

NATIONAL IDENTITY IN HUNGARIAN ARCHITECTURE AND THE SHAPING OF BUDAPEST

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Great cities are usually considered to be cities of modernity, so it may seem a bit bizarre to connect them with national identity. Indeed, the face of the Hungarian capital is rather international, reflecting well the universal tendencies of modernization and urbanization that occurred from the end of 18th century. There are, however, some key-buildings and a few other examples in Budapest that give evidence of a counter intention: to provide architecture with a distinctive character as an expression of Hungarian nationality in a modern sense. The 19th century was a high period of Nationalism, and the issue of national style in the arts was raised in many places in Europe and even in the Americas. How could it have been avoided in a multi-ethnic Hungary that tried in vain to regain its independence from the Habsburg Empire throughout the century? It is no wonder that the national character of the arts was the subject of a more or less permanent discussion from the 1850s to the outbreak of World War I. The following paper offers an overview of the urban development of Budapest, followed by presentation of the concepts of the national style with reference to the example of buildings erected in the capital city and a brief discussion of their antecedents.

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Budapest was once three separate towns each of which remained provincial until the end of the 18th century, at which time Emperor Joseph II made them the center of the Hungarian territory. While earlier Buda, essentially an enclosed bastion on castle hill, had been more significant, from the beginning of the 19th century the small civic community of Pest began to gain importance. The growth of the population began to increase in the 1820s, when industrialization and commerce attracted masses from the countryside to Pest. In this period, the pace of the assimilation of the German speaking population (mostly of German, Slovak and Jewish origin) started to accelerate. The Absolutist period following the defeat of the revolution of 1848 slightly hindered urbanization, but with the Compromise of 1867 urban development began at a pace comparable to that in the United States

as the unified capital city of Budapest turned into a real metropolis, with all infrastructure, public buildings and residential quarters. This process took place in the three decades before 1900. Models for urban development were first and foremost Paris and Vienna, while the style of public and private buildings mostly followed universal European trends: Classicism in the first half of 19th century and Historicism in the second (Preisich, 1964).

Dissatisfaction with the international manner of building in Pest was first expressed by enlightened aristocrats, such as Count István Széchenyi, and young intellectuals, like Bertalan Szemere, who traveled widely in Europe and discovered that our “Italianate” buildings did not differ from what was being built in the rest of the continent. Both men longed for the comfort of the English house and the practical construction in Britain, but did not call for the imitation of these structures (Sisa, 1999, 81–4, 86–7). On the contrary, they invited Hungarian architects to invent something new that could respond to local climatic conditions and at the same time express national character. However, this period, the so-called Age of Reform (1790–1848) was not able to formulate this peculiar character; its architecture followed the universal style of Classicism, due perhaps to the attraction of the cultured West.

The intention to establish a national style appeared first within the vocabulary of historic styles. The first record is a pamphlet written by Johannes Schauff, a German art teacher in Pressburg (today Bratislava), with the design of a Hungarian order (Bibó, 1989, 60–3). Classical orders had been regarded as the invention of the Greeks tribes and the essence of architecture. Hence, it seemed quite natural to continue the sequence of orders with new ones that expressed the characters of nations as the modern equivalent of tribes. However, like his French, German and British forefathers, Schauff used heraldic symbols (in his case the double cross and the horizontal bands of the flag) referring to a concept prior to nation-states, when the monarchy had been decisive and the ethnic origin, language and culture of the subjects had not mattered.

Even fifty years later, when criteria for the nation in the modern sense were defined, such as ethnicity, common language, religion, territory and common historical memories, the task of finding the appropriate means of expressing this content in the arts was the source of much debate. The art historian Imre Henszlmann, who insisted on the creation of a national style, believed that, given the lack of a native architectural tradition, Hungary was compelled to choose from existing styles. He proposed the Byzantine style first and later the Gothic, claiming that “heydays of our national history were related to the ogival style” (Széles, 1973–75, 45), and the Gothic was of French and not German origin. For the building of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences he suggested using Gothic forms, but the jury was in favor of the Neo-Renaissance, which they felt more appropriate to express the universal idea of the sciences. Three decades later the House of Parliament was built

with a Gothic superstructure, but in this case the reference to the London Parliament was certainly more significant than any allusion to the glorious Hungarian kingdom of the Middle Ages (Sisa, 1998, 205–6).

The age of Romanticism made possible the birth of an architectural work deliberately national in style. Romanticism led everywhere to an interest in the national past and popular culture. This trend was amplified by particular historic events in Hungary. The defeat of the war of independence against Habsburg reign reinforced national emotions, either by encouraging escape into a romanticized past or resistance against the repression of Habsburg absolutism. The building of the Vigadó, erected on the Pest riverfront in this period, was therefore of considerable importance. Its architect, Frigyes Feszl who had been born in a German patrician family and whose mother tongue was German, decided to provide this stately cultural building with singularly Hungarian traits. At first glance, it does not differ much from the oriental-Islamic tradition of European Romantic architecture, but rather shows a striking originality in the use of Moorish, Byzantine and Romanesque motifs. The arcaded main façade was designed by the architect on the model of the ‘porch,’ the traditional archway of peasant houses and country mansions (Komárik, 2002, 177, 179). The national character, in tune with 19th century thinking, resides mostly in the sculptural and ornamental decoration of the building: sculptured heads of Hungarian kings and statesmen and the coat of arms crown the top of the façade, and the motifs borrowed from clothing, for instance the ceremonial knot of the Hungarian hussar’s uniform, were used as an element of the decoration. This reflects a common belief that national taste was better preserved in the form of clothing than buildings (Moravánszky, 1998, 218). Feszl “dressed” (so to speak) his Assembly Hall in garb that contemporaries definitely felt to be Hungarian. This is not entirely evident now. When compared to a bank building in Vienna by Heinrich von Ferstel completed some years earlier (1856–60), the Vigadó shows embarrassing similarities. Feszl apparently borrowed a few architectural elements from this Vienna building, while Ferstel did the same with figures that have typical Hungarian faces and cloths. One should not forget that formalities like Hungarian dances, clothing, Gypsy music, and rhapsodies by Franz Liszt were in fashion at that time throughout the Empire and beyond. In the 1870s Feszl himself used romanticized elements of peasant life in bizarre ruined monuments (Moravánszky, 1998, 218–19), probably to the memory of the failed 1848–49 revolution, where the Caryatides are replaced by Hungarian shepherds wearing the *cifraszűr* (a traditional heavy woolen cloak).

While Feszl’s attempt remained unique in his time, the 1890s saw the renaissance of national style in architecture. The most prominent figure of this shift was Ödön Lechner, an architect of German origin and a graduate of the Berlin Bauakademie. Lechner sacrificed his whole life to the creation of a Hungarian ‘language of form.’ His style was based on a collection of ornamental samples

published by József Huszka, a Transylvanian art teacher. Using formal analogies, Huszka had tried to prove the ancient Asian origin of these motifs. The richness, originality and the pedigree of folklore motifs induced Lechner to transpose this recently discovered treasure in his new style. The first example in Budapest is the Museum and School of Applied Arts. Like most 19th century artists and designers, he was convinced that the ornament was a language with its own grammar, as the title of Owen Jones' book suggested, and if there was Celtic, Persian, Moorish ornament, why could there not be a Hungarian one? First he applied these ornaments to a French Renaissance structure, but after a trip to London he realized that the Indian Mughal style could be a more organic bearer of the same decoration. The cross-fertilization of these cultures, he believed, would be useful. All the components that had a great effect on his architecture can be distinguished individually on the building: the French Renaissance distribution of volumes, the Moorish constructions in Andalusia as reflected in the large window over the entrance, the Persian influence at the entrance gate, the Indian at the cave-like open entrance-hall and the top-lit exhibition hall, and the colorful ornaments manufactured by the famous Zsolnay-factory (Moravánszky, 1998, 225). The idiosyncratic style of Lechner, though it did not manage to curry the favor of politicians, became very popular among a band of younger architects at the turn-of-the-century, who brought it into fashion in private constructions.

Lechner's program to establish an architecture that is modern and has a national character was acceptable for the next generation of architects, as well. The so-called 'Young Architects', however, rejected Lechner's style, as is clearly visible on the Main Square of the Wekerle Garden City, as overly imbued with individualism and speculation about ornaments. They did not want to draw from pattern books and other secondary sources, but rather directly from village buildings. The Arts and Crafts movement and Finnish National Romanticism directed their attention to the unspoiled world of peasant culture. Not only their style, but also their whole worldview differed from that of the previous generation. While the art of Lechner and his pupils had been deeply anchored in urban culture and liberalism, the younger generation was anti-liberal and against the metropolis (Ferkai, 1993, 13). The romantic anti-capitalism of Pre-Raphaelites drove them to the villages, where they hoped to find a remedy to the artistic poverty of the mass culture of the cities in organic peasant culture. They preferred to build in the countryside and, when compelled to erect buildings in the capital, they used the same romantically exaggerated roofs, wooden structures, and stonework, in other words elements typical of the Transylvanian medieval churches and old mountain houses of which they were fond.

The Wekerle Garden City, with its four thousand apartments in small semi-detached houses, was the most ambitious housing scheme at the beginning of 20th century. The central square designed by Károly Kós, who was twenty-nine years

old at the time, differs from the rest of the village-like colony. Since he had been born in Transylvania (again to a family of German origin), he found inspiration in the main squares of medieval Transylvanian towns, such as Hermannstadt (or Nagyszeben in Hungarian and Sibiu in Romanian) and Klausenburg (Kolozsvár in Hungarian and Cluj-Napoca in Romanian), where terraces of two-storey houses surround the central park (Gall, 2002, 252). In order to avoid breaking the closed composition, he bridged over the streets on the longer sides. Façades designed by Kós and his friends followed the detailing of national romanticism which was appropriate in this suburban environment. Kós never built in the city center of Pest, and all of his designs in the capital city are situated in a garden or park, where he was able to use his favorite picturesque rural structures, even in the case of larger public buildings. These can be regarded as a critique not only of Historicism and Jugendstil, but the whole metropolitan context, which previously had not been called in question.

Parallel to the architecture of Kós and the Young Architects, another loosely affiliated group appeared before World War I with Béla Lajta as its most outstanding representative. His Municipal Commercial School (1909–12) was built in the dense 8th district of Budapest. As a student Lajta (originally Leitersdorfer), who had been born to an assimilated Jewish family, became enthusiastic about the architecture of Lechner. He even worked together with his master, but apart from a few common projects and early independent works his oeuvre bears witness to other influences. He traveled a great deal in Western Europe and was familiar with contemporary tendencies, which are evident in his Commercial School. The brickwork recalls industrial buildings by Peter Behrens, the verticality of the façade and the Mansard roof Messel's department store in Berlin, so one may wonder why this building is considered part of the Hungarian national tendency. The explanation may lie in the ornaments borrowed from Hungarian folklore. Yet it is not easy to recognize the Hungarian origin of these geometric patterns. Sculpted stone boards on both sides of the entrances seem closer to Pre-Columbian friezes or the ornaments used by Frank Lloyd Wright, and interior wall paintings seem to bear more affinity with the patterns of Josef Hoffmann and the Wiener Werstätte. One may well agree with the comment of a contemporary, who stated in 1919 that by the eve of World War I the program of national style in architecture had lost its validity (Ligeti, 1919, 27).

The war did indeed put an end to this tendency. Pre-war nationalistic aspirations, represented by Lechner and his followers, including Béla Lajta, did not continue, while the Young Architects had to adapt their style to new conditions. Lechner and Lajta died and others emigrated. In addition, the conservative regime of the 1920s applied the 'national' label to its own constructions, which reflected a renewed Historicism and primarily Neo-Baroque style (Ferkai, 1998, 245–50). Little mention is made of the fact that the very reason for the pursuit of a national

style had vanished. With the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy, Hungary became an independent nation-state and lost most of its ethnic minorities, along with two-thirds of its former territory. Neither the struggle for independence nor the assimilation of minorities justified a national style. Followers of Lechner were blamed for distorting their master's style with their Jewish character and preference for individuality and excesses. The official cultural policy and the gentry mentality was similarly adverse to everything related to peasantry and folklore, and even architects who refreshed their National Romantic style with Turanian ideology (Ede Thoroczkai Wigand and István Medgyaszay) found themselves on the periphery. The issue of national style was raised again in discussions of the late 1920s, when the International Modern Movement suddenly conquered Hungarian architecture. Those who claimed in the mid-1930s that modern architecture should be assimilated to conditions in Hungary did not want to create an overall national style. Instead, they were in favor of regional styles based on local traditions. This did not affect the architecture of Budapest; it remained basically modern until the Stalinist cultural policy designated 19th century Neo-Classicism as a 'progressive tradition.' In the late 1960s and 70s, monolithic housing projects provoked a harsh reaction on behalf of the Hungarian organic movement, which in many respects was a continuation of previous national tendencies. As was the case with National Romanticism, the typical sphere of action of the organic movement was the countryside; they only rarely built in the capital.

Thus the image of Budapest has essentially been defined by international influences, whether they arrived from the West or East. The diversity of influences notwithstanding, its architecture has nonetheless coalesced into a unique, recognizable cityscape. While the city has been labeled cosmopolitan from time to time, or, in worse periods, the 'wicked city', most of its architecture apparently has a particular character which visitors are able to distinguish.

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