>3</sup> – both of which appear in the bibliography, whereas my contribution does not. Even so, there is value for scholars and casual readers in bringing together recent interviews with current and former residents, unpublished personal photographs, and ephemera like newspaper articles that highlight how many of the building’s spaces are known only from period photographs and construction documents.

In the introduction, Beneš provides brief vignettes of iconic examples of the international collective house movement, such as Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, France, and the Marieberg Collective House in Stockholm, Sweden. Chapter one tells the history of the competition leading to the building of the Collective House in Litvínov and the progress of its construction. For general readers, this chapter may be a first introduction to the intricacies of the project brief, the origin of the building in the aftermath of German wartime occupation, and the architects Václav Hlinský and Evžen Linhart. The chapter includes a detailed chronological look at how the project came to be in the context of German and then Czech interest in increasing the industrial labour force in the area around Litvínov, which the Nazi Party had controlled during the war. Among the highlights of this chapter are rare photographs of local events from the late 1940s as well as images of the construction process of the west wing, completed in 1953 with a steel structure, and the east wing, built later with a reinforced concrete frame and opened in 1958.

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<sup>1</sup> *Zarecor*, Kimberly Elman: *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity. Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1960*. Pittsburgh 2011; *Zarecorová*, Kimberly Elman: *Utváření socialistické modernity. Bydlení v Československu v letech 1945-1960*. Prague 2015.

<sup>2</sup> *Guzik*, Hubert: *Čtyři cesty ke koldomu. Kolektivní bydlení – utopie české architektury 1900-1989* [Four Paths to the Koldům. Collective Housing – The Utopia of Czech Architecture 1900-1989]. Prague 2014.

<sup>3</sup> *Guzik*, Hubert: *Bydlet spolu. Kolektivní domy v českých zemích a Evropě ve 20. století* [To live together. Collective Houses in the Czech Lands and Europe in the 20th Century]. Prague 2017.

Chapter two offers insights into how people perceived their new surroundings after moving into the Collective House. Beneš collected testimonials from his own interviews and other printed sources, which portray a modern building that offered amenities like central heating, hot water, a school and nursery, a restaurant, a hairdresser, and a small grocery. These facilities significantly improved everyday life for the families selected for the new apartments, often members of the Communist Party or important employees at the local industrial sites. The chapter includes amusing stories about the still-rural habits of some new occupants, including one older man who grew potatoes in dirt in the second room of his apartment, and others who kept animals on their balconies. Many children lived in the building, and in the 1960s new amenities like gymnasium spaces were added in the basements to provide activities and reduce the number of children roaming unsupervised in the hallways. Beneš includes photographs of folk dances and holiday festivals that took place regularly, supported by recollections from residents about happy memories at the Collective House. Less well-known shared spaces are featured as well, such as the gymnasiums, the nursery, social spaces where men's and women's clubs met, and the roof terraces. Daily life was not always easy in such close quarters, of course, and the amenities could be disappointing. Among the constant complaints were the unreliability of the elevators (which were often out of service) and the quality and variety of food at the restaurant, which was designed to serve only the residents during the daytime before becoming a public restaurant with a popular dance floor in the evenings.

Much of the attention in chapter three focuses on the pool that opened in 1959, around the same time as the east wing, and other recreational opportunities for residents. Chapter four is primarily a recounting of a survey taken at the Collective House in 1973 about resident satisfaction with the building. Besides asking tenants what their major complaints were, it enquired about cleanliness, cost and quality of the food at the grocery and restaurant, and usage patterns for amenities like the roof terrace. The results of the survey were mixed (and Beneš includes much of the data), but the responses reveal a general satisfaction with most aspects of life in the building. During the period of normalization, efforts were made to better record residents' complaints and create more social activities. The government also tried to present the Collective House in Litvínov as evidence of the Communist Party's successes. The 1980s brought tragedy to the building when the central section, which had housed the restaurant, grocery, schools, and a dormitory burned down, killing a 45-year-old woman. Beneš writes that losing so much of the shared infrastructure for the community meant the end of the Collective House as envisioned by Hilský and Linhart.

Chapter five, the longest in the book, brings the story into the present day in a way that previous studies have not done, and offers the newest material for researchers and the interested public. In this section, Beneš uses his journalistic skills to bring the post-socialist decades into vivid view, with many photographs and anecdotes from residents. The building needed significant renovation by this time, as the Communist government had not invested in maintenance over the decades. Beneš uses the narrative framework of the "wild 1990s" to describe the piecemeal attempts

to address some of the most urgent needs in the years after the end of the Communist rule. A major rehabilitation project finally kicked off in 1997 and ended up taking ten years through 2007 – much longer than anticipated. Beneš carefully follows the timelines of this reconstruction, using local media and interviews to follow the progress. Since then, residents have still found the need to advocate for more parking, less noise, and funding to continue making updates, including reinvesting in amenities that struggled financially starting in the 1990s. The apartments were privatized in the 2010s, and the services in the central building have been maintained by the local city government on a lease ending with the year 2025. The final pages of the chapter hold photographs of renovated apartments in the Collective House, showing how the interior of the building continues to change and become more modern and comfortable even though its facades have remained largely the same.

The final chapters six and seven provide biographical details about the people who spoke to the author for the book, several examples of how the Collective House features in literature, a timeline, and an extended interview with anthropology student Hana Glasser Daňková, who wrote about the building in her diploma project in 2014. This interview is the main content of chapter seven, focusing on Daňková's process for data collection, her approach to the topic as an anthropologist, and the interactions that she had with her informants, many of whom moved into the building in the 1950s and have not left. These chapters are followed by additional documentation on the building design, including an unbuilt version of the project by the same architects, as well as a collection of postcards featuring Collective House scenes.

This book is ambitious. The author creates a record of the building from its conception in the 1940s to its present state using documents, journals, mass media, and interviews to reconstruct its history. His passion for detailed research on the topic and a desire to highlight its largely successful conception and implementation are the strongest threads extending throughout the book. While much of the story in the early chapters is already known, Beneš weaves in new oral history material to offer fresh insights even to expert readers. As the building moves farther away from its original intent as a model for a new way of living, the uniqueness of the situation and the analytical potential are reduced. The overall effect is a deep microhistory of a single building, its fortunes and those of its residents, as told while the world transforms around them, especially after 1989. A more scholarly effort would have reduced some of the extra materials that pad the page count, but the photographs and recollections nevertheless add something new and important to the understanding of housing experiments and everyday life in postwar Czechoslovakia in their own right.