

Antonín Mendl, an Architect in a State of Tension Spanning Antiquity and Modernity

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ABSTRACT

The present article deals with the relationship between modern architects and classical architecture as far as both academic study and creative inspiration are concerned. This relationship is examined through the specific example of Professor Antonín Mendl. First of all, Mendl's publication on Resafa is analysed and then a selection of his architectural activity is offered. On the basis of this analysis one can arrive at the conclusion that modern architecture was not in total contradiction to the historic or more precisely the classical model, but that in its fundamental principles modern architecture was based on the classical model.

KEYWORDS

Modernity; classical architecture; Antonín Mendl; Alois Musil; Resafa; Czech Technical University in Prague.

The term “modernity” can be construed in several ways – as an entire system of ideas, as architecture based on such a system, and as a time period. What we have in mind here is the period of early modernity before WWI, as well as modern styles in the interwar period, such as purism or functionalism. Modernistic ideas in architecture can be very briefly characterised as conditionality of function, construction, and form, from which a sober and minimalist morphology is derived. In any case, modernity is usually positioned in fundamental contradiction to previous historical styles and is considered to represent a discontinuation of historical development. It is our goal to show that this issue is more complex and we shall use the example of Antonin Mendl, an architect and a clear protagonist of modernity, to demonstrate that.

Antonín Mendl (**Fig. 1**) was born on August 31, 1890 in Ždánice na Moravě and died on December 26, 1944 in Prague. He graduated from the Czech Technical School in Prague. One of his teachers was Josef Fanta. As early as in 1920 Mendl assumed the position of an assistant lecturer at the Czech Technical University, assisting Professor Josef Fanta, and in 1924 he became Head of the Second Institute of Medieval Architectonics. He became a professor on June 7, 1927 on the basis of a decision dated April 30 and he obtained a regular professorship on September 2, 1931 on the basis of a decision dated June 30 in the same year. He became Head of the Institute of the History of Architecture in 1935, at the time of its reorganisation. He was one of the first promoters of modern architecture at this school, where a rather conservative atmosphere had been prevalent until that time (LÍBAL 2014). “He proved a born teacher who, through education and his own role model as an artist, tried to foster in his students inner high-mindedness and a sense of formal beauty” (ANONYMOUS 1945).

First of all, we will explain his approach to classical architecture from the scientific point of view. He lectured on historical architecture at the Technical University and his students' works dealt with topics such as the Baths of Titus, of Caracalla, and of Diocletian, the Temple of Theseus in Athens, Baalbek, Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli, the Temple of Athena Niké in Athens,

the Theatre in Timgad, the Temple of Vespasian in Brescia, the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, Erechtheion in Athens, the Temple of Vesta in Tivoli, or the peristyle in Split.¹



Fig. 1: Antonín Mendl, the architect (Municipal Archives Ždánice - fund Mendl, Antonín).

The most important proof of his relationship to Classical architecture is his publication on Resafa, a town in Syria. Here he based his work on the knowledge of Alois Musil, a famed Orientalist and Catholic priest (BAUER 1989). In his study on Resafa Mendl dealt in the first place with the origins of early Christian art and with history and the architectural development of the city. Then he described the city walls and gates, giving a detailed analysis of the northern one. Furthermore, he provided a description and a reconstruction of the three nave and five nave basilicas (**Fig. 2; Pl. 7/1-2**).

The focus of the next chapter is on the so-called Martyrion (**Fig. 3; Pl. 7/3-4**), an extremely interesting building with a partially central disposition. The last section of the study explores the remnants of a building standing outside the city walls, the so-called small temple *extra muros*. All the descriptions of the architectural remains are complemented by photographic documentation and reconstructions of their possible original states (MENDL 1925).

1 Archive of architecture NTM (National Technical Museum - Prague) AAS, fund nr. 27 - Mendl, Antonín.

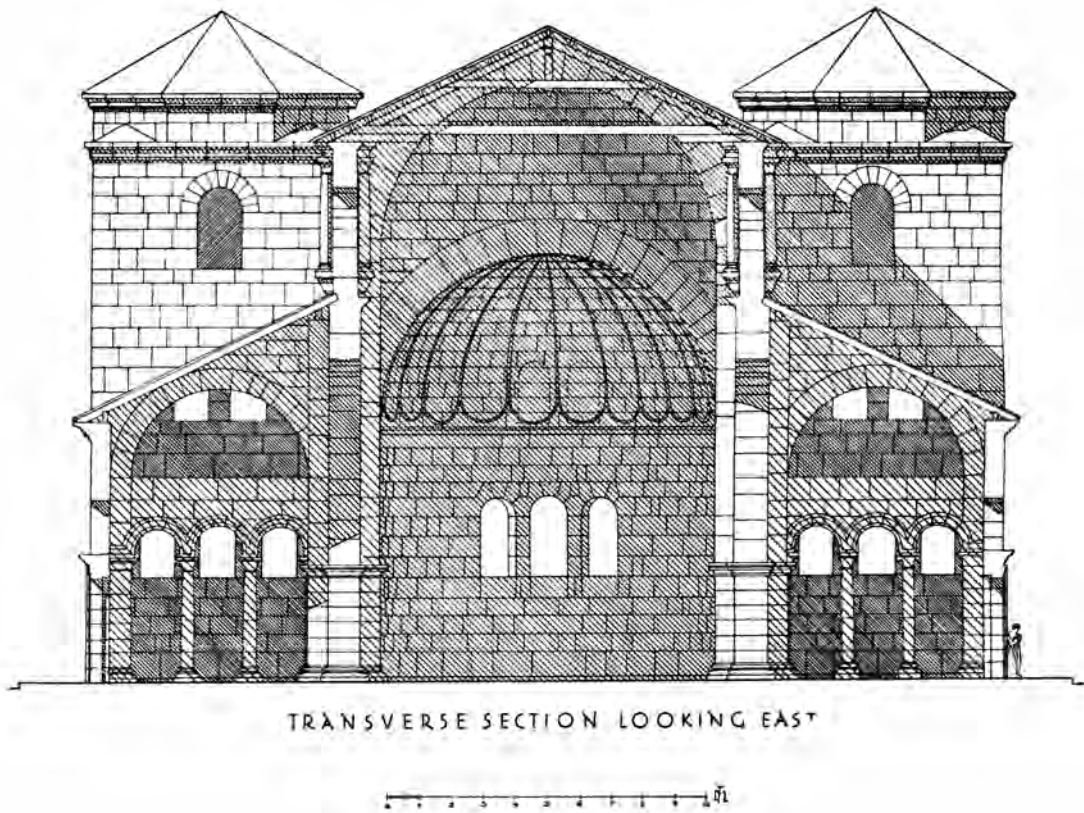


Fig. 2: A cross section through the three-nave basilica (reconstruction by A. Mendl).

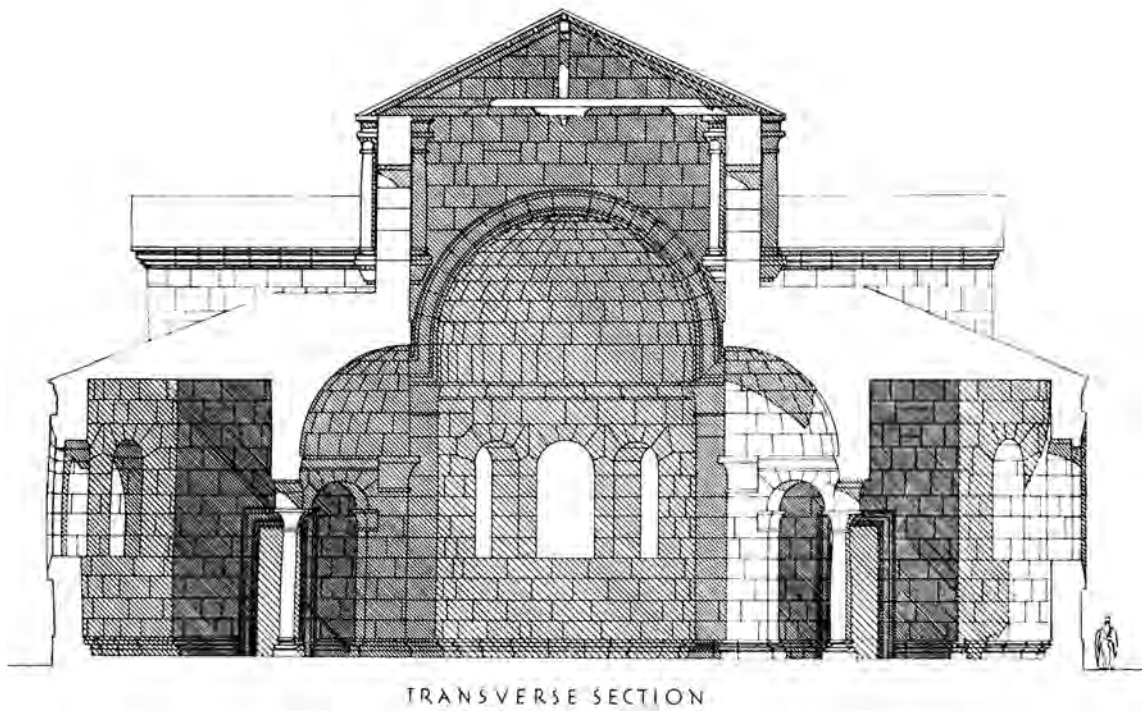


Fig. 3: A cross section through the "Martyrion" (reconstruction by A. Mendl).

Musil used these reconstructions in his works, both scientific studies (MUSIL 1928) and books of travels (MUSIL 1930). This is the reason why Mendl is sometimes mentioned in studies that quote Musil's works (BRILL 1913–1938, 1186). Mendl later collaborated with this scholar on other projects and established a close friendship with him as well. Later Mendl designed a villa for Musil in Kosova Hora near Sedlčany (**Fig. 4**; LÍBAL 2009), in which, however, Musil only lived for a short period of time. Mendl also designed a tomb for Musil that is located in Rychtářov, Musil's birthplace (**Fig. 5**).



Fig. 4: A. Musil's villa in Kosova Hora (photo P. Líbal).

The evidence presented so far has only shown Mendl's positive relationship to classical architecture as the testimony of a specific historical period. It is much more interesting to observe how Mendl applied classical principles to his own creative work. "When lecturing on Early Christian and medieval architecture he conveyed the historic topic with constant respect to modern times and their needs. He emphasised the continuous development of the idea of architecture as far as fundamental principles, i.e. space, materials, and details, as well as the constantly changing aesthetics of a period conditioned by purpose and materials, are concerned."²

2 Municipal Archives Žďánice – fund Mendl, Antonín.

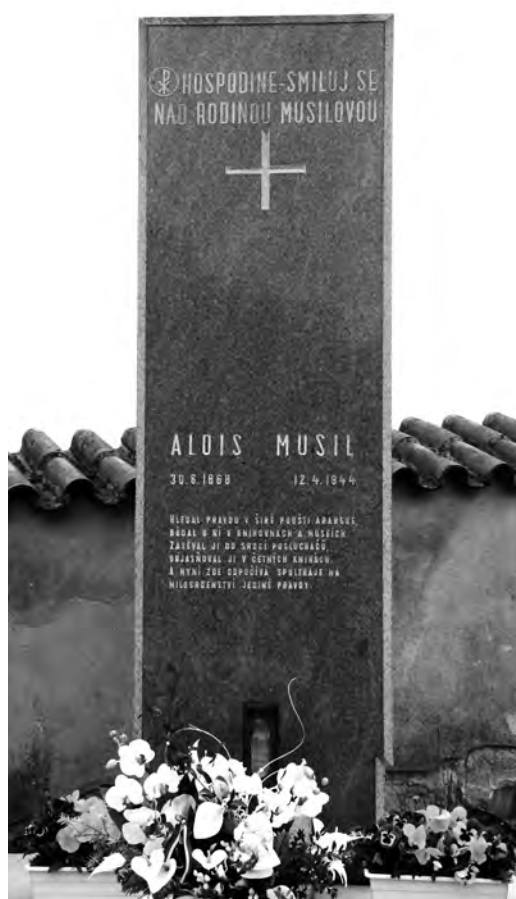


Fig. 5: A. Musil's grave in Rychtářov (photo P. Líbal).

As far as the expression of style of Mendl's buildings is concerned, it developed from late modernity and late Cubism through decorativism to a purist and functionalist morphology. The most significant work from the first half of the 1920s is Tyl's House in Polička, which Mendl designed together with the architect Václav Šantrůček. Jointly they also designed several Sokol gymnasiums and residential buildings.

In 1928 the Catholic Church of Sts. Martin, Cyril, and Methodius in Násedlovice in Moravia was consecrated. "The conditions for the solution were identical to those of early Christian churches: hence the effort for maximum simplicity of space and material. The tower was added to the design as a campanile."³ Thus, there is yet another link or rather connection to the older, specifically Italian medieval architecture. In fact, such a separation of a tower from a church was not a common practice in the case of either Catholic or Protestant churches in the inter-war period (LÍBAL 2013).

3 Municipal Archives Ždánice – fund Mendl, Antonín.



Fig. 6: The church of Sts. Martin, Cyril and Methodius in Násedlovice (photo P. Líbal).



Fig. 7: Interior of the church in Násedlovice (photo P. Líbal).

Mendl designed several modernist villas in Prague in the 1930s. They had flat roofs and other attributes of functionalist architecture, but they are all based on timeless tectonic and proportional systems (**Fig. 8**). But Mendl began to gradually abandon a strict model of abstract geometry for houses from the second half of the 1930s. His buildings again had sloping roofs; however, they were free of decorativism.



Fig. 8: Villa in Prague - Dejvice, 27 Na Míčánci Street (photo P. Líbal).

But Mendl remained a committed functionalist until the 1940s as far as competitions for large buildings, such as schools and galleries, are concerned. Nevertheless, those designs were never realised, which was also the case of his project for the Radlovec Hotel in Ždánice. This building would have altered the character of Ždánice fundamentally, making it resemble a large city. These studies too preserved a proportional system based on tectonic architecture. Here we are getting to a more general problem of the relationship of modern architects to previous style periods, i.e. to the architecture of classical, medieval European and early modern times. As opposed to frequent opinions stating that modern architecture totally dissociated itself from historic periods (Nový 1996, 129), a different view of older architecture can be supported. Even Karel Boromejský Mádl, a theoretician of modernity, did not deny the heritage of older architecture either: “None of the new ones, not even the most radical ones, has contempt for the old artistic heritage. On the contrary, everyone and everywhere derives from it” (MÁDL 1900). Continuity, mainly of a tectonic type, was required by Vlastislav Hofman (HOFMAN 1911–1912). Harmony (which does not mean real continuity) between the Palladian architecture and the works of Le Corbusier was proved by Colin Rowe (ROWE 1977). The villas in Garches were compared with the Villa Malcontenta, and the Villa Savoy was compared with the Villa Rotonda (FRAMPTON 2000, 158). Bruno Zevi too criticised the absurdity of emphasising the

antagonism between modernity and historic styles (ZEVI 1981). Here one must add that there was rather a large disproportion between (some, mainly so-called scientific) functionalist theories and the practice, where a clearly distinct major emphasis was placed on the aesthetic effect of the buildings. This position surely prevailed, precisely in the sense of purposefulness – strength – beauty.

It is exactly the texts and works by Antonín Mendl that show there was no discontinuation of a thousand years of the development of European architecture, but that this development continued. His works show an approach to classical architecture as to a continuous source of inspiration, not from the point of view of form or rather style, but as far as a proportional and compositional pattern is concerned. And this statement holds true in general with respect to the majority of other modern architects as well.

English by Jan Novák

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Pl. 7/1: The three-nave basilica in Resafa (photo A. Musil).



Pl. 7/2: The three-nave basilica in Resafa (photo P. Líbal).



Pl. 7/3: "Martyrion" in Resafa (photo A. Musil).



Pl. 7/4: "Martyrion" in Resafa (photo P. Líbal).