



István Bérces, Miklós Gnädig, Béla Szittyá, Old port, Tihany, Hungary, 1962. The complex seen from above. © 1960s, Fortepan photo archive, No 58863.

## Historiography of post-war modern architecture in Hungary. Evaluation — research — preservation

BY MARIANN SIMON

Reviewing the research on post-war modern Hungarian architecture we find a serious backwardness. This paper presents an overview of the situation and an explanation focusing on three factors. The first is the underestimation of the socialist modern architecture by the lay public, but also by some professionals. The second field of investigation is the research background: institutes, researchers, funds and the accessibility of archival material, and the results achieved despite the difficulties. The paper also surveys the preservation of this heritage, and finally presents a recent rehabilitation project, one of the few positive examples.

### Evaluation

Except for a short historicist interruption, modern architecture was a ruling trend during the 45 years of state Socialism in Hungary. The best examples of recently completed buildings were published in periodicals, and the regular anniversaries of the regime gave an opportunity to celebrate socialist building industry (and architecture) with special exhibitions and publications. However, as the main feature of the system was looking ahead, it took almost thirty years until the first post-war modern building was put under monument protection: the Budapest bus terminal built in 1949 was listed in 1977, while the next post-war building became protected only in 1991<sup>1</sup>.

While art historian and architect advocates of post-war modern buildings tried, in vain, to make accepted their proposals to conservation officials, the architectural profession took the first step by making an overview of the period in the 1980s. The periodical *Magyar Építőművészet* [Hungarian architecture] devoted a whole issue to the architecture of the 1950s in 1984. The growing interest for 1950s architecture can be explained by the fact — that the post-modern architectural trend reached Hungary at that time and the label “1950s architecture” represented the historicism of the so-called socialist-realist architecture — although it only lasted for 4–5 years. In another respect, recalling the 1950s was part of a continuing conscious historical retrospection, as an earlier issue of the periodical had focused on 1930s Hungarian architecture. A third issue of the series presented 1960s architecture in 1988. Due to the limitations of the genre, the periodical drew attention to only some examples of this period and added their designers’ comments who lived in most of them.

The change of the political system in 1989–1990 could have given impetus to the re-evaluation of post-war

modern architecture, but circumstances delayed the research of this heritage. One of the reasons was that international and home interest alike focused on other trends and periods of Hungarian architecture: namely the Hungarian organic architecture and the socialist-realist historicism of the 1950s.

Hungarian organic architecture and especially the architecture of Imre Makovecz was present in international journals already in the 1980s and accepted a premium home evaluation when this trend was selected to represent Hungary at the *Venice Architecture Biennale* in 1991. The “rest” of the architecture during the state socialist period (socialist Modernism) was underestimated not only by the general public but also by the art historian author of the first book written with the intention of giving an overview of the period. The title — *The Compromised Modern* — perfectly expressed the author’s value judgment: half of the book was devoted to organic architecture as a positive, resistant alternative to large industrial constructions. The book, written in German but published in cooperation by a German and a Hungarian publishing company, reflected both an international and a local evaluation<sup>2</sup>.

Interest in the historicist architecture of the 1950s — as mentioned before — started earlier, but as a research theme, it fully emerged only after the political change. In 1992 the Hungarian Museum of Architecture organized an exhibition from its archival material under the title *Építészet és tervezés Magyarországon 1945–1956* [architecture and planning in Hungary 1945–1956] accompanied by a catalog. As a result of the exhibition’s success, the exhibition was repeated with expanded material, this time covering the period 1945–1959. Although the exhibition and the catalog focused on the socialist-realist period — recalling an awesome history and particularity of built form — it also presented some modern



**01** István Bérces, Miklós Gnädig, Béla Szittyá, Old port, Tihany, Hungary, 1962. The complex seen from above. © 1960s, Fortepan photo archive, No 58863.



**02** István Bérces, Miklós Gnädig, Béla Szittyá, Old port, Tihany, Hungary, 1962. The concrete shell structure. © 1960s, IPARTERV photo archive, No 6051.

buildings. According to the curator, the expanded time scope served to present the transitional period before and after the central theme<sup>3</sup>.

### Research

Against the above-mentioned problems of underestimation of post-war Modernism, the main obstacle to scientific research was the lack of accessibility of original sources. Consequently, especially in the 1990s, the first attempts to discover the modern architecture of the period were based on re-reading of contemporary public sources, periodicals, and the few collections summarizing socialist architecture: all from the 1970s or 1980s. These books had been published in a large number of copies, so even now they serve as a starting point for discovering the era. This would not be a problem if a thorough scientific research had followed, but even nowadays a lot of research remains at this level. Some retrospective writings in periodicals or blogs just scratch the surface and serve the increasing nostalgia for the Kádár-era.

The Hungarian Museum of Architecture working within the National Board for the Protection of Historic Monuments was founded in 1968 as a collection and research unit of 20<sup>th</sup>-century architecture. Its increasing archival material and the art historian staff made it a perfect place for authentic research on modern architecture. The above-mentioned exhibitions and catalogs on architecture in the period 1945-1959 were based on the Museum's collection. The Museum staff was active also in editing the archival material: between 1995 and 2009 seven books of original documents on modern architecture were published as part of the *Lapis Angularis* series. Unfortunately, only two of them were closely connected to post-war modern architecture. The exhibitions based on the Museum's collection were continued after the success of the first two exhibitions on the 1950s but were marginally extended in material and timespan. For example, the 2006 exhibition *Modern és szocreál: építészet és tervezés Magyarországon 1945-1959* [modern and social-real: architecture and design in Hungary 1945-1959] dealt with the same period as the previous ones<sup>4</sup>. However, the content was different, as the exhibition and the accompanying publication presented new research

results on five buildings. Ironically, the scientific research was made urgent and possible, because these monuments faced sale or rebuilding. Unfortunately, the Museum didn't present further exhibitions or published research on the period. The institute was closed in 2014, and the archival material was moved into a storage, with the hope of re-opening.

Researchers at the Hungarian Museum of Architecture focused on modern architecture before 1959, while an interest covering further decades appeared thanks to a private initiative. Barnabás Winkler, architect and head of the architectural design office, *HAP Hungaro-Austro Plan*, devoted himself to presenting and popularizing modern architectural heritage. Between 2003 and 2013 he and his colleagues organized 110 exhibitions with the support of cultural foundations. The venue was mainly the private gallery of the office in Budapest, but the materials and events often traveled within the country. The theme of the exhibitions was art, architecture and monument preservation, but one-third of them presented architects who were active after WWII. The exhibition material was based partly on the Hungarian Museum of Architecture's archive and partly on the private collections of the exhibited architects' relatives and successors. The *HAP Gallery* also edited books. Among the 10 items that were released, we find the selected writings of the exhibited architects and two books on leading architects of post-war Modernism in Hungary. The two books were not the only ones in the series as there was a total of only four, edited by two organizations, namely the *HAP Hungaro-Austro Plan* and a small publishing house, *6BT*. All four books presented architects — György Jánossy, Péter Molnár, Zoltán Gulyás and Zoltán Farkasdy — belonged to the same generation, born between 1923 and 1930 and active in the most prosperous period of post-war Modernism. The publication in each case was supported by cultural foundations which is the only possibility to finance books on contemporary or modern architecture in Hungary, while the initiators were relatives and successors.

The exhibitions organized by the *HAP Gallery* as well as the above-mentioned books presented the work of architects who had already passed away. The *Kijárat Publishing*



03 László Földes, András Farkas, Péter Sugár, Old port, Tihany, Hungary, 2015. The former bazaar now topped with a café. © Tamás Bujnovszky, 2015.



04 László Földes, András Farkas, Péter Sugár, Old port, Tihany, Hungary, 2015. Sails above the new deck. © Tamás Bujnovszky, 2015.

House approached the theme differently. Under the series title *Vallomások-Architectura* [confessions-architecture] they edited 16 books on living Hungarian architects between 1996 and 2007. The books essentially published a conversation with the architects, extended with a list of works. While these publications surely added some information to the history of architecture of the socialist period they can't be considered as new research, but as a source of later scientific research.

The above overview shows that the research on Hungarian post-war modern architecture as it appeared for the wider profession had two main tracks: presenting selected buildings or leading architects of the period. Historiography of this era sadly misses comprehensive and summarizing works accessible to the profession, too. Accessibility in this respect means a book. Since the 1990s only three such works can be mentioned. One is a book on an experimental housing estate in Budapest, built in the late 1950s. The authors combine sociological and art historian approaches. The other is the two-volume edition on *KÖZTI*, one of the largest architectural design offices during the socialist era, but its second volume is devoted to the post-1990 activity of the firm. The third book is a collection of research essays covering two periods of Hungarian architectural history, the only bilingual edition<sup>5</sup>.

The lack of thorough scientific research on post-war modern architecture in Hungary can be explained by two main factors. One is the difficulty in gaining access to original documents. In the 1990s the archives of state design offices, building authorities and professional organizations were still closed. After the change of the political system these institutions were slowly reorganized, transformed or abandoned, but in the meantime the documents were either withheld or disappeared. The material delivered into the state archives or to the Hungarian Museum of Architecture was consciously pre-selected or randomly sent. Some further documents – especially design materials – are in private collections. This makes it extremely difficult to discover the history of the state design offices. Even the authors of the edition on *KÖZTI* lacked data, although the

design office didn't stop after the political change, as it was only reorganized.

Adequate, high-quality research into post-war modern architecture is impossible without a historical background, without the historical processing of the era. The first results of historical and social research of the socialist period were published only at the end of the 1990s, but unfortunately that did not foster or accelerate architectural research. This fact leads us to the second main reason why there is minimal research on post-war modern architecture. There are researchers, but there are no research institutes. The Hungarian Museum of Architecture — which was founded with the intention to act both as an archive and a research locale — was closed in 2014, and though formally it has been opened recently, its research activity is unknown. Academic institutes and university departments also give background to the research, but the research theme is based on the researcher's personal interest and on the random research funds. The situation is similar to that of the few researchers who work in archives which possess types of architectural material of the period.

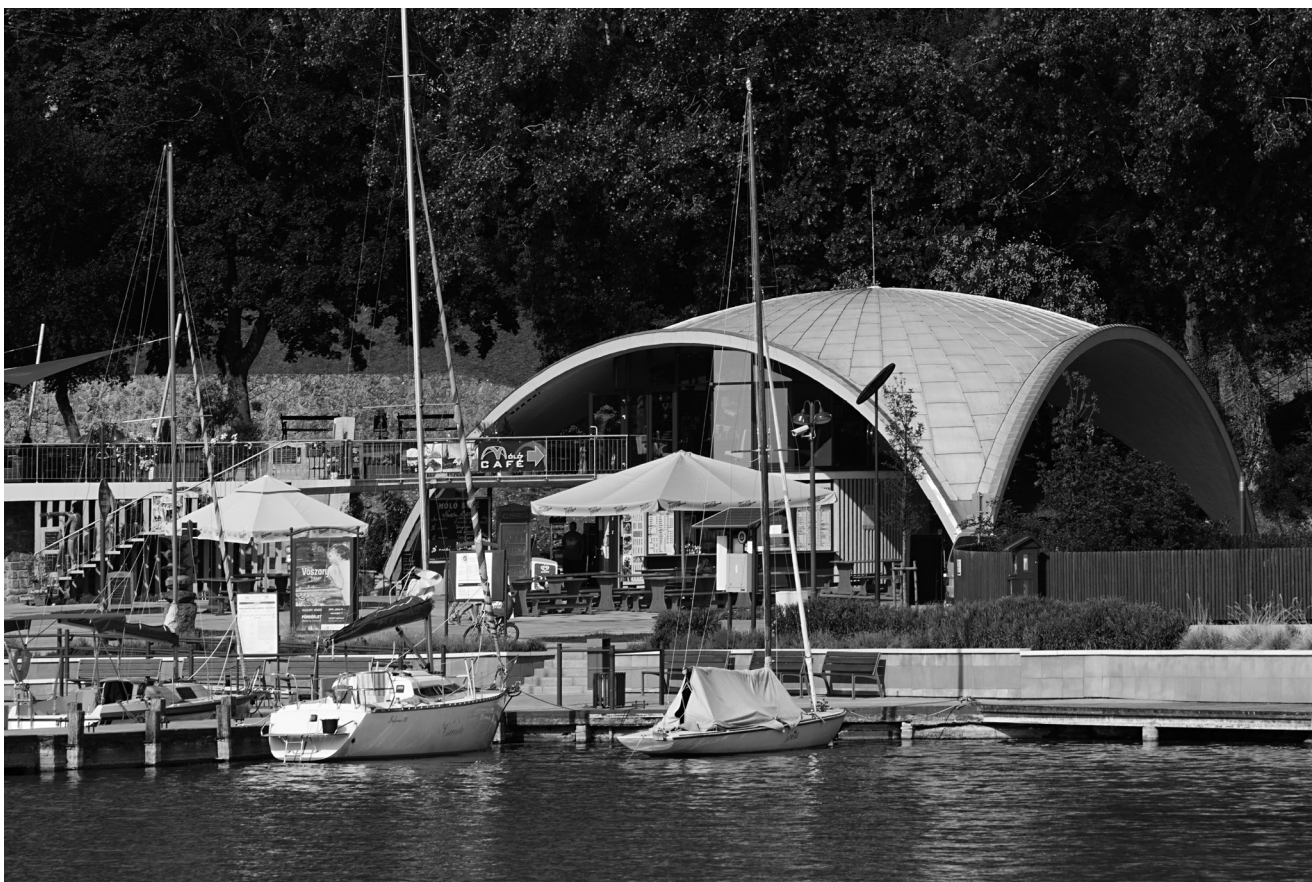
To sum up, the research themes are based on available material and personal interest. The best results are found in PhD degree theses. The list of the relevant doctoral works is short, but increasing and the results are valuable, so they are worth mentioning: Kornélia Kissfazekas, *Rural town centers in state socialism*, 2011; Rozália Marton, *Location, Configuration, Articulation — Architecture of the Balaton region in the 1960s*, 2014 and Péter Haba, *Context of structure, technology and aesthetics in Hungarian industrial architecture 1947-1970*, 2017. Although the dissertations are in Hungarian, the research results are widely published in international conference proceedings and journals.

### Preservation

András Ferkai called attention to the danger threatening modern architectural heritage in Hungary already in 1998. As one of the reasons, he mentioned the general underestimation of socialist Modernism and, as another, the privatization of former state properties. This often meant that foreign developers purchased real estate just to obtain



05 László Földes, András Farkas, Péter Sugár, Old port, Tihany, Hungary, 2015. Information centre and buffet under the reconstructed concrete shell structure.  
© Tamás Bujnovszky, 2015.



06 László Földes, András Farkas, Péter Sugár, Old port, Tihany, Hungary, 2015. The complex from the pier. © Tamás Bujnovszky, 2015.



07 László Földes, András Farkas, Péter Sugár, Old port, Tihany, Hungary, 2015. View of the new complex. © Tamás Bujnovszky, 2015.

a site of high value and they were not interested in costly reconstruction<sup>6</sup>. The situation has not been changed in twenty years. Many, once valuable, special or innovative modern buildings from the socialist period are now demolished, fully rebuilt or out of use which leads to a slow but guaranteed destruction. In 1992 a new level of monument protection was introduced, so-called local protection, which gave more opportunities for the authorities to also list post-war modern buildings. However, this didn't result in a radical extension of such items, despite the fact that scholars proposed a long list of modern buildings worth protecting in 2000<sup>7</sup>.

The situation described above explains that it is difficult to find successful examples of preservation or reconstruction of post-war modern architecture from the last decade. Some buildings in Tihany are the rare exceptions. The socialist government started an intensive program for the development of tourism around the Lake Balaton in 1957 which resulted in several innovative modern buildings completed around 1960. The architecture of the 1960s attracted professional attention already before the political change, so it is not surprising that the buildings in the old port of Tihany were put on the conservationists' wish-list to protect — without success.

The architects László Földes, András Farkas and Péter Sugár began to work on the development of the whole Tihany peninsula in 2008. As a part of this project, they suggested the local protection of the buildings in the old port: the post-office, the bazaar and the snack bar. It took seven years, but the reconstruction of the first two items was completed in 2015. The core of the project was the concrete shell structure which was preserved as well as the cylindrical shape of the former post-office under the roof. The single story bazaar was also kept but at one end, it was transformed into a two-story building. The ground floor houses shops and stores, while upstairs there is a café with a

deck now connecting the upper level to the shell structure. An originally existing but meaningless structural connection now had a function. The result is reconstruction and reinterpretation simultaneously.

#### Notes

- 1 Pál Lővei, "Aközelmúlt emlékeinek műemléki védelméről" [about preservation of the recent past], *Műemlékvédelmi Szemle*, n. 1, Budapest, Országos Műemléki Felügyelőség, 1996, 147-169.
- 2 Anna M. Eifert-Körnig, *Die kompromittierte Moderne: Staatliche Bauproduktion und oppositionelle Tendenzen in der Nachkriegsarchitektur Ungarns* [the compromised modern: large industrial construction and resistant tendencies in post-war Hungarian architecture], Budapest/Berlin, Új Művészet/Reimer, 1994.
- 3 Endre Prakfalvi, Virág Hajdú (ed.), *Építészet és tervezés Magyarországon 1945-1959 / Architecture and Planning in Hungary 1945-1959*, Budapest, Országos Műemlékvédelmi Hivatal, Magyar Építészeti Múzeum, 1996.
- 4 Zoltán Fehérvári, Virág Hajdú, Endre Prakfalvi, *Modern és szocreál: építészet és tervezés Magyarországon 1945-1959* [modern and social-real: architecture and planning in Hungary 1945-1959], Budapest, Magyar Építészeti Múzeum, 2006.
- 5 Márta Branczik (ed.), *Korszerű lakás, 1960* [modern housing, 1960], Budapest, Terc, Budapesti Történelmi Múzeum, 1956-os Intézet, 2011; András Ferkai, Erszébet Rubóczky (ed.), *KÖZTI, egy tervezőiroda története* [KÖZTI, history of a design office], vol. 1-2, Budapest, Vince, 2015; Mariann Simon, *Restarts. Hungarian architecture 1956-1969 and 1990-2010*, Budapest, Terc, 2016.
- 6 András Ferkai, "Recording and preserving the modern heritage in Hungary", in Allen Cunningham (ed.), *Modern Movement Heritage – A Challenge to Manage*, London, Routledge, 1998, 44-49.
- 7 Pál Lővei (ed.), *A műemlékvédelem táguló körei* [expanding circles of heritage protection], Budapest, Országos Műemlékvédelmi Hivatal, 2000.

#### Mariann Simon

PhD, architect. She is a professor at Szent Istvan University, Budapest, Hungary. She is the author of the book *Valami más* [the other] (Terc, 2003) and co-editor of the book *Ideological Equals: Women architects in socialist Europe 1945-1989* (Routledge, 2017). Her collected essays about 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian architecture were published in the book *Restarts* (Terc, 2016).