

interview with Ulrich Stefan Knoll

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How did you come to the house or the house to you?

Seventeen years ago, me and my husband moved from the town to the countryside and, besides our new home, found a new way of life. Spent most of the day outside, take care of the garden, meet around the big table, perceive nature, explore the surroundings.

Shortly we thought of creating a new project not in the city but here.

And create a similar place to our home. Like a home of your friends to whom you come for a weekend.

At the same time, during a trip to the near Podolanky valley, we have noticed a white abandoned house with a sign "for sale".

For many years my husband and I have been interested in reconstructions of historical buildings and cultural monuments. Immediately a house lost behind the wooden fences became a part of ourselves.

We have found it and it has found us.

In which condition was the house when you took over?

Almost two hundred years old building was as neglected as the garden surrounding it.

Besides its inhabitants, it lost all of its details and furnishing and a big and thrilling task to bring it back to life was ahead of us.

Does the house have a special history?

At the end of the 17th century there were archiepiscopal smelt houses and ironworks nearby.

Besides ironstone there was enough of wood used to make wood coal needed to furnaces.

The house was built by one of the first smelt houses' directors - and that is why it is made out of brick and more spacious than the rest of the wooden cottages which were typical for that period.

Between fences: nice wording, but what exactly does it mean to you personally?

Mezi Plutky/ Between fences reflects traditional wooden fences, which you can find around the antique village houses. I have "glimpsed" the sign of free and different perception of things in them. In fact they do not separate anything, on many places unclosed, on some even displaced, they only signified who and what belongs to where. They sensitively frame the lands,

while they climb up to the hills or get lost in the forest. They smell. They lure to caress or to get over. They say that in fact there are no fences.

Is it's architecture typical for the region?

Mezi Plutky lies in the middle of the highest Carpathian mountains called Beskydy near the village Celadna, on the notional ethnographical border of Wallachia and Lachia, where one folk architecture connects to the other. Together with the social level of the builder it lead to creation of untypical building, however containing many local aspects and materials. The house and both of the barns have traditional shingled roof and small windows, wooden parts are made from larch wood and like in days of old, without surface treatment, to make it grey and aged. The garden is filled with local trees - beeches and firs, seedbeds with local herbs and flowers.

How long did it take to reconstruct it and what where the greatest challenges?

We bought the building in summer of 2015 and opened the last summer. The first year we were renewing the stone courts and the old basin, which we turned into natural pond. We were building small hedges from field stones, we placed the floors made out of old stone, found in the ceased farms across the whole Moravia, we restored ceilings, built the guest rooms in the empty attic. On the ground floor we enriched the original layout by kitchen, dining room, living room, library and one more guest room. The next year we were working on the interior.

The greatest challenge of the project was *finding the light*.

The old mountain cottages used to have small windows and doors to keep the heat inside. If you want to maintain them, you look elsewhere.

During this finding we have uncovered and restored old fashioned ceiling beams, which brought us almost half a meter of the high on the ground floor. We have chosen light sandstone on the floor.

We have enlightened the huge attic by adding the mansard windows.

We gained even more light thanks to whitewashed surface treatment of the wood floor and walls.

Finding the light have brought me into the only modern item in the whole project - when was necessary to replace unoriginal and unattractive outside doors, i have decided for the glass ones. Courageous solution, because respect to all of the original is very important for me, has caused besides the light unexpected connection between interior and exterior. The stone pavement goes through the house, hides the boundary between garden and itself.

What is in your own opinion the biggest exception concerning your boutique hotel / its architecture?

The thing, that catches our guests' eyes is something between respect and cosiness. Seemingly unrelated themes accompanied the whole reconstruction and remained up to now.

Respect and care to each place and moment both in the house and the garden. To the tradition, to the surroundings, to the materials. I use old wood and stone, I plant ancient herbs, I design furniture from Czech oak, textile from linen, I care about perfectly made craft,

about details. Our guests notice it. They perceive it all together like simple and so wanted feeling of *cosiness*.

And so they feel some *generosity*, fulfilled desire for space. Some owner and architect would make more guest rooms in here, but for me the biggest luxury is the spaciousness. Both the bedrooms and common spaces - guest kitchen, dining room, living room, library, winter garden in old barn or summer bedroom in the new one, offer exceptional amount of space and therefore coveted calmness and privacy.

As an architect: what is your professional focus?

The proceeding is my theme. In time - to keep what the house used to be and add something new. In space - to perceive the project as whole, interior and exterior, garden, furniture, lighting, tableware or bedding since the first moment.

My favorite realization is the first one - Chateau Zabreh, ten years old renovation of the cultural landmark into the historical hotel, brewery and restaurant. And indeed the newest one - *Mezi lukami/ Between meadows*, between wooden (timbering) cottage and landscape.

Interior and landscape design: is there anything exceptional to be mentioned especially?

Between fences is a place, which desires for harmony rather than unity. Nevertheless there are at least two elements which surprise our guests. Floor from the old sandstone and rustic ceiling. Manually processed materials, despite the fact they are strong and raw, they look cosy and warm. People lust to touch them, they are familiar to them.

Did you already welcome guests before (in another house e.g.) or is it your first time as a host?

Another sense of our project is our relation to it. The final of work of art is for every architect and designer sorrowful moment. The dream is done and ready to live its own story. Yet the author's journey has come to its end. With every next project I wished to experience the house "after", be a part of its growth. *Between fences* is my first "living" project.

Are you often on site, involved in the houses daily routine?

Hotel is like a baby. It is not about bringing it to life, but nurturing it is what matters. My husband and I have decided to stay here for at least a year, four seasons. We welcome the guests, we tell them our story, prepare breakfast and dinner, converse about architecture and design and many times about themselves.

Breakfast is included and you offer cookings.. Apart from that: your guests do the cooking themselves in your two kitchens or go out for meals? If so, is there a restaurant nearby you really recommend?

Breakfast is our signature meal - our guests love the homemade bread, jams, paté from the local butcher, huge Wallachian cakes. Just as breakfast, we also prepare dinner from local ingredients - we love rabbit, venison, pork or lamb chops, beef steaks or vegetable. We are open to recommend nearby restaurants with their traditional potato pancakes, schnitzel with potato salad or modern cuisine in close hotel on the golf course.

All rooms can be rent individually (besides for marriages) – means you have four parties of guests mostly?

Yes, there are usually only eight guests in our house, eventually twelve, because our suites have the alcove with two more beds.

Why only children from 12 years on?

Our guests are looking for intimacy and privacy here. They are coming here to talk, read, lose themselves.. at the fireplace, at the swimming pond, at the far end of the garden.

What else should your guests have seen/ done in the surroundings by all means – any insider tip?

The biggest attraction of our neighborhood is the surrounding itself. Beskydy are one of the most preserved hill landscape of Czech Republic, between forests and meadows of the silent Podolanky Valley. There are several nature parklands and the national reservation Knehyne. What guests are looking for and finding there are endless walks and mountain hikes, cycling or skiing.

Only a few steps from us there is Golf course Celadna - the biggest golf resort in the Middle Europe, which already hosted three PGA tournaments (36 holes). There is also a horse riding school and in the wintertime the whole area turns into a snow arena with a cross country skiing route of 15 kilometers.

Only 22 km away you can find Wallachian Open Air Museum - the biggest and second oldest skansen (museum of folk wooden buildings) in the Middle Europe (Roznov pod Radhostem).

And thirdly - the nearby city of Ostrava is proud of Lower Vitkovice - a national site of industrial heritage and European culture heritage (35km).
(ev Zlin, Kromeriz, Olomouc, Krakow/ Poland)

What do your guests love most at the house/ the surroundings?

Our guests tell us themselves what they love the most. We talk to each other, they often trust us with their deep feelings and emotions. Half a year after opening we begin to believe that *Mezi plutky* could be a place where dreams, our and sometimes theirs can come true.

We have many clients from Germany (obviously!): what makes the house that special that they shall come a long way to the Carpathians (instead of going to Italy, France or Spain)?

We asked a similar question before we started. Could the concept of the boutique hotel which we know from Italy or Spain be successful in Beskydy?

We thought about some place somewhere “south” too. But then, during traveling we started more and more realizing how beautiful our country is, how we are happy here. That is why *Mezi plutky* were born.