

Pracovní list 5: **Jan Hird Pokorný**

1. Read the following text about architect Jan Hird Pokorny

Jan Hird Pokorný

Curriculum vitae and way abroad

Jan Hird Pokorný was born in 1914 in Brno, Czechoslovakia. He was educated and raised in Prague. In 1932 he entered the School of Architecture and Civil Engineering at the Czech Technical University in Prague and he graduated in 1937. Shortly after graduation, Pokorný briefly worked as an architect in Czechoslovakia. In 1939, Pokorný fled the German occupation of Czechoslovakia. In August 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, he left for Sweden and six months later he arrived at Ellis Island on a student visa to begin a new life in New York City, where he finished his studies at Columbia University. In 1946 he established his own office in New York.

Work and selected projects

Although Jan Hird Pokorný had already received full architectural training in Europe, he enrolled at Columbia University's School of Architecture where he earned a Masters degree in two years. In 1945 he acquired full American citizenship. In 1946 he returned to Columbia University to work as a design critic, re-establishing a vigorous relationship with the institution that had sheltered him as a war émigré. He continued to serve on the faculty for over 50 years. During World War II Pokorný also served as a designer for the military in Detroit. After a brief period with the office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in the 1940s, Pokorný opened a firm with his then wife, Elizabeth Hird. A major commission in 1949 to design a student union and library at Centenary College in Hackettstown, New Jersey, gained the firm notice and began a string of successful commissions for designing institutional and private buildings and interiors. Among them were Buttinger Library in Manhattan; the School of General Studies at Lewisohn Hall on the Columbia University Campus; a master plan for the State University at Stony Brook, followed by the student union, library and administration buildings there. Pokorný also designed a master plan for Lehman College in the Bronx, followed by a central campus facility, library, theatre and auditorium buildings. The acoustics of the auditorium were praised by the New Yorker as being second only to those of Carnegie Hall. In 1957 he was appointed professor of Columbia University.

As a designer, Pokorný's style was modern and lean. He avoided grandiose statements and instead relied on a humanistic appreciation of scale, materials, and context. His fellow countryman, friend and architect Antonín Raymond also heavily influenced him. His interiors were notable for their functionality; rational plans, sensitive lighting, and a warm tactile quality achieved through use of natural wood and textured surfaces. His townhouse on East



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51st Street in Manhattan embodied all of these hallmarks. The townhouse contained his architectural office, which at times housed a dozen employees. The office remained on East 51st Street until 2005 and came to epitomise the relaxed, familial feel of the firm. Monthly staff meetings were held in the living room, with employees gathering on Nakashima and Pokorný designed furniture.

In the early 1960s, a commission to redesign the historic Lewisohn Hall at Columbia University brought out Pokorný's latent preservationist instincts and laid the groundwork for his later shift toward preservation architecture. While many architects would have lobbied for wholesale changes, exterior alterations, or the construction of a new building altogether, Pokorný left Lewisohn's exterior intact, reworking the interior to accommodate new programmatic requirements. The result was a beautiful, functional, modern interior and an exterior that retained visual continuity with the campus as a whole. The project came to the attention of James Marston Fitch, a colleague and a pioneer of the preservation movement, who admired the project for its restraint and fine interior plan, and characterised it as a successful "adaptive use," the first of many that Pokorný would perform in the coming years. He subsequently joined the faculty of Fitch's historic preservation program at Columbia University, where he served for 38 years. Pokorný's firm has become well known as an office specialising in historic preservation. It completed major commissions including the restoration of the Schermerhorn Row block at the South Street Seaport in Lower Manhattan or the restoration of the rotunda and dome of the New Jersey State House in Trenton. The restorations of the Fireman's Memorial in Riverside Park, of the Battery Maritime Building in Lower Manhattan and of the Brooklyn Historical Society building in Brooklyn Heights are also his work.

Pokorný also served on the Art Commission of the City of New York from 1973 to 1977. He also represents the exile organisations American Fund for Czechoslovak Relief and Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association. He was awarded the title "Fellow of the American Institute of Architects" and the prize for life's work from Columbia Preservation. From 1997 to 2007 Pokorný served as the senior commissioner on the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. He felt that his service on the Landmarks Commission played an important role in encouraging new design while protecting historic buildings and districts in the city. Pokorný became characterised later in his career as the quintessential architect in New York City. Colleagues and professional organisations bestowed numerous awards upon him. However, despite an active professional life in New York, Pokorný retained strong ties to his native Czechoslovakia and his personal identity was inextricably linked to old-world Europe. In manner, dress, speech, and in his respectful, diplomatic treatment of others, Pokorný embodied the idea of an aristocratic European gentleman taking seriously his responsibility as a figurehead of the Czech émigré community and de-facto "cultural ambassador" of the Czechoslovak Republic in New York. His mastery of design, studied professionalism and genteel, soft-spoken manner as well as his dedication to architectural education garnered him the respect of his colleagues, and the love of his students and staff.

FAMOUS BUILDINGS

Library, administrative building, Student Union, Art School for the University Stony Brook and urban project of its campus, New York

The architects Damaz, Pokorný and Weigel assumed urban planning for this thousand-acres campus of state New York in 1965 and they co-ordinated the work of five other independent architectural ateliers. The architects determined a clear architectural language and common materials: polished and coloured throughout concrete and warmly brown bricks. The university developed from a little institution in scattered neo-colonial style to a giant campus for 25 000 students. The architects wanted the architectural language to correspond with this new scale. For a few older buildings, which were to be saved, Jan Pokorný recommended simply to plant ivy around them. The buildings by Damaze, Pokorný and Weigl surround the heart of the campus, which goes in terraces downward towards the square where students of all subjects can meet. Here is the house of the students union, which is connected with a suspension walkway; the library and the centre of arts with an L-ground plan enclose this square on two sides.



The Guardian Life Insurance Building

The Guardian Life Insurance Building, with its four-story terracotta and ornamental copper-clad roof, commands a prominent site at the north-east corner of Union Square in Manhattan. The Pokorný's firm documented and conducted extensive analyses and tests to determine how the roof would be replaced with historically appropriate materials. JHPA coordinated the technical aspects of scaffolding the entire roof area in order to inspect and document roof conditions. The firm then designed new roof details and selected appropriate new roof materials. New substrate materials were applied to ensure a weatherproof envelope. The unique and elaborate ornamental copper elements were replaced with carefully produced replicas. The firm also directed the project through the complexities of municipal approvals and the construction process. The project was awarded the prestigious Lucy G. Moses award for architectural excellence by The New York Landmarks Conservancy.



Renovation of the building of Kress Foundation

The Samuel H. Kress Foundation, a non-profit educational organisation, selected JHPA to convert a residential town house on Manhattan's Upper East Side into corporate offices for the Foundation and two other non-profit tenants. The building had once served as a dormitory and was comprised of many dimly lit rooms. The Foundation requested that their new offices combine efficient and flexible workspaces with the feeling of a private home. JHPA redesigned all floors to provide open areas of circulation and spacious, library-like private offices. In addition, all electrical and mechanical systems were completely updated. The rear yard, conceived as a reception garden, is linked visually and physically to the main floor of the house by an elegant curved staircase and terrace. Rehabilitation of the street facade included changes to first-floor openings, the design of a new understated formal entrance portico, and the removal of unsightly air-conditioning sleeves. The renovated Kress Foundation building is a handsome and harmonious complement to its residential neighbours. The project reflects the firm's commitment to blending contextual design with close attention to the client's programmatic needs.

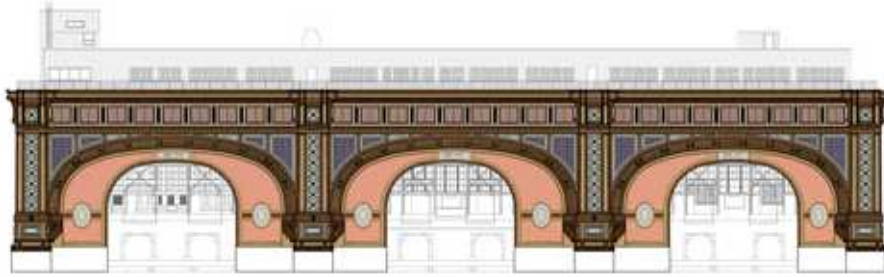


Renovation of Morris Jumell Mansion

The Morris-Jumel Mansion, dating from 1765, is among the most important examples of Georgian architecture in the country. The building features rare early examples of a two-story colonnaded portico and an octagonal wing. The wooden facade is fashioned to simulate stone construction. Colonel Roger Morris built the house as his summer retreat and, with its prominent site overlooking the Harlem River and Manhattan, the building briefly served as Washington's headquarters during the Revolution. The property is now one of New York's most important landmarks. Although maintained as an historic site since 1903, the Morris-Jumel Mansion had not seen any major repairs in almost thirty years. JHPA conducted a complete condition survey and prepared construction documents for exterior restoration. Extensive restoration included epoxy consolidation of deteriorated wooden structural members and detailed repairs of chimneys, porches, wooden portico columns, balustrades and other exterior elements. Craftsmen replicated the original windows using traditional mortise-and-tenon joinery and hand-blown glass. Careful planning allowed this popular site to remain open to the public throughout the duration of the project. The completed restoration received a special citation from the Landmarks Preservation Commission.



Renovation of a ferry port on Manhattan for Governors Island



In 2006 JHPA completed an exterior restoration of the 110,000sf cast iron Battery Maritime Building, which was originally a sister ferry terminal of the adjacent Staten Island Ferry Terminal on South Street in lower Manhattan. In 2008 JHPA was engaged by the economic Development Corporation and the Governor's Island Preservation & Education Corporation to design the interior for a new 2,900sf Ferry waiting facility for public visitation to Governor's Island. The new waiting facility is situated within what had been an awkwardly subdivided space between two of the building's three ferry slips. The facility was designed to accommodate up to 500 passengers before embarking on a five-minute ferry ride to the island. Included within the project were a National Park Service information booth, a security guard station, public toilet facilities, and access ramps down to ferry passageways at slip level. The modern, yet referential design recreated vaulted ceilings supported by massive riveted iron framing. Existing structural iron elements and windows were painted to match the historic exterior paint scheme. New interior and slip ramps were constructed in aluminium to recall ferry gangways, and new lighting was of a modern energy-efficient design. The new facility was also equipped with a high-efficiency heating and cooling system to operate independently of the rest of the building systems.



2. Describe following picture :

- What is in the picture?
- What kind of place is it?
- Where is this building?
- What are the people inside doing now?
- What kind of jobs are the people doing?
- What can you guess about the people?



3. Compare this picture with the previous one:

- What is similar? (place, type of building?)
- What is different?



4. Talk about a house you would like to have in the future:

5. Write a letter of inquiry:

As a student of the faculty of architecture you want to become acquainted with the work of J. H. Pokorný in the USA and to study and to work on your dissertation at the Graduate school of Architecture, Planning and Preservation of Columbia University in the City of New York.

Write an email of 60-70 words in which you ask about:

- the possibility to take part in courses of history of architecture,
- the possibility to visit and to work on your dissertation there,
- the possibility to co-operate with some tutors or students from the faculty of architecture,
- the accommodation and catering for their students.

Illustration sources:

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