Czech Republic

Construction and Planning in Prague – the Prague Building Regulations

On 1 August 2016, the new Prague Building Regulations (PBRs) came into effect. This occurred following a demanding approval process since the Ministry for Regional Development terminated the validity of the building regulations passed in 2014 when the city authorities did not implement the ministry’s comments. As a result, a new version of the building regulations was prepared complying with the ministry’s terms.

The main objectives of the PBRs are to promote the satisfactory development of the city and services for citizens, to encourage the proper use of municipal land, not to unnecessarily encumber unobstructed land, and to offer citizens of the city (as well as others) sufficient public infrastructure, public facilities, and green spaces. The regulations are based on the ideas of the team of authors, made up of a young generation of architects led by Pavel Hniliček and Filip Tittl. The architects’ experience abroad and their modern conception of urbanism and urban development had an obvious impact on the new regulations. So it is no wonder that cities such as Vienna, Berlin, Amsterdam, Munich, Zurich, and Copenhagen are models for the PBRs.

Urban concept

The building regulations return to the well-established principles of “urbanising” the elements of construction, especially the use of blocks, street areas, and street lines. In ordinary cases, a street line is created by the façade of a house or a fence which is then connected to the pavement. Street areas are enclosed by street lines, which include, in particular, streets and squares. Street areas are used for the basic operations or servicing of a space. Therefore, transportation and technical infrastructure should be primarily located there and should be positioned so that they do not interfere with the planting of trees.

In an attempt to promote the balanced development of a city, the plots of land are divided into blocks. These blocks are then either designated as construction blocks or non-construction blocks, depending on their main purpose. A construction block will primarily contain buildings, and a non-construction block will be made up of gardens and parks in particular. Minor structures could appear in non-construction blocks, such as garden restaurants, and on the contrary, a certain amount of green space is expected in construction blocks.

There are four basic urban types for the planning of streets – boulevards/avenues, important streets, local streets, and access streets based on their importance and spatial parameters. Each type of street has a minimum street width and conditions for landscaping that are applied in particular for new streets in the development area.

When proposing and establishing public areas, residential quality, the importance of the location, and the needs of pedestrians must be taken into account. The utility function must be balanced with the social-cultural function (residential, representative, aesthetic) so that a functional public space may be established with a quality environment for its users. The PBRs require that a pavement be constructed on the street area with a width adequate for the specific type of street. The elements must be
positioned in a public area in such a way that it interferes as little as possible with pedestrian movement, especially on pavements or walkways. The width of the pavement or another pedestrian path must be at least 1.5 metres provided this is possible with respect to the width and organisation of the street profile. The street area must be illuminated.

A great deal of emphasis is put on building regulations for the planting of trees so that they may have a positive contribution to the quality of the public area. On the most important streets – on city avenues or boulevards and important streets – rows of trees should be planted if possible, and the space between the trees should not be more than 25 metres.

The new building regulations give priority to pedestrian or bicycle crossings at street level as opposed to underpasses or overpasses. Thus, crossings not at street level will be constructed only if absolutely necessary. In particular, underpasses may present a number of dangers at night, and the new regulations attempt to avoid this. This is also a philosophical approach, i.e. pedestrians in a city should not be forced to leave the surface level of a public area.

Rules for construction

Building regulations emphasise the fact that new structures should respect the nature of the land on which they are located. Newly constructed buildings on squares and larger city streets should be built in such a way that the ground floor adjacent to the public space is directly accessible and may be easily used for businesses and services, provided it is not unsuitable with respect to the nature of the structure.

The basic rules of spatial construction are established with the help of a “construction line”. This line defines how the structure should be implemented. In areas with a closed construction line, the individual buildings must be lined up with each other with no spaces in between. In an open construction line, there may be spaces between the houses. However, even here, the houses must be lined up with each other. On the contrary, with a free construction line, the construction need not be correlated, and the structures do not need to line up with each other and may be placed at different distances from the street.

In addition to organisation, the height of buildings is also regulated. The PBRs establish eight heights which are applied according to the zoning documentation. Besides height levels, it offers additional options for setting height limits by determining the minimum and maximum regulated height of buildings or setting the minimum and maximum number of floors. The maximum height is the distance from the lowest point of the adjacent terrain up to the main frame of the building. While a structure may not exceed at any point the maximum height limit, the minimum height is only binding along the construction line – i.e. on the façade of the building. The “lowest” level I allows a building to be constructed up to 6 metres, and the “highest” level VIII allows buildings to be built over 40 metres. The zoning or regulatory plan may establish the conditions under which it is possible to exceed the maximum height allowed in a specific location.

When preparing building regulations, the authors took into account the privacy of the inhabitants of buildings next to which new building should be constructed and also ensuring sufficient space between windows. Thus, the PBRs establish the spacing angle which sets the smallest possible distance of new structures with respect to the individual windows of living spaces in existing buildings. Hence, the inhabitants of existing buildings are protected against the detrimental effects of new buildings being constructed next to their own. The building regulations also deal with the distance
between structures and fencing with the goal of ensuring the effectivity and aesthetic nature of the structures.

**Transportation and parking**

A newly constructed building must be connected to a road infrastructure that will be adequate for the needs of the specific locality. In addition, the delicate issue of parking relates to transportation. The territory of Prague is divided into zones, according to which the minimum required and maximum acceptable number of parking spaces for each structure is calculated. Another decisive factor is the purpose of the structure in question. Thus, residential buildings have a different number of parking spaces than, for example, administrative buildings or schools, even though they are located in the same area. One of the other objectives of the legislation is to prevent traffic congestion in the city centre of Prague. Thus, the main area for parking should be primarily located outside the city centre near public transportation stations, especially metro stations. This is a very specific feature in contrast to the national building regulations valid for other towns.

The specific solution for parking spaces focuses on locating parking spaces directly on land for construction, i.e. underground, in order to free up public areas as much as possible. Parking for residents of new buildings and employees who work there should be resolved by garages in order to deter the construction of buildings surrounded by a large paved parking area. An exception is low buildings up to three storeys and private residential structures (especially family houses). Parking for these structures may be resolved individually based on the needs of the specific buildings. In addition to vehicle parking, the structures should also be equipped with storage areas for baby carriages and bicycles.

An often discussed issue relating to the new building regulations is the requirement of sunlight in flats. When establishing this requirement, a compromise was necessary between the actual possibilities of construction in Prague and the hygienic requirements for national norms. These require that at least one third of the floor area of all living spaces of a flat be exposed to sunlight during a certain time. However, this national requirement is not feasible in Prague since it would exclude traditional street structures in the historical centre or in blocks in parts of Prague such as Vinohrady, Žižkov, Dejvice, or Karlín. Thus, the new building regulations came up with a compromise based on the national norm. The regulations also state that if the nature of the existing structure does not ensure sufficient sunlight, at least 80% of the planned flats must fulfil the requirements. For ensuring quality living, rules requiring a minimum height of the living space have also been established. Unfortunately, the increase in the minimum height clearance for doors to 210 centimetres did not pass.

**Advertising**

Among the discussed issues, there is the question of outdoor advertising, especially billboards. The original version of the regulation from 2014 prohibited all advertising with a surface area of over 6 square metres. However, all smaller advertising areas were operated by one company, which led to the risk of market distortion and proceedings before the Competition Office. In addition, the original draft did not regulate in any way advertising placed outside built-up areas, for example, near the Prague bypass road. Here the legislation establishes the required distance between billboards as at least 100 metres. Billboards with a surface area of over four square metres are, of course, prohibited in conservation areas and zones. One exception is advertising on temporary construction, for example, scaffolding on buildings. Increased protection is also provided for parks, forests, natural parks, specially protected areas, bridges over rivers, and pedestrian paths. Billboards in these areas are
entirely prohibited, with the exception of signs indicating certain facilities or establishments. The municipal districts may also regulate advertising through zoning or regulatory plans.

**Environmental protection**

The new building regulations emphasise environmental protection. In addition to the above-mentioned rows of trees (and many other rules for the protection of green spaces), a good example is also the regulation of rainwater management. Rainwater should be redirected from the structures and plots of land to the ground for absorption. If this is not possible, rainwater should be channelled to surface water, or as a last resort, to the public sewers. The regulation in this area also establishes, for example, the minimum level of rainwater retention.

**A few final words**

The Prague building regulations are a complex document which was drafted in such a way that the regulations influence the citizens of Prague in the most favourable manner. They present rules that ensure the balanced development of Prague. They set out requirements for the quality of newly constructed buildings, support the development of ecological transportation, contribute to the quality of services for citizens, and take into account environmental protection. In addition to the main points of the legislation, there are many other rules that increase the quality of life in Prague. We trust that they will have a positive impact on the development of Prague as a member of the family of modern European cities.

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