Villa Bílek, Prague-Hradčany, Czech Republic

Mickiewiczova 233/1, Praha 6

Investor: City Gallery Prague

Contractor: GEMA ART GROUP a.s.

Implementation: 08/2008–09/2010

Villa Bílek is one of the most original examples of Symbolism in Art Nouveau architecture in the Czech Republic. The villa was designed personally by the sculptor and graphic artist František Bílek in 1910. Since January 1963 the building has been under the administration of the City Gallery Prague, which decided to develop the site as the František Bílek Centre and open the artist's studio to the public. Reconstruction of the villa took place under the management of GEMA ART GROUP a.s. Apart from the renovation work the company was also responsible for the complete refurbishment of the site and its utilities. The villa has completely rewired, given new insulation and damp and water proofing, a new gas and heating system and new air conditioning. An important part of the project was the replacement of the flooring, repairs to the retaining walls and fencing and connections between the buildings on the site. Restoration tasks concerned mainly the fa ade and the stone bas-reliefs and wrought iron work of both the exterior and the interior. No less important was the landscaping of the areas around the villa, for which the GEMA ART GROUP a.s. was also responsible.

This project was of high interest to GEMA ART GROUP a.s. as the work involved reconstruction of all technical equipment of the building as well as the employment of a nearly complete range of restoration, craft and artisan skills.

The sculptural group Komenský says farewell to his homeland (1926)

Interior – after reconstruction of the floor

Sanitary facilities fo visitors – work in progress

Stained glass windows in interior

Detail of metal elements

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RESTORATION OF THE FACADE AND STONE BAS-RELIEFS

The facade of villa Bílek is built mostly of rough fired bricks of red hue, and in parts of argillite stone.

The last repairs of the facade took place in the 1990s, and as a result the surface was found to be in a reasonably good state. The most significant damage to the brick facade was found in the areas around the window frames and sills, in the lower parts of the facade and in the areas most exposed to the elements. The damage was mostly mechanical. The whole surface was cleaned using water steam jet. Broken off brick edges were re-modelled using a mixture of mineral binders and crushed bricks. In isolated cases the whole damaged bricks were replaced by copies.

The concrete columns representing wheat sheaves were in places cracked and covered by dust deposits. On the eastern side the columns were marked by occurrences of salt efflorescence. During restoration, the columns were firstly cleaned by steam jet. Where the cracks were deeper, a probe was inserted into the core of the column to establish the cause of the damage. The cracks were cleaned and then in-filled. Mechanically broken off parts were re-attached using polyester glue. The whole surface of each column was then toned to achieve a unity of colour.

The exterior of the villa is decorated by several important bas-reliefs, among them a statue of the Virgin Mary and the bas-relief with a group of male heads. The bas-reliefs had a thick surface layer of dust deposits, which was removed by a water steam. The bas-relief of the Virgin Mary was covered by a patina intended to resemble argillite, but the surface of the patina was disturbed and the middle of the bas-reliefsignificantly cracked. The bas-reliefs of the male heads exhibited damage by gypsum crusts.

All damaged areas were fortified using a silicon acid based preparation and individual cracks injected with a man made mineral based filler. To achieve optimum colour tones, ferrous pigments were added to the filler. Finally, the stone was treated with a hydrophobic agent.

Sculpture with religious motives

Concrete column after restoration

Concrete columns evocating ears of corn

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RESTORATION OF ARGILLITE PARTS OF THE WALLS, PORTALS AND INTERIOR CLADDING

As part of the work the argillite stone areas in the interior of the František Bílek studio on the ground floor and areas on the first floor were restored. The surface of the stone was covered by a layer of dust, which was removed using sponges and nylon brushes. Where the dust layer was deep, a weak detergent and steam jet were employed. The cement pointing between the individual argillite blocks was in places damaged or altogether missing. Both the portals and the stone cladding were covered by a whitewash, which was removed. Filler was injected into cracks and missing parts of the stone were replaced by mineral based substance. Re-pointing was carried out using appropriate materials. After consultations with conservationists, preventative treatment with a hydrophobic agent was abandoned.

Stairs before restoration

Star railing – after restoration

Balcony – after reconstruction

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BUILDING WORK ON THE BALCONY BALUSTRADE
AND ON THE ENTRANCE STAIRCASE

With the consent of the National Heritage Institute the banisters of the balcony and the whole entrance staircase were completely dismantled after having been found in a nearly critical state. Prior to dismantling, detailed photo documentation was carried out, and subsequently guided the experts. At the request of the conservationists, only historic building material from the beginning of the 20th century was used, namely bricks from a disused old grain store from the Krušovice area. Both the balcony banisters and the staircase were completely rebuilt, colour toned to fit in with the surroundings and finally treated with a hydrophobic agent.

Work in progress

Argillite parts