

KATARÍNA HABERLANDOVÁ, ĽUBICA VOĽANSKÁ:

Avion

Bratislava: Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2021, 183 p.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2023.4.41> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV, v. v. i.  
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The story of the apartment building Avion in Bratislava, considered a masterpiece of functionalist architecture by both the general public and the expert community, is brought by two authors with different scientific backgrounds – a theorist of architecture, Katarína Haberlandová and an ethnologist, Ľubica Voľanská. This interdisciplinary collaboration predetermines how they approach their research subject and how they weave their main topic into the chapters. Throughout the book, they chronologically move from the democratic inter-war period, when the building was built, through the fascist Slovak state during WW2, to socialism, and to the era after the regime's fall. The story of one building mirrors the tale of the city and, ultimately, the whole country.

But there is another aspect that has shaped the character of the monograph profoundly. It is the authors' relationship to the building. One of them (Voľanská) grew up in one of the apartments, and her parents still live there. The other (Haberlandová) has been interested in the subject since the beginning of her professional career. The debate about the legitimacy of doing anthropology at home is vast in anthropology. The related methodological discussion in anthropology has spread over several decades (e.g., Mughal, 2015; Peirano, 1998), as many tried to liberate the discipline from its colonial roots and tendencies to exoticize its research themes and informants.

In the case of the Avion research, the concept of home (as in 'doing anthropology at home') takes a very intimate turn – most definitely in Voľanská's case. She and Haberlandová pay prominent attention to this problem as they make their first methodological remark in the introductory chapter. They have carefully considered the issue and approached it head-on. In the post-postmodern era of autoethnographic research (e.g., Ellis, 2013; Ellis et al., 2011) and other anthropological areas promoting the self-reflexivity of researchers gaining more and more prominence in anthropological research, it might seem obsolete to dwell on the need to rationalize this kind of research. However, I appreciate the thoroughness and scrutiny with which they have approached its implications and considered them in their methodology. It might serve as an exemplary model for those seeking to design their research similarly.

From an ethnological/anthropological perspective, Voľanská's position is one to pay attention to, as her attachment to the building has had significant methodological and ethical implications for her research. In her ethnography, she employed in-depth interviews, incorporating an oral historical approach and biographical interviews. As Voľanská describes: "The conversations often touched on topics that were not easy to process – the closer into the present, the more sensitive they were perceived on both sides" (Haberlandová, Voľanská, 2021: 15). This has resulted in her sensitive approach to the data, in some cases she avoided direct citations and carefully anonymized the informants as her partners in the research. Simultaneously, the relevant parts of the first draft of the book were introduced to the respondents who became their reviewers. The authors of the monograph "tried to take their remarks into consideration and respect their corrections", as they put it (ibid., 2021: 16).

# Avion

I would like to encourage them to write a methodological paper on this particular review process and the subsequent decision-making. It would be intriguing to understand how they approached their informants' specific concerns and experienced the shift in their power position. Also, they might be able to uncover the (un)conscious process of informants reviewing their stances and possibly even reshaping their memories as researchers have put them into the perspective of other testimonies in the monograph.

At this point, I would like to shift your attention to the thematic overview of the book. After the introduction, the authors move to the socio-cultural context of the life and living environment of inter-war Bratislava. They shed light on the early years of social housing when the face of the city was fundamentally changed by such architects as Friedrich Weinwurm, Alois Balán and Jiří Grossman, Klement Šilinger, or – the architect of the Avion building – Josef Marek.

In the text, factual socio-historical data complement the memories of the informants. These add colours, sounds, and flavours to the information as emotionally infused personal recollections often do. The historical photographs accompanying them enhance their impact as they visualize the past of the building and the whole city district. I enjoyed the interdisciplinary aspect of the book the most in these particular moments of the playful combination of data. In this regard, one also needs to mention a colourful and neat graphic design by Matúš Hnát, who effortlessly blended various types of information and data in the book.

The third chapter, titled “The House in the Right Time”, explores Josef Marek's persona. Similar to his peers, in Marek's modernist approach, his commitment to preserving cultural heritage clashed with the perception of the necessity to adapt the city to meet the current needs of modern citizens and society. Avion was designed following the functionalist principles, as Marek never adopted the decorative ‘national style’ (Seneši Lutherová, 2021; Seneši Lutherová, 2022). As readers dive into his architectural adventure, they can also look at the original architectural plans of the building. The following sub-chapter focuses on its interior, which has also characterized attributes of the functionalist program perceived as simple, practical, and yet comfortable and elegant at the time (Seneši Lutherová, 2013). Again, the voices of the informants – past and current inhabitants of Avion accompany many factual threads, which make the story plastic and lively through their memories.

The next chapter, “Life of the House, Life in the House”, investigates the early years of the building, when the first inhabitants started to inhabit it, the end of the inter-war era of the 1<sup>st</sup> Czechoslovak Republic and life in the building during WW2. In this part of the text, the ethnography comes to the forefront. After moving into the building, people started to interact with their personal space, which became the place – filled with meanings – their home

(G. Lutherová, 2015). The building was built and also perceived as middle-class urban housing, and the informants also mentioned this, mirroring themselves and their social aspirations in this aspect of their narratives. Over the years, the changes in family ideologies and structures transformed how people used their apartments and particular rooms, as seen in the example of the room for the servant maid or using other extra spaces/rooms in the flats, which were perceived as oversized according to the current living standard during the socialist era. The informants' narratives become more vivid and detailed as the story moves closer to recent times. Starting with the 1950s and continuing with the following decades, the stories connect to their childhood memories characterized by a specific quality of nostalgia (G. Lutherová, 2010). Their voices create a generational mosaic of memories of the life of the building and its inhabitants. Through their stories, we also learn about "the grand narrative" of the country (Vrzgulová, 2023) and trace the dramatic socio-political changes in the society up to the present day.

In the last chapter, the authors introduce the palace of Avion as a cultural heritage site – both in the past and today. Once again, thanks to their interdisciplinary knowledge, they paint a complex picture of the issue concerning the past reconstructions of the interior and exterior of the building and also the perspective of its inhabitants.

Material culture gets its meaning in relation to people, and even such an architectural gem as Avion comes to life through people's lives, be it its creator, Josef Marek, or its inhabitants. The authors write in their conclusion: "People of Avion decided to tell the nice stories," and they respected their perspective. They did not push them into revealing "the ugly truths" that might potentially hide behind them. Many informants still live in the building and hence are a part of its community; their well-being relates to its integrity. I understand the authors' decision because it is impossible to anonymize them fully. It does not diminish the informational value of this book or belittle the sheer reading pleasure for this reader in particular. The monograph was released as an e-book, and I am very much looking forward to revisiting it in the revised printed version, as a monograph with such rich visual material and beautiful graphic design surely deserves it.

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