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OBITUARY

Jan Kaplicky, iconoclast and standard-bearer for modernism

'How is the gloomy one?', Cedric Price would inquire of Jan Kaplicky, who died in his native Prague on 14 January aged 71, shortly after the birth of a daughter with his second wife Eliska. Like Price, Jan died too early, and while his architectural achievement was considerable, his death marks the end of what would have been his greatest building, the highly controversial Prague National Library (AR May 2007), won in 2007 in a competition organised by the International Union of Architects (UIA).

This will probably be one of architecture's great might-have-beens. The extraordinary amorphous form of the building aroused such extreme emotions – the conservative Czech president Václav Klaus said that he would personally lie in front of the bulldozers rather than allow the project, on the Letna plain overlooking Prague, to proceed. On the other hand, the design resulted in a petition of 12,000 supporters across the world, including many librarians, impressed by the design's first-rate functional credentials, who believed that this would be a great building.

This project became highly politicised; formally it was scrapped, and the head of the national library dismissed because he not only supported it, but found a new site which would have countered some of the objections to its skyline impact. Jan continued to believe that the project would be realised, even if it needed a change of political power to make that possible. He continued to lobby for it, and to fight various legal moves undertaken by jealous competition losers, which ended in a dubious ruling by the European Union that the original tender process for the competition was faulty.

In an act of generosity, not replicated by certain critics who went behind Jan's back to oppose the design, French architect Dominique Perrault publicly supported the proposal. Perrault won the French National Library competition in Paris in 1989, narrowly beating Future Systems – the practice founded by Jan and David Nixon in the early 1970s. That project would have projected Future Systems on to the world stage; as it was, the firm went on to produce a series of striking and influential designs in the UK. In particular, the idea of the media centre was re-examined in the building for Lord's Cricket Ground in

London, which won the Stirling Prize in 1999, and the Selfridges store in Birmingham, which re-interpreted the building type in a provocative manner that attracted criticism as well as praise (AR October 2003). The design for the French National Library and the subsequent UK buildings were produced by Jan and his then personal and professional partner Amanda Levete, who provided formidable organisation to complement Jan's extraordinary designs.

There were more modest buildings (individual houses, shops) and industrial objects (champagne bucket, restaurant trolley, lamps) that attracted critical and fashion acclaim. Future Systems was a name one expected to see in both society magazines and in technical analyses in architectural publications. Kaplicky and Levete were British architecture's golden couple for more than a decade – creative, tough, critical and opposed to the sentimentality, bogus history and sloppy snobbery engrained in much of Britain's culture. Averse to compromise and as critical of themselves as others, they represented an integrity which was unwavering, and as a consequence were reliant on cultural and individual patronage rather than the general run of commercial commissions, a condition in which they seemed to thrive.

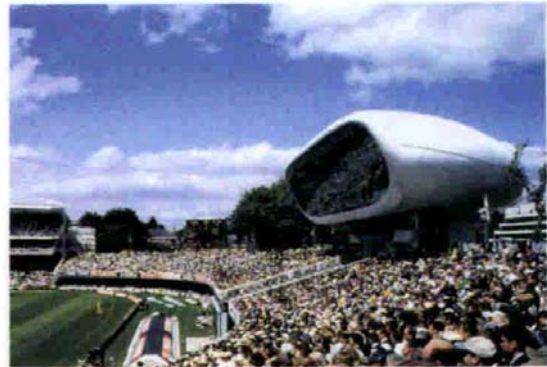
Jan's brand of almost-professional pessimism was what brought him to Britain in the first place, quitting Czechoslovakia (as it was then) in the wake of the failed 1968 Prague Spring, which prefigured the later liberation of eastern Europe from Soviet communism. He was one of several talented architects and designers who subsequently made their mark, notably his long-standing friend Eva Jiricna. Jan was a mature architect by the time he arrived in London (he was born in 1937), and his talent as a designer and understanding of technology and materials saw him working for a string of influential architects: Denys Lasdun, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, Spence and Webster, and Foster Associates (now Foster + Partners), where he worked on the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank headquarters. Rogers and Foster both paid generous tributes to him, though Kaplicky was always uneasy about the necessary compromises involved in creating large numbers of buildings.

Kaplicky's influence on other architects is difficult to assess. His was such a particular talent, the buildings so unusual, that substandard copying is almost impossible. On the other hand, the impregnable integrity that he represented

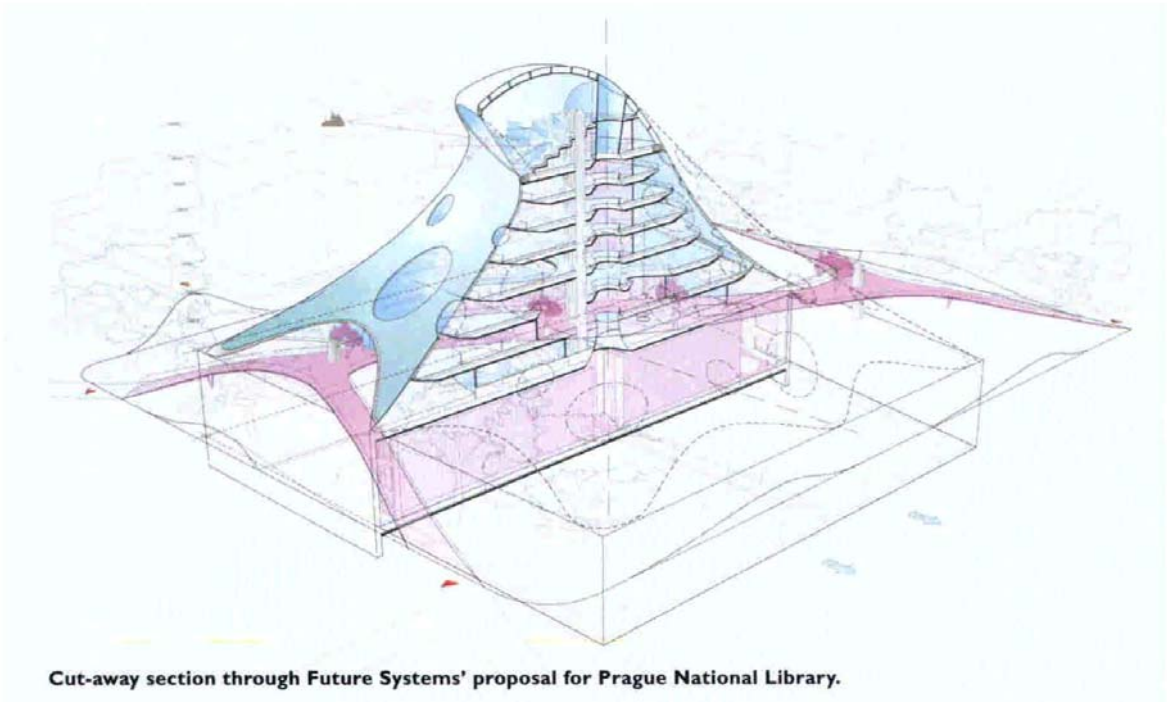
has been a touchstone for young designers, even if they choose, quite legitimately, the path of business success rather than the purer air of the 'uncommercial' office. What is certain is that the inspiration that Future Systems found in nature encouraged the idea that architectural programme plus technology could, and should, create beautiful forms. The sleek curves, the facade inspired by a Paco Rabanne dress on Selfridges Birmingham – these were far removed from the austerity of the puritan strand of high-tech which Jan acknowledged without loving.

My last meeting with Jan was shortly before Christmas, at his table at the Caprice restaurant in London. As ever, the conversation was gossipy, a bit scandalous, serious and funny by turns. His engaging smile and laugh, as much

as his continuing capacity to be shocked by the inevitable cynicisms of professional life, made him engaging company. Really, he was a romantic. PAUL FINCH



Lord's Media Centre in London, completed in 1999.



Cut-away section through Future Systems' proposal for Prague National Library.