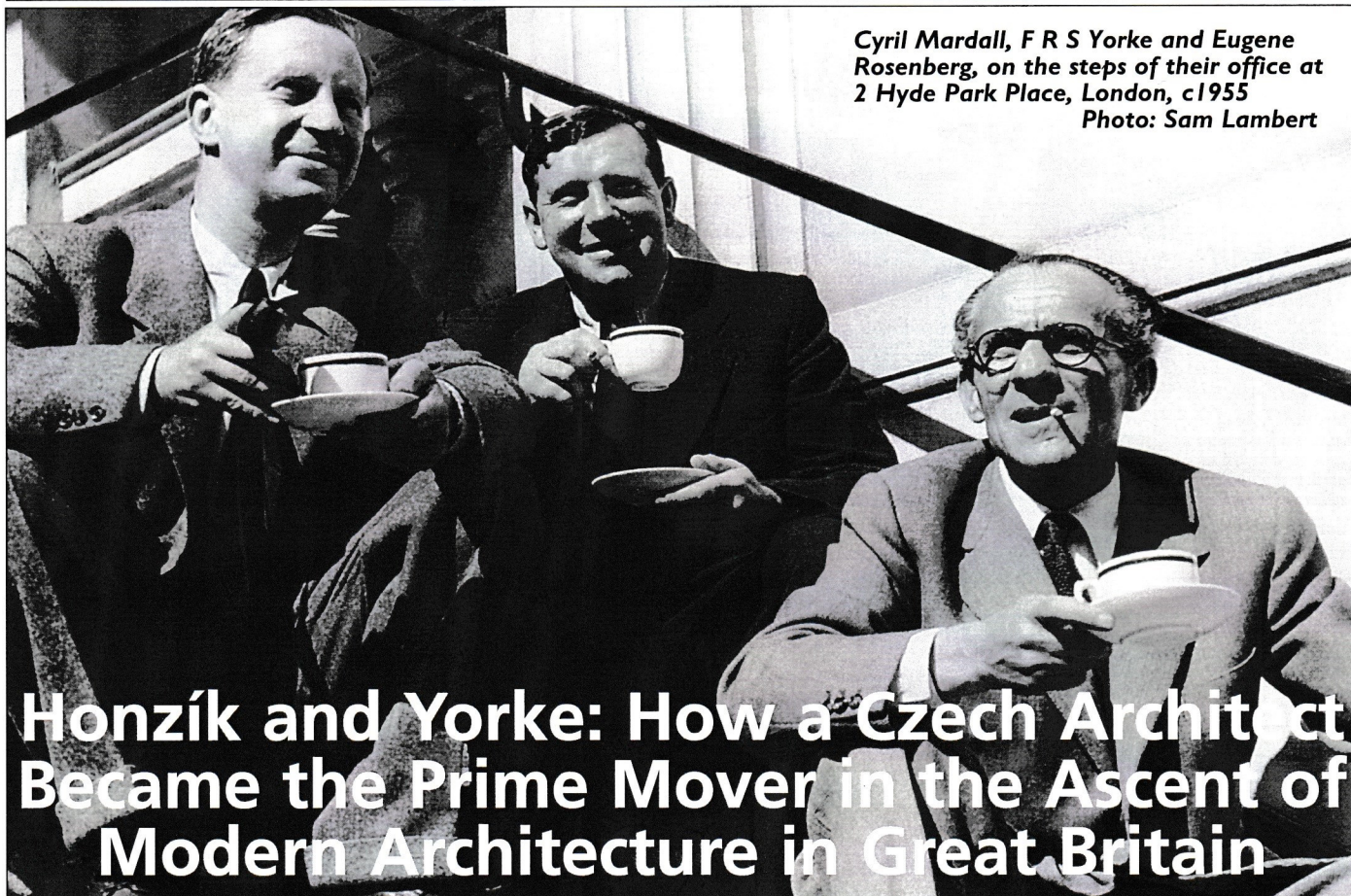


# BCSA 2017 Essay Competition: winning entry



Cyril Mardall, F R S Yorke and Eugene Rosenberg, on the steps of their office at 2 Hyde Park Place, London, c1955  
Photo: Sam Lambert

## Honzík and Yorke: How a Czech Architect Became the Prime Mover in the Ascent of Modern Architecture in Great Britain

On November 8, 1934 King George V and Queen Mary opened the new building for the Royal Institute of British Architects at 66 Portland Place, London. In 1931 architectural competition conditions were issued for the new headquarters to be completed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the RIBA. By 1932, 284 submissions had been received. The winning design was by George Grey Wornum and the construction began in June 1933.

The Czech architect Karel Honzík travelled to the opening as a delegate to represent Czechoslovakia and for the evening reception had been requested to wear a tailcoat. Honzík forgot to bring the tailcoat and had to telegraph his mother to send him one via airmail. In the morning of the opening day all the delegates were invited to meet the King at Buckingham Palace.

The invitation to the opening was received by the editorial office of the *Stavba* magazine in Prague which was the publication of the Czechoslovak Architects' Club, but there was no finance to fund the trip. Luckily at the same time Honzík was invited to visit Britain by a young English architect, F.R.S. Yorke, whom he had befriended on his visit to Prague three years before, and despite being very busy in the office of Havlíček & Honzík decided to come together with his wife Marie.

Karel Honzík (1900–1966) was an architect and author, member of *Devětsil*. He studied at the Czech Institute of Technology (1918–25) in Prague and established an architectural practice with Josef Havlíček (1899–1961) in 1928, becoming an early

protagonist of International Functionalism. F.R.S. Yorke (1906–1962), an architect and author, was born in Stratford-on-Avon, son of an Arts & Crafts architect F.W.B. Yorke. He studied at the Birmingham School of Architecture (1924–30). He was influenced by writings of architect W.R. Lethaby and by architectural critic and journalist P. Morton Shand. Yorke contributed to the *Architects' Journal* and was the editor of annual *Specification* publication. From 1935 he practised together with the émigré architect Marcel Breuer in London before Breuer departed to the United States in 1937.

Twenty-five-year old Yorke started to work for *The Architectural Press* publisher in 1931. Its editor, Christian Barman, steered the Press's contributor Shand toward commenting on modern architecture to bring it forth to the consciousness of British practitioners. Shand in turn, encouraged Yorke to travel and make contacts with European architects practising the new movement. In April 1933 Shand, together with architects Wells Coates, Maxwell Fry and Yorke were the founding members of the MARS – Modern Architectural Research Group – promoting and representing new architectural thinking in Britain.

On his way through Europe, visiting France, Belgium, Italy and Germany, keen to discover new architecture, Yorke arrived in Prague in 1931. In a bookshop window he saw the publication of *Mezinárodní soudobá architektura* no. 3 issued by Odeon with Karel Teige's cover displaying the model of the General Pensions Institute building (1929–34) proposed by Havlíček & Honzík which was then being planned on the site of the former gasworks in Žižkov off Karlova street (now Winston Churchill Square). In the

telephone directory he found the address of their studio and came knocking on the door at Štěpánská 35.

The Institute design, which Shand described later as 'the white cathedral of Prague', was Yorke's first acquaintance with Functionalist architecture in large building projects. In fact the building was faced in 'beige' Rakodur ceramic tiles and initially the client resisted this finish for cost reasons. However, the tile was readily accepted after the architects had demonstrated how quickly the cheaper render would discolour in the close proximity to the sooty Main Railway station when leaving a render sample half exposed and showing in contrast the other clean half which had been covered up.

Honzík welcomed Yorke and gave him a list of other buildings to visit while in Prague. Later in 1937 Yorke wrote: 'From photographs such buildings had looked a little inhuman, and it was difficult to visualise their insides. But to see the work as a reality, to go into the buildings, was to be reassured that here was the architecture for modern life, free plan, free façade and the logical use of new materials.' Prague became an important milestone in Yorke's development into an expert on European Modernism.

Yorke also met writer, painter and cartoonist Adolf Hoffmeister on his Prague visit. When he arrived again the following year, Hoffmeister offered him to stay in his flat in central Prague located in the Cubist Diamant House on Spálená 82/4.

Yorke, was very enthusiastic about what he had seen and decided, on the prompting from *The Architectural Press*, to inform British public about the new architectural movement. On Yorke's return to Britain, at

Yorke's request and offer of book collaboration, Honzík sent Yorke a number of drawings, notes and photographs of modern architecture in Czechoslovakia and abroad which formed the basis of the forthcoming book. On *The Modern House* publication by *The Architectural Press* Yorke acknowledged Honzík's help: 'I wish to place on record my extreme indebtedness to Architekt Ing. Karel Honzík, who has supplied me with much of the material that has made the production of this book possible.'

However, due to 'a sudden influx of work in his Prague office' Honzík was not able to devote more time to the offered collaboration, but had hoped the intended publication would incorporate, apart from family houses and villas, also larger residential projects. In the end Yorke decided to limit the content of his first book to family houses architecture leaving modern flats design to a later publication, *The Modern Flat*, which came out in 1937 written together with his architect friend Frederick Gibberd. Later Honzík conceded that even just the architecture of family houses would illustrate the principles of the new style and their dispositions would embody the elements needed in residential blocks design.

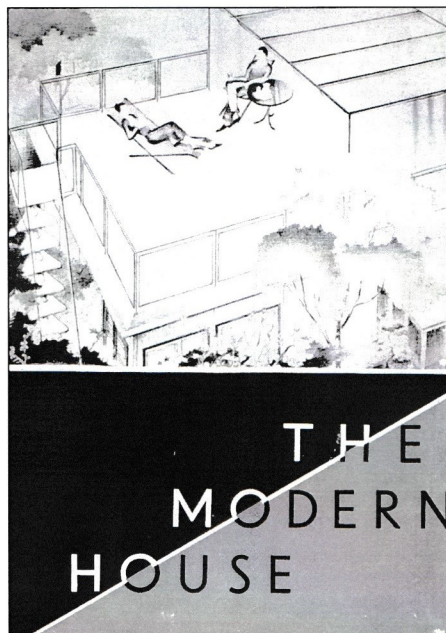
The first edition of *The Modern House* book published in May 1934 had 128 pages and shown 57 house designs from 14 countries. It included texts and illustrations on plans, wall and window and roof elements, construction details, use of new materials and prefabrication. It was aimed at the British readers, mainly architects in need of weaning off the contemporary usage of neo-Tudor or neo-Georgian styles.

Almost immediately on its appearance the book was recognized as one of the most important documents of its time. Its success was huge. The book was widely reviewed. In *The Architectural Review* of July 1934 Shand said: 'This is a memorable book, for it is the first in English which liberates architecture from its narrower self, and shows us the modern house as the technical product it really is against a background of the crystallizing discoveries and resultant complications of modern life.' *The Spectator* of August 17, 1934 commented: 'Mr Yorke's book is by far the best on its subject that has yet appeared ... It would be expensive folly for any layman to think of building a house today without first reading this book ... or seeing that his architect had done so.'

Architect and author Maxwell Fry wrote in the memoir on Yorke in 1962: 'I find it hard to overestimate the value of that book, especially for someone like myself that had not the money to travel; it was a real eye-opener and, appearing as early as 1934, gave us a conspectus of the movement at the time we most needed it.'

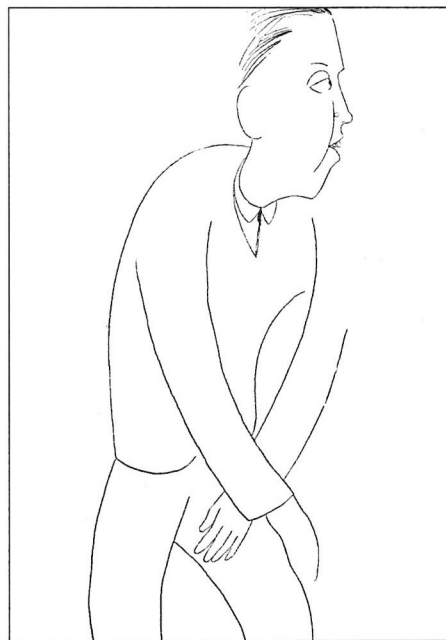
The book's reputation endured appearing at the right time to inspire the young generation of British architects keen to break the barriers of the contemporary conservative attitudes to the introduction of something new in architectural design. It went through three editions before 1939, two editions during the war and three after, being updated, revised with new house designs added.

It included six villas (the number being amended in various editions) in Czechoslovakia: Heinrich Lauterbach's Villa Hásek in Jablonec nad Nisou (wrongly labelled being in Germany), villas in Prague: Havlíček & Honzík's Villa Jiše, Ladislav Žák's Villa Hain, Evžen Linhart's Villa



**Above: Cover of The Modern House**

**Below: Karel Honzík by Adolf Hoffmeister**



Linhart, Adolf Benš's Troja Villa, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Villa Tugendhat in Brno.

In *The Modern Flat* several examples of apartment blocks from Czechoslovakia were also included designed by Eugene Rosenberg, Richard Podzemný, Josef Polášek and Havlíček & Honzík and again Honzík's help for supplying information had been acknowledged. In his following book, *A Key to Modern Architecture*, written with Colin Penn in 1939 Yorke said: 'Czechoslovakia was one of the first countries to adopt whole-heartedly the new style ... Prague had been made a rendezvous for students of modern architecture.'

When in London Honzík and his wife stayed first in a hotel belonging to a Czech émigré. London was foggy and cold as it had been usual in those late autumn days and the hotel bathroom window was impossible to close. When they complained to the hotel owner he replied: 'It's like that to prevent bathroom steaming up which is not good for

you.' Yorke, informally known to his friends as Kay (as a result of being addressed in the army as 'Yor-kay') rescued them the next day and moved them to Lyons' owned Regent Palace Hotel on Piccadilly Circus. This accommodation was much better and to Honzík's satisfaction.

Yorke took them to visit his parents living at 36 Calthorpe Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham and they had a trip from there to Stratford. Honzík's were rather dismayed by the state of British housing and were surprised on visiting Yorke's apartment in Old Church Street, Chelsea, London where Yorke's wife Thelma was preparing a dinner for them in their bathroom. A wooden board placed over an old-fashioned bathtub served as the kitchen worktop and cupboards over the bath stored kitchen utensils, plates and cooking pots and this arrangement had not been in any way excused and everything had been done without any need for explanation or apology.

More surprises continued with the wooden communal toilet standing in the back yard three storeys down from the apartment. Yorke said: 'When you come again in two or three years' time we shall live in a new modern house which will have all in-built facilities and conveniences fully tiled and hygienic.' In fact it was as late as in 1947 when he built a house for himself and his family on Isle of Wight but usually he resided a floor above his architectural studio in London.

In 1938 Yorke met the Slovak born architect Eugene Rosenberg (1907-1990) who had worked for a while for Havlíček & Honzík on the General Pensions Institute building. Rosenberg began his own practice in Prague designing and building apartment blocks, the largest being the infill between Štěpánská and Ve Smečkách which included a retail mall passageway. In 1939 Rosenberg left for Britain to continue his career in architecture. In 1944 at Café Royal on Regent Street together with Yorke and the Finn Cyril Mardall they founded Yorke Rosenberg Mardall studio (1944-2011). Rosenberg continued in Honzík's footsteps by bringing aspects of Czechoslovak architecture into Britain this time as real examples. Many notable buildings resulted including the Gatwick Airport, University of Warwick and St Thomas' Hospital.

One of Rosenberg's main contributions was his conscious import of the use of ceramic tile façades – a very permanent surface, easily cleaned and maintained without deterioration designed with very careful discipline aiming for full tile size without any tile cutting necessary – such façades, dictated by the tile dimensions, had to be projected from the outside to the inside thus determining the form of the building. Suddenly modern 'Prague architecture' stood prominently facing Barry's and Pugin's Parliament in the form of the new St Thomas' Hospital (1966-75) – quite an immense cultural accomplishment achieved by the people of Czechoslovakia in the heart of the United Kingdom capital. Even after Brexit the legacy of Czech and Slovak architects will remain.

**■ Ivan Margolius is an architect and author of memoirs and articles and books on art, architecture, engineering, design and automobile history. He was born in Prague, studied architecture at the Czech Institute of Technology in Prague and at The Polytechnic in London after his arrival to the United Kingdom in 1966.**