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Rational student living, Prague

In reshaping part of a decades-old office block, **Schindler Seko Architects** implement a strikingly contemporary dormitory formula.

CZECH REPUBLIC — TEXT: VENDULA HNÍDKOVÁ, PHOTOGRAPHY: ONDŘEJ POLÁK

The need for transformations, reconstructions and renovations will become one of the decisive factors shaping future trends in European architecture. Besides 19th-century industrial buildings in the Romantic style, there is the greater challenge of office blocks from the 1970s and '80s that could engage many architects, also in historical cities such as Prague.

Schindler Seko Architects faced such a challenge in a commission to transform an existing structure into a student dormitory. Although the office is usually occupied with projects of a much larger scale, here the architects coped with the problem of reshaping just one part in an

entire block of buildings, whose existing structure was unremarkable. Built in the '70s as an office building, it was renovated in the 1990s and served as a bank. Later, it proved unsuitable for offices and the client decided to give the structure a completely new programme: housing for students.

Built on a corner plot in a rather quiet place, it overlooks a green strip containing a park and stream in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, the architects were restricted in their conception and thus unable to use all the advantages of such a location. In general, the new project respects and reuses the former



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FACTS & FIGURES

It was in Prague, in the year 1348, where the first university in Central Europe was founded by Czech King Charles IV.

In 2013, enrolment in tertiary education numbered 440,200 persons (including university and non-university studies) in the regular education system in the Czech Republic.

Most universities in the Czech Republic offer student housing in their own dormitories, about €100 per month. Private student accommodation in Prague can cost up to €400 per month.

Europe's rapidly growing student housing sector is spurred by its robust, fast-growing student market. The number of students in higher education is anticipated to grow to 262 million globally by 2025; Europe receives a large portion of these numbers.



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(Rational student living, Prague)
construction that gave order to the final division of spaces. Although the purpose and design is completely new, the basic volume remains unchanged.

On its six upper floors, the same strictly rational distribution of housing units repeats at regular intervals, while on the ground floor there is an entrance lobby and a restaurant, and in the basement a fitness centre, laundry and special party space. The six upper floors have a central corridor with rooms on both sides. The wing opening to the south is equipped with balconies belonging to the some of the units, but the rooms facing the park curiously lack them. The reason is simple: Schindler Seko Architects simply respected the original placement of balconies in the former building.

The main departure from the regularity of its outer appearance is a striking cantilevered volume on the two upper floors that embodies that central aspect of student life: the study room. This impressive feature creates a kind of gesture that visually stresses the meaning of knowledge, especially in contrast with another characteristic part of the student programme, the party space deep in the basement.

At first glance, the architects have made an intriguing concept with expressive possibilities of colour, both inside the building and on the outer skin as well. In the interior, the colours define the particular floors; each is painted in a single, vivid shade. The students can easily distinguish between the otherwise identical floors. While fresh colours like orange, red or blue were used in the corridors, in the privacy of the dormitories the design is limited exclusively to white tones, even for the furniture. Moreover, the effect of white space is underscored by an explosion of light, as daylight is strictly limited in the corridors.

The colours on the facades also play a significant role. Here, the architects applied an attractive contrast of white and black, or rather, anthracite. Such a choice totally breaks from the local tradition of this densely developed urban setting and gives the building its identity.

STUDENT DORMITORY, 2013

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